

Then Jesus took a little child and put it among them, saying: "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name, welcomes me" (Mark 9:36-37a)

It's hard being a grown-up. I've been at it now for a few years, and I can only say: you get used to it over time, but being a grownup it's hard. As a child, I couldn't wait to be a grown up – to decide for myself what I was going to do that day, what I was going to eat, or what clothes I was going to wear, or what time I was going to bed. Even as a child, I loved nighttime reading. I couldn't wait to be a grown up, so nobody would tell me: Erik, go to sleep! How wrong I was.

Being a grownup is hard, not because, unlike children, we are now free to make all our own choices and decisions, which we are, but because responsible adult choices and decisions are framed with a larger context of responsibilities, obligations, and commitments. That adults still behave like children sometimes is a different story.

Jesus sits down with his disciples today for what may be best described as a teaching moment. They have been arguing among themselves about who is the greatest, who is the best disciple. As Jesus foretells his violent death on the cross, they are arguing among themselves who will take Jesus' place. Who will be the next leader of the movement. Finding ourselves in an election season, we know how intense those conversations can get. But Jesus doesn't appoint a successor or cast a tie-breaking vote. He simply says: "Whoever wants to be first, must be last of all and servant of all." (Mark 9:35b)

Now, I say "simply", but really these are difficult words that in the history of the church sometimes have been used to lull people into pious servitude or to promote false humility within leadership. It's hard being a grownup. Jesus helps his disciples understand his point through an illustration. Jesus takes a small child, places it among the disciples, embraces the child, and says: "whoever welcomes one such child in my name, welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me, welcomes not me but the one who sent me." (Mark 9:37) Sometimes the illustration is as complicated as the original point it is meant to illustrate, and we are left in confusion. What is Jesus talking about?

I do not want to speculate on the position of children in ancient Jewish society, but we just read a few weeks ago the story of the Syrophenician woman who risked impropriety to advocate with Jesus for the healing of her sick daughter. And she is not alone. Not included in the Sunday lectionary is the healing that immediately precedes our reading today. An unnamed father comes to Jesus and pleads for the healing of his sick son, unable to speak and suffering with convulsions. Jesus' disciples have tried to heal the child, but they have been unsuccessful. Perhaps this is not the time for them to be arguing who is the greatest.

What our reading shows us, and what our experience tells us, is that children are subjects of love and care, but they are also vulnerable and dependent on the nurturing protection of others, certainly in ancient times when infant mortality rates were much higher than they are today. Jesus teaches his disciples, and us, to be less concerned about status and power and position – who is to be the greatest – but to have greater care for those in the community that are vulnerable: the widows and orphans, the sick, the hungry and the poor, the outcast, and the foreigner. “Whoever welcomes one of these, welcomes me.”

The quest to be great is not absent in the church today. When we say: “we are just a small church,” it almost sounds like an apology. And too often, myself included, we become obsessed with numbers: is the average Sunday attendance increasing, is our giving keeping up with our expenses? How is the state of our endowment? Don't get me wrong: these are important questions, especially in a time of stewardship. The reality is, we need to fund our outreach, and we need to pay our electric bill. Just like everybody else. But, Jesus tells us, the greatest is not the one with the biggest sanctuary or the highest Sunday attendance. The greatest is not the one with the largest outreach budget or the largest number of people helped. Church is to be the place where we practice and grow in empathy, where we stand in solidarity with the vulnerable, where we sit in the discomfort of hardship and injustice.

Jesus welcomes us into these places. There is no promise that we will be great, famous, and successful – a model other churches will want to follow; Jesus warns his followers again and again that his own earthly ministry will end in defeat and rejection. But, Jesus also tells us, when we venture into these places, the thin places of discomfort and vulnerability, we are sure to encounter God. Perhaps there is no greater training school in empathy than to care for a child. To exercise love and care -- to the best of your ability, and then some -- without the guarantee that when they venture into the world they will be safe and well.

To be a grownup in this world is to recognize how vulnerable life really is, and that, but for the grace of God, each of us could be facing challenges and hardship we once thought unimaginable. The wisdom of the psalmist and the prophets is the recognition that all we have and all that we are is grounded in God alone.

Being a grownup is hard. Empathy is hard. A mature faith that acknowledges the highs and lows of life is hard. So, I leave you with an invitation. You are invited to small group gatherings at the rectory, on Friday evenings at 6. We'll meet together for fellowship and conversation and prayer. We will use the "Animate: Faith" curriculum by Sparkhouse Publishing to guide our reflections. Each week a different pastor or theologian will introduce a faith topic, like our belief in God, grace, the church, etc. These video presentations were made a few years ago but remain very current and to-the-point. Because all study goes better with food, our meetings will have a potluck meal. The only request is that you please let me know if you are interested in attending, just so I can make sure there is enough seating available at the table.

Being a grownup is hard because life itself is hard. Yes, there is so much to love, to appreciate, and to enjoy, but sometimes we get too wrapped up in life to notice, and like the disciples we are left to argue the stuff that doesn't matter all that much in the long run. If today you feel worn out, may you remember that God embraces you. If today you are counting your blessings, may you make God's love visible in and through your life. May we all encounter God as we welcome the least of us among us. Amen.