

## Sermon: PENTECOST 17, September 20<sup>th</sup>, 2015

In the Name...

England's King Edward VII preferred the seclusion of his country estate at Sandringham to the pomp and ceremony of Windsor and, whenever he could get away, he would go there for long walks by himself around the area. Once, he dropped in to the village school and, without revealing to her class who this visiting gentleman was, the teacher asked them to name the greatest English kings and queens. The children named, of course, William the Conqueror, Henry VIII, Elizabeth, and the king's own mother, Victoria. The teacher quickly whispered to one child who then proclaimed, "And our good King Edward." "Really", the king smiled, "and what has he done to be so great?" The embarrassed child stammered, "I, I don't know." "That's quite all right, my boy", the king replied, "Neither do I."

Today's Gospel lesson begins with Jesus telling his disciples, as they travel to Capernaum, about his impending doom and, as usual, they pay no attention and chat among themselves. After arriving at their destination, he asks them to share what they'd been discussing. Of course, none of them wants to admit that they'd been squabbling over which one of them was greatest because they knew Jesus wouldn't be all too pleased with that topic. So Jesus took the opportunity to give them an object lesson on greatness. He embraced a little child in his arms and said, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name, welcomes me."

We all know that Jesus normally turned things upside down when he taught. He often answered questions with more questions. When people tried to pin him down, he told stories. And, above all, he defied conventional wisdom about how the world operates and he said we need to do things which are the exact opposite. For example, "He who would save his life will lose it. He who loses his life for my sake will save it." "I say to you love your enemies." "Blessed are the peacemakers." "Whoever would be first must be last and servant of all."

So how does Jesus' statement about valuing children, something we might consider very normal, fit this pattern? In this lesson about greatness, where is the upside down thing he asks of us? The passage can only make sense if to value a child is somehow to be considered a foolish act. And that is, of course, the case.

In Jesus' day, as cruel as this may sound, children had no value, no social standing, no rights. Children might be loved, but, were more often treated as a liability than an asset. People had large families because they needed cheap labour. Slaves were expensive to buy, children were easy to produce. When times were hard, they were fed last. They could always be replaced. Over half died by the age of five. They didn't count for much.

Of course, in our modern society, children seem to count a great deal. They're protected by labour laws, welfare laws, and all kinds of other laws. Politicians can always increase their popularity by speaking up for children. Advertisers target children because they drive many of the family's buying decisions. In broken homes, they frequently get to choose which parent with whom they wish to live. Children even set their own allowances, curfews, and house rules. It seems they have more control over their lives than at any time in history.

But, in other ways, children are valued less and we don't have to look at the Third World, where societies are more like 1st Century Judea, to find that. Every day, in the United States, almost 8,000 children under the age of 12 are abused and 5 die violently. In the most medically advanced country on the globe, over 5 million children lack adequate healthcare. In the midst of the communication explosion, many parents have no idea what their children view on-line.

Even before birth, children are at risk in ways unimaginable even a generation ago. Abortion has decimated our society. In China, pre-natal testing is being used for eugenic purposes on a scale of which the Third Reich could only wistfully dream. Children can be as unvalued today as at any time in history. Far from improved, their status seems as ambiguous as ever.

And it's not just in secular society. I remember years ago, in another parish, I was impressed by the growth our church was experiencing, but this one woman disagreed with me and said our numbers were declining. So, I suggested we each count one Sunday and compare notes. We did, and came up with very different numbers. So, I began naming the people I had seen and she agreed with my names until I named a young boy and she emphatically said, "Oh, no. You can't count the children." And she was serious! Children didn't count in her concept of church. Only pledging members.

When Jesus embraced the child, he was expressing God's foolish love for all those who don't count, who are lowly or undervalued. And that's a good lesson. We should keep our eyes open for those who are, as Jesus also said, considered the least in the world. But, more than that, more than that - and really the point that Jesus was making today - when Jesus spoke about welcoming children he also was calling his disciples to welcome their vision of life. The kingdom of a child has no strife about greatness, status, or prestige. Good always triumphs and evil is always vanquished. There's a quality of innocence about it and a peace of mind.

Greatness is achieved in Jesus' eyes, not just by the fact that we give value to and serve others, as important as that is. It's also found in our willingness to lay aside the very attitudes which cause us to make judgements and create divisions. That's what Jesus himself did when he lived and died and rose for all of us without distinction.

He didn't say I'm only going to die for the smart people, or the spiritual people, or the good-looking people. He reversed the nature of things. He made that which was unholy, holy; that which was unclean, clean; that which was divided, united. He gave us new eyes to see and prayed we would use them.

St. Teresa of Calcutta, better known to us as Mother Teresa, would stand for hours as people came to seek her blessing or ask her advice on all matters great and small. And somehow, she never used to tire. Once, she was asked how a person well into her 70's could bear the physical burden of dealing with all the crowds and she replied, "How can a person grow tired of counting diamonds?"

Diamonds. To her, every person, the rich, the poor, the young, the old, the leper, the clean, was one of God's diamonds. That was her perspective. How child-like. Whenever we treat another

person as a precious jewel, we adopt God's perspective. So, as a church and as individuals, let us welcome and value, in Jesus' name, not only the children, but the children's perspective, and therein learn the lesson of true greatness.

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