

“The Least of These ...”

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At the close of a convention in Chicago, some businessmen decided to leave before the last session was finished in order to catch the early train home. They wanted to get home early for the weekend with their families. As they hurried through the crowded train station, one man's briefcase hit the edge of the table on which a little boy had his product displayed -- polished apples stacked in a pyramid. When the briefcase hit the table, the apples tumbled to the floor. But the men kept running. They reached the early train just in time -- out of breath but relieved to be heading home after a few full days of meetings. The man whose briefcase hit the table could not forget the image of the apples rolling all over the floor. He told the other men to call his home and tell his family that he would be home the next day. He returned to the train station to find the boy, who was blind, crawling on the floor picking up the apples. The man got down on his hands and knees and joined the boy and together they restacked those apples on the table. Knowing that the apples would show bruises in time, the man gave the boy a \$20 bill and left to find a motel room. As the man left, the little boy exclaimed, “Hey sir! Are you Jesus?”

This little boy recognized in the stranger a response that was different -- a response of kindness, compassion, and extravagant love. A response that demonstrated respect and care A response that seemed to point to a different set of values ... values that reminded him of Jesus ...

Jesus, who lived a life of works done with gentleness born of wisdom ... God's wisdom... a wisdom as James describes in the passage that we just heard, a wisdom

from above that was pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.

Is it any wonder then, that Jesus loved little children. He welcomed the little children when no one else would. For children in that day were not very important. But Jesus paid attention to them ... I expect he noticed the ways they played in the villages. I imagine a sparkle in his eyes when he saw the little ones trailing beside their moms in the marketplace. He wasn't afraid to hold young babies --- holding them tenderly in his arms and blessing them. "Let the children come to me for God's kingdom belongs to such as these..."

Yes, he took special interest in children in a time when they were devalued and considered of little worth. A scenario that sounds strange to us today ...when the tables have turned and children are greatly cherished ...a large majority of children in North America are given an abundance of attention and love ...offered opportunities to learn....granted experiences for involvement. Children in our culture are much more visible and valued than they were in Jesus' day.

In the last 11 years, I have thoroughly enjoyed my role as an aunt. I love to spend time with my nephews and my niece ...delighted with their laughter, amazed at their vocabulary, astounded at their ability to be creative. They are cute and playful and inquisitive. But after spending some time with them, reality does set in ... and they're not so cute or playful. They can also be noisy and stubborn and quarrelsome. They, as children, need limits and accountability just as I as an adult, have need of limits and accountability.

So I don't think Jesus was suggesting when he brought the children in the midst of the disciples that day that children are the models for how to live. He didn't say we were to **imitate** children ... rather, Jesus names in this passage in gospel of Mark that we are to welcome the child --- we are to welcome the least of these and when we do in Jesus' name, we welcome God. Jesus, the teacher gave credence to the status of the child in that day, viewed as one of the least, as people to whom we are to give our attention....not only the child ...-- persons with little status, or power, or wealth, or outstanding ability -- the least of these. When we make time to be with someone with no means of offering reward or payment, the least of these, it is then that we welcome God Jesus is painting for us a new picture of how to live life ... how to live expressing God's way, God's wisdom ...a wisdom that challenges our common understandings of success and power and greatness. When we spend time with someone who doesn't count, when we work at something for no reward, it is then that we are brought into the presence of God it is **then** that we work at truly becoming great That seems to be the lesson that Jesus was teaching that day to his disciples ... the ones who were arguing about who was the greatest ...it seems that the disciples didn't understand what Jesus was talking about when he told them that he was to be betrayed and killed and rise again.... So the disciples in their inability to understand what Jesus was saying, reverted back to something familiar ... they begin arguing about who is the greatest.

But Jesus doesn't give up on these friends who never seem to get it. He continues to love these well meaning followers who trip up and stumble and make mistakes ... he continues to believe in these folks who seek to live God's way but get caught up in power struggles and the race to be first. Jesus continues to offer new glimpses of what it truly

means to embrace God's way. Jesus brings a little child into their midst to demonstrate that greatness is measured by how we relate to those deemed powerless and worthless in this world. God's values are not our values ...

The call to welcome the most vulnerable among us as we would welcome God lies at the heart of the gospel. It is an unusual one ... of the least being the greatestwe can't really comprehend it. But God's ways are not our ways ...God's wisdom reaches beyond our capacity to understand. And the text seems to be saying to us today that if we want to welcome God, there isn't anyone we can really ignore. For the most unlikely people are most likely to be representatives of God.

In July 2001, I joined a group from Hope Mennonite Church in Wichita, Kansas on a 2 week service trip to Guatemala to work for Habitat for Humanity. While there, our group ate our meals in the same restaurant every day. The eatery, much like a small town café, provided a welcome reprieve from the masonry work in which we were engaged.

One day, a woman came into this restaurant where we were enjoying our lunch. She had handmade pieces of cloth to sell. The woman looked very weathered and old when very likely she was relatively young in age. Small in stature, she was not taller as she stood beside us than we were sitting down at the table. Her eyes had a piercing depth – they seemed to be telling us she'd had a difficult life. She smelled of smoke, of dust, of work. Her hands had lived many lives.

We told her that first morning that we weren't interested. This was our first encounter with a vendor. She persisted. I felt some guilt for not helping her by purchasing something. I was disappointed with myself for the inner discomfort I felt

about her lack of cleanliness. Carmen, one of our Spanish speaking group members, told her to come back another time. She will, I thought.

One week later, we were gathered around the same table waiting for breakfast. Vicki read a prayer from the book entitled, *Soul Weavings* a part of the prayer said this

“Show me the movement I must make ... toward a God not confined to heaven but scandalously earthed, poor, unrecognized ... Help me find myself as I walk in others’ shoes.”

We reflected on these thoughts and decided that we would try to keep our eyes open for evidence of God in the midst of the people.

I was asked to close in prayer. “God who is mystery ... I began. And then in the middle of my prayer, I felt a tap on my shoulder. I opened my eyes to look squarely into the eyes of the vendor woman. She wanted to sell her wares. I was momentarily stunned. The words that Vicki had read ran through my mind: “Show me the movement I must make toward a God not confined to heaven but scandalously earthed, poor, unrecognized ...”

Eric had the presence of mind to say to the woman, “un momento”. I quickly finished my prayer. The woman moved to the end of the table showing her things to Carmen who could speak her language. Several of us purchased something. She left with a big smile on her face.

The next noon as we ate our lunches, the woman came into the restaurant again wanting to sell us something. We all said no. She asked for a drink. Carmen called the waitress to our table and ordered not only a drink but a plate of food. The woman

thanked her profusely and went to sit at another table. There was no more room at our table – the 11 of us were crowded around the small space as it was. It felt awkward to be eating while someone, who was “the least of these ...” sat alone. Carmen picked up her plate and went to the table with the woman ... she conversed in Spanish with her. When her food came, the weatherworn woman quickly ate the chicken and gulped her glass of milk. She took a paper napkin and carefully tucked all the pappas frite (French fries) into it to carry with her. Tears came to my eyes as I watched the woman and Carmen communing together around the table. For these brief moments, all the walls were gone --- the cultural, the economic, the language barriers had disappeared. There was common ground between these two persons as Carmen extended welcome to the least of these it was a holy moment.

The call to welcome the most vulnerable among us as we would welcome God lies at the heart of the gospel. God’s ways are not our ways. Jesus lived a life demonstrating God’s way, with works done with gentleness born of wisdom ... God’s wisdom... a wisdom from above that was pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. I want to live like Jesus ...

Lord, I want to be a Christian

Lord I want to be more loving ...

Lord, I want to be more holy ..

Lord, I want to be like Jesus