

October 4, 2009

**The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost**

Mark 10:13-16

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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Jesus is angry! He is fed-up. The disciples still don't get it. From their behavior, it is clear that they haven't understood any of his previous teachings about children. When Jesus was wrongly accused, when he faced an unjust trial and was eventually condemned to death, he never once showed anger, he never once lashed-out at those who had wronged him. So why now? What makes this situation different? Because these particular teachings, the ones about children are so important, they are vital to our spiritual well-being. A few weeks ago, we heard Jesus say, "Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me." (Mark 9:37) He then went on a short while later to say, "And if anyone causes one of these little ones who believes in me to sin, it would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone tied around his neck." (Mark 9:42)

And just a few verses later, perhaps a few weeks later in their journey, it appears that the disciples have already forgotten what Jesus taught them about children.

So here they are, people are bringing their children to Jesus. They want Jesus to touch them. There is no mention of these children being sick or possessed by demons. They simply want Jesus to convey his blessing upon their children. This seems like an easy request, but first they have to get past the disciples, past the bouncers. But instead of welcoming the children, as they had earlier been taught, the disciples begin rebuking those who had brought their children to Jesus. Surely the disciples are thinking something like: "He doesn't have time for children. Don't you know who this is? Don't you know how valuable his time is? Certainly children can't help fulfill the mission of God. They have no political clout, no useful contacts, and they certainly don't have any financial resources."

The disciples remain blind to the worth of a single child. Jesus once again tells them to let the children come to him. And he gives a new command: look to the children as models of membership in the kingdom of God. The disciples themselves must become like a child in order to receive the kingdom.

My nieces Abby and Emily are eight years old and have never met a stranger. When they were here for my daughter Madelynne's baptism, Emily told everyone she met as much of her life story as she could manage to tell in a brief conversation. "Did you know that Aunt Liz is my godmother? My sister Abby is named after her, but she is my godmother. And guess what, I named Madelynne. I used to call baby Maddy my godsister." and then she goes on to explain how she got each diamond on her add-a-diamond necklace which takes you into numerous other details about herself and her life. She is completely open about who she is. She is trusting in allowing herself to be vulnerable, to be completely herself - no holds barred. She allows herself be known.

Emily does eventually stop for breath and asks for details about who you are. She wants to know about your life. She is not simply being polite, she is genuinely interested and curious, and most of all she is receptive to who you are.

I am sure that many of you have had similar conversations with children in your lives. These children all share common traits: they are open, they allow themselves to be vulnerable and they share who they are while also being receptive to who you are. This is what Jesus asks of us for membership into the kingdom of God.

I must admit that for me, the thought of allowing myself to be that vulnerable, to allow myself to be open is extremely unnerving. Something that was so easy to do when I was a child, now seems impossible, it feels perilous. Remove my many masks? Take away the crutches that prop me up? These are the things I rely on to get me through the day-to-day of my life: my self-reliance, my ego, my aura of self-confidence, I could go on and on. Over the years I, like many of you, have molded many masks, created many crutches to help me navigate safely through this world. But these masks and crutches lead us to believe that we are in charge, that we have control over our lives, that we are not dependent upon anyone except ourselves. Perhaps we haven't trusted completely in God's love and care for us. We have chosen instead to have a back-up plan, deluding ourselves into thinking that we have control over our lives.

Children know otherwise. They are completely dependent upon other people for their well-being: for their food, shelter, and protection. They must trust in others. They must allow themselves to be open and vulnerable with others, trusting that this vulnerability will build relationship and through that relationship they will be cared for. This is what God is asking of each of us – to allow ourselves to be open and vulnerable before God, trusting that our vulnerability will build relationship and through that relationship God will care for us.

Many of us have been taught since late childhood not to trust people we don't know, not to trust that we are safe, we have been taught how to protect ourselves. Over time, as we have aged those forms of self-protection have become more ingrained and complex. So the question becomes how do we go about opening ourselves up and experiencing vulnerability before others? How do we shed our masks simply be ourselves, completely and truly known by God and the world? It might take us some time to learn to become comfortable in our vulnerability, but if we look closely we might realize that we have already begun practicing vulnerability thru prayer.

Almost every Sunday, baptism and Lent being the obvious exceptions, we begin each service from the back of the church praying the collect for purity. This prayer is intended to help prepare us for worship, help us to set aside those things which are not important. It reminds us to open our minds and our hearts to God. "Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known and from you no secrets are hid." With these words we acknowledge our own vulnerability before God – God opens our hearts, and knows our desires, sees our hidden secrets. All that we hid away from everyone else is laid out there on the table before God. This is vulnerability.

Knowing that we cannot sustain this level of vulnerability on our own, the prayer continues and we ask for God to help us to remain open so that we are fully present in relationship with God. “Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you and worthily magnify your holy Name.”

This prayer helps us to set aside all the masks that we wear. And we come before God naked and completely vulnerable, allowing ourselves to be known by God, and opening our hearts to knowing God and hearing God’s word spoken to us.

Each and every time we celebrate a Eucharistic service we lay it all out there thru this prayer, and instead of facing rejection, each time we find we are loved and we have been deemed worthy to be invited into the presence of God. Thru that vulnerable and open space we enter into the rest of worship, we hear God’s word spoken to us, we ask for and receive God’s forgiveness, we remember our part in Jesus’ death, and we humbly receive Jesus redemption offered to all. Each Sunday we practice vulnerability, openness, and receptiveness before God.

Here is perhaps the most challenging part: what we experience here in worship, must also be brought out into the world. Our vulnerability and receptiveness that we experience before God we must also bring into our lives out in the world. More and more as we practice removing those masks and stepping away from our crutches and trust in God, we will find that our lives are being transformed, new, stronger, right relationships are forming thru that vulnerability. And even now we might catch a glimpse of the kingdom of God breaking in here on earth.

I invite you into a time of silent prayer. Consider removing your masks and allow yourselves into that space of vulnerability. For a few moments, let yourselves be fully known before God, as we pray “Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid. Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit that we may perfectly love you and worthily magnify your holy Name, thru Jesus Christ our Lord.”