**And That’s Good News**

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**Texts: Romans 6:1-4, Mark 9:33-37**

When I was being examined for ordination on the floor of Mission Presbytery, I was asked what my favorite part of the liturgy was. Now, having just given an in-depth answer to the Committee on Ministry’s question concerning the essential elements of faith formation, I think they were surprised that I didn’t immediately name the children’s sermon, but rather baptism. I did acknowledge, mostly so my head of staff’s and several of my professor’s jaws could return to their rightful places, that I did love children’s time and valued every opportunity to preach these smaller sermons to our youngest disciples.

My smaller sermons, I realized after a season of training in homiletics, fell into a very predictable pattern. They start with a story, often personal, that children can relate to – a problem they too have encountered in their daily lives. Then a move to the scriptures – in today’s bible story, this or that Bible hero had the same problem! And this story always ends with God’s story – the way that God’s love broke through – and just to make sure they heard it, I exclaim – And that’s Good News! Tying it up, I tell them how that good news is good news for them too, right now. The four sticky notes of the sermon. The homiletician, Paul Scott Wilson, calls the format the four pages of the sermon, but with only 5-6 minutes, the sticky notes will have to do.

And preaching a children’s sermon about this passage, finding the good news for the child in this story would be pretty easy. Children often feel like they are left out, like they are the last to have their voices and opinions heard, like they aren’t taken seriously. So, how great would it be to see Jesus prioritize the child and proclaim that he, and they, are worthy in Jesus’s eyes.

It’s a story I told over and over; how much Jesus loves us and is there for us. That even when things are hard for us, especially when things are hard, we can count on Jesus to see us when no one else does. The Bible is full of stories of Jesus, of God, embracing God’s people who have been overlooked or cast out.

Jesus loves me. This I know. For the Bible tells me so.

On the playground between the two apartment buildings on the Austin Seminary campus, there is a statue of Jesus with a child on his lap and lamb by his side. I imagine the sculptor was thinking about this passage, or any of the others where Jesus welcomes and prioritizes the children to sit with him. And the seminary children seem to get this. It isn’t uncommon to see the children pause in their play, climb on his lap or touch his face and robes and then scamper back to play some more. Jesus loves them. This they know.

Here, in this story, Jesus plucks a child out of the shadows and sets him among the disciples. He pronounces the child worthy, not because of what he can do or what he knows, but because of who he is, a beloved creation of a loving God.

This is extraordinary. In our eyes, in which children are treasures and blessings, this all seems very sweet. A beautiful story about how the church should have a robust children’s ministry for the youngest disciples. But to read the story this way misses the point. See, in first-century Israel, this child was one of the last. Not even of value as a servant who could do work and provide for the household. Of all the people one would think to include, this one would be the last. Yet Jesus tells his disciples that to welcome one of these is to welcome him and the one who sent him. And it isn’t as much about the child, but about all the ones who, like him, have had their value go unnoticed.

It is surely the good news of the gospel that we get to approach Christ as this child. In need of quiet rest, in need of grace and compassion, we are welcome to sit with him. We are worthy because we are his. He pulls us out of the shadows of life, embraces us, and proclaims us as one of his. Anyone who finds themselves cast away, lost, silenced, overburdened, scared…has a place waiting for them on Jesus’s knee. So, whenever you find yourself in the place of the child, and friends, we move in and out of this place our whole lives, know that Jesus sees you, Jesus embraces you, and Jesus loves you. The Bible tells us so. And, friends, that is good news.

But there is another story happening here, entwined intricately with this one. One that reminds us that this great gift of love and acceptance also asks something of us in return.

Perhaps, today, you are comfortable. Perhaps you recognize your privilege. Perhaps you are confident in the knowledge that you belong to God. Your voice is heard and your worth secured.

This time, in this story, you are not the child being welcomed in, because you have already been welcomed in. You are not the child on his knee, but one of the disciples, clustered around him, listening as Jesus explains what it means to be great.

If you want to be the greatest, then you have to be the least, he says. You must be willing to set aside what worldly power and prestige you have to serve the one who has even less than you. The greatest disciple is the servant of all, serving and loving and caring for others, no matter who they are or how it will look.

To be the greatest disciple requires us to be humble. To be the greatest disciple doesn’t mean we get to sit in places of power and tell everyone else what to do, but rather to be humble enough to walk beside them on their journey as we do the work of God together. To be the greatest disciple doesn’t mean we get to hoard the spotlight of success, but to be humble enough to sit with those who are crying out for our help and help carry their burdens.

This picture of discipleship, where greatness is measured in the willingness to be humbled, to be perceived as weak and powerless, to serve those in deepest need, whose companionship would bring no prestige, isn’t such good news, is it? The disciples didn’t think so. After all, they’d spent the last part of their journey bickering amongst themselves, each one scrambling to be recognized, to be seen, to be important, only to stand around looking at their toes when Jesus asked what they had talked about.

It’s not that this is a brand-new lesson for us. It wasn’t new to the disciples either. Jesus taught this through his words and actions over and over and over again. This is the guy who eats with sinners. Who mends the ills of those who have been long forgotten. Who sits with outcasts. Who shuns the spotlight and tells them to keep his miraculous work a secret. He doesn’t worry about these matters of prestige and power.

And the idea of caring for the least of these, the honor of having a servant’s heart is woven through the wisdom literature, the psalms and proverbs, with which the disciples were most likely quite familiar. But it’s easy for us, as it was for them, to get distracted by the promise of power, prestige, and wealth in the world in which we live. It’s easy for us to get overwhelmed by the problems of the world and want Jesus to fix it for *us* and make it easy for *us* and to ignore the world in search of *our own* personal happiness.

This makes the good news harder. Because it isn’t about how Jesus is going to do for *us*, but what *we* are going to do for the world because we have accepted the invitation to be part of this circle of disciples. We are not the child on Jesus’s knee right now. We are the disciples gathered around him, enfolding and embracing the one most needy that Christ has set in our midst. But friends, this is good news.

The good news is that we are part of the circle. Our task is not going to be easy. At times, it will be downright hard and thankless. But we are not alone. Jesus, who loves us, is right there with us.

And the good news is that when we do this work of serving the one most needy, that one is no longer alone either. They find the love of Jesus in the midst of us. And, in this way, we welcome God and a vision of the world as God wants it. Where power is marked by our ability to care for each other with love and wealth is marked by our strength as a compassionate community. Where everyone has a place to belong and be heard. And that is good news. Good news for the world.

Today, we will celebrate a baptism. Today, it is not an infant we baptize, but a child of God making this leap of faith as a young adult. As I was preparing this week, I kept returning to the memory of that statue on the playground. For me, it seems to hold the multiple meanings of baptism. I remember…sometimes, I’m the child, overwhelmed, exhausted, and looking for my personal embrace of peace. But sometimes, when I remember Jesus with his arms extended, I pause, gathered him not as the child, but as one of the disciples. And I wonder who Jesus puts in my midst today.

This is the thing about baptism. It is a both/and moment that we will wander through our whole lives long. A both/and moment of belonging and serving.

When we baptize our children, we place them in the midst of the disciples of Jesus, knowing that Jesus loves them and values them. They are the child sitting on Jesus’s knee surrounded by a community of disciples called to nurture them. But this isn’t the end, it’s a beginning. Years later, the children may return to the font to remember this baptism at confirmation and claim their place among the circle of disciples, accepting the invitation and responsibility to serve the ones placed in their midst.

When we come to the font as adults, perhaps it’s easier for us to connect the dual meaning. We, as the church, celebrate this new member of the family of God Jesus has set among us. And the one to be baptized claims that invitation to join this circle of disciples, both to be nurtured in the midst of them and called to serve alongside them all at once.

And that’s not the end, but a beginning. We will walk this baptismal journey our whole lives long. Sometimes we will be the child in need of welcome and, sometimes, the disciples called to task. Either way, Jesus sits down, reaches out, and pulls us close.

The good news is that Jesus loves us. And the good news is that we are called us to be partners in this love, humbly bringing the good news of the gospel to life through acts of servanthood to those who are overlooked and alone. And in doing this, we welcome Jesus, who loves each one of us and loves the whole world with us.

And that’s good news. Amen.