

18 Pentecost, Proper 20. Mark 9:30-37. September 23, 2018.

On the first Sunday that public services were held here at St. Christopher's, the vicar used the service program to express his hope that St. Christopher's would be "the church of the children." I don't know exactly what he had in mind by that phrase, and I'm sure that over the course of the last hundred years we've had our ups and downs in terms of our commitment to children. But I thought of Fr. Bell's hope this week when I read Jesus' inauguration of the great preaching tradition of using children as sermon illustrations. Though I'm sure we have had ups and downs, care for children, even the centrality of children, has become thoroughly woven into our shared life here at St. C's. And while Fr. Bell may have just been hoping that we would always have a robust Sunday School, when his hope is put in the context of today's gospel reading, it becomes in fact revolutionary.

I'll ask you not to leap immediately to the image on the cover of the Children's Bible. I know, Jesus cuddling this unnamed kid is adorable and may seem like a welcome relief from the litany of cross-bearing and self-emptying and voluntary back-of-the-lining that we're otherwise in the midst of. But it matters that the cuddle comes in the midst of that litany. In the first chapters of Marks, Jesus has built a reputation through exciting teaching and miracles of healing and feeding. And now he has set his face toward Jerusalem and is teaching his disciples that the way of the Messiah is not a triumphal procession to a throne, but a path of betrayal, suffering, and death before resurrection.

It is no wonder that he has to repeat himself so often. It is a difficult enough teaching that the church still hasn't managed to make it our norm, two thousand years later. Declining pomp for service, privileging the well-being of those who cannot pay us back, turning our ambition upside down to pursue the course of love—we never have quite managed to make this the first thing people think of when they think of the church.

Jesus pulls this child into his arms not to pose for a postcard, but to drive home the point that the way of Jesus is radically different from the ways of the world. That it is a way of self-emptying, of giving; a cruciform life: living with arms extended and palms open, not fists clenched. The kid works as an illustration of that because probably the ancient world was considerably less sentimental about children than we are. We think that for the ancient world, a kid was not the centerpiece of hope for the future, but simply a non-functioning member of society. In an honor-based culture, kindness to a child was kindness wasted, because the child had no means of returning the honor you showed her. The welcome Jesus is identifying himself with is a profligate, imprudent welcome. It is hospitality and service removed completely from the economics of prestige.

The child is a stranger, a refugee, a hospice patient with dementia. The love we give there is love that reaps no worldly benefit for us. It is love without exchange. This is already a revolutionary love but Jesus presses it even a step further: this reckless non-

economic welcome is the way to welcome Jesus and the one who sent him. God is found in the love we give away for free.

Now, I began this sermon with Fr. Bell's hope that St. Christopher's would be the church of the children. I share this hope, and especially in the terms of today's gospel lesson. I hope that we will consistently find God in the love we give away for free. We do this internally to each other, giving each other love as a kind of training in discipleship. We love each other until we all know how to love and be loved, even when it's hard, even when we disagree in the strongest possible terms. We give our love away to each other for free as we clean up after each other, forgive each other, and walk each other to the threshold of death. And in the process, Christ is born within us and between us again and again and again.

But we also give our love away, as a community, to those outside our community. At the food pantry and the soup kitchen and in the homeless shelter. In our work with refugees. Every time we put our own social prestige on the line for someone with no social standing. And when we do this, we carry Christ to the world and Christ comes to us from the world. Love is only real when it is shared, and the God who is love is welcomed every time we share the love that has saved us.

It's hard to find another example of someone missing the point as spectacularly as the disciples do in today's reading: arguing over who is the greatest while Jesus is teaching them to give and give and give until God gives them more to give away. Except that we still do it all the time. Our dreams of grandeur, or more likely our insecurities about our status, distract us from the child in front of us. And it is in that child, refugee, dying elder, that we meet Christ. Amen.