

Sunday October 4th, 2015

St. Paul's Church

Gospel: Mark 10:2-16

Rev. Trudy Brady

I don't know about you, but I enjoy an outdoor worship service – especially on a warm late summer Sunday. I recently attended such a service in Bethel, CT. It is the tradition of the United Methodist Church there to start their fall program with a service in the park and a picnic lunch. The service was held in a pavilion - the picnic tables arranged in rows served as pews. The choir started the service with a spirited introit. Out of the corner of my eye I could see a little girl about three years old slide off her bench and start dancing in time with the music. When her mother saw her, she quickly put the little girl back on her seat. When the first hymn began, once again the little girl began twirling and dancing. This time it was her grand mother who grabbed the little girl and stopped her dancing. Later when the choir began their anthem, the girl slide off the bench, moved further away from her family's grasp, and danced and twirled with enthusiasm. When the song was over, she turned and faced the choir and cheered, "Yeah!" The choir smiled. During "The Lamb of God", she seemed to recognize the shift in the Congregation's spirit and her movements were slower, more reverent. After the service I turned to speak with her family, but they had already headed for the bouncy house.

As I read our Scripture lesson from Mark this week, I was reminded of that little girl. She showed joy, enthusiasm, spontaneity, reverence, and determination. Certainly these are some of the qualities that Jesus meant when He talked about receiving the kingdom of God as a little child. But what other qualities do children naturally possess that we adults seem to have lost somewhere along the journey.

I must confess that when I was raising three children and working a very demanding full time job, I did not always wake up in the morning with enthusiasm. In fact more than once I thought how nice it would be to have time for a second cup of coffee and just leisurely read the paper. This allergy to morning must be inherited. My 7 year old grand daughter often wakes up grumpy as well. However, by the time Sophia has come downstairs, eaten her breakfast, dressed for school, put on her backpack, and ridden in the car the 5 minutes to the bus stop, she is a different person. She bounces out of the car, runs across the street, hugs her friends, and positions herself at the front of the line to board the bus. She is off with a little wave to her family, ready for all the new opportunities she may have that day. New ideas, new friends, and new lessons to be absorbed.

One more personal story may help us understand Jesus' love of children and their unique world. When my oldest daughter Kathy was three years old, we lived in married student housing at Syracuse University, where my husband was a graduate student. Kathy and I attended University United Methodist Church - which was a beautiful stone building with gorgeous stained glass windows, and an impressive music program. The church had a substantial endowment and many wealthy members. Most important to me, at that time, was their excellent Sunday School. Not only did they have a paid Church School Superintendent, many volunteers, but also bright, well-supplied classrooms. The first week that Kathy went she was a little hesitant, but by the time I picked her up, she was eager to return the next week. The second week when she told me about her morning she said that the BEAUTIFUL LADY had come into her classroom. She then showed me her drawings and papers. The third week she talked about the BEAUTIFUL LADY again. I tried to get more details about who

this mysterious person might be, but that was all she could say - the BEAUTIFUL LADY. So for the next few weeks I made it my mission to discover who this beautiful lady was. I thought surely I would recognize her when I saw her in the hall. But no matter how hard I looked every woman I saw looked rather ordinary. Finally after weeks of searching I'd almost given up. Then one day, after I picked her up, Kathy clutched my hand and whispered, "There she is – THE BEAUTIFUL LADY". She pointed to a group of women at the end of the hall. A group of mothers AND the Sunday School Superintendent. I looked where she was pointing; but I still did not understand. I did not see her Beautiful Lady. Kathy must have sensed my confusion because she went on to say, "See, Mommy, see how beautiful her clothes look with the color of her skin". This was my daughter's first introduction to an Afro-American woman. And all she could see was THE BEAUTIFUL LADY. We can all learn so much from our children.

However, there is another reality about children. Children are vulnerable. They are dependent on adults for many years, perhaps far longer than any other creature in God's creation. We read in the paper and hear on the news about a 4 year old left alone on the streets of Hartford for many hours. We are horrified to hear of children who are beaten, starved or even killed. We cringe when tales emerge of children who are sexually abused by those they trust the most. These sensational stories occur all too often in our society. We say thank God they do not happen in our homes. But other damage is done in our homes. Jesus knew what He was talking about in the first verses of our Gospel lesson when He spoke to the Pharisees and His Disciples. Children are also negatively affected by divorce. It does not matter if they are tiny tots, or teenagers, or even college students. Even if the parents stay together, tension and stress

within the family walls can leave scars that last a life time. Scars that echo down from generation to generation.

Therefore I challenge each of us this week to take a good hard look at all of our relationships that affect children. How can we be more supportive in a gentle loving way? How can we try to heal hurt and misunderstandings? How can we protect the best qualities of childhood and learn from them?

I would like to close by the reading the lyrics from one of my favorite songs. This song by Donald Avery and Richard Marsh first became popular in the 1980's, and my choirs often sang it during Advent. The words are certainly relevant at any time of year:

"COME AS A LITTLE CHILD"

Come as a little child, come with a smile of eagerness.
Greet each new day with a special gift of love.
Even if you're old and gray, even though you've come a long hard way.
Come ready to sing and dance and take a chance.

Refrain: For of such is the kingdom, come as a child.

Come with an open mind; come through each door with humbleness.
Treat each new thought as a spark of Holy Light.
Even if you're proud and wise and dignified,
Come ready to open up your eyes - ready to learn and be surprised.

Refrain: For of such is the kingdom, come as a child.

Come with a trusting heart; come face the world with innocence,
Meet everyone as a friend to know and love.
Even if your sick and tired, disillusioned and uninspired.
Come ready to follow and explore - ready to lift your wings and soar.

Refrain: For of such is the kingdom, come as a child.

May God bless you.

May God bless our children.

Amen.