

Mark 9:30-37

In this morning's Gospel story Jesus picked up a little child and he said to his disciples, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

This is not an uncommon theme with Jesus. It shows up twice in Matthew's Gospel. In the 18th chapter Jesus says, "Unless you change and become like children you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." Then in the 19th chapter he says, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them, for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs."

So if Jesus had that to say about children, let's consider this this morning: Let's think about what it means to be childlike in the way Jesus meant. Jesus held up a child as an ideal and he said, "Be like this." If we're going to take that exhortation seriously we need to be clear on what it is that Jesus wants us to imitate, because I don't think we always imitate the characteristics Jesus had in mind.

Sometimes we do a great job of imitating a childish kind of immaturity or ignorance or a wrong kind of helplessness, but I'm pretty sure those aren't the qualities Jesus was telling us to imitate. I think he had something very different in mind.

Before we look at what Jesus meant, though, I should say that when he offered a child as a model, I believe

Jesus was talking about a child who was quite young. I say that, because the qualities Jesus liked so much don't last for very long in most of us. Most of those qualities are discouraged or oppressed until they begin to fade and then finally disappear altogether, and that process happens fairly quickly.

But what about those characteristics Jesus admired in children? Let's take a look at them. Most young children tend to be absolutely straightforward. There is an innocent kind of honesty that just speaks right up. Like the five year-old granddaughter of my friend and former parishioner, Edna. Edna lived on a hill at the end of a lane outside of Alexandria, Virginia. One day when I was at her house she told me about a visit from this little granddaughter. She said they were in the parlor, and the little girl was sitting in a rocking chair. After a few minutes the little girl spoke up and asked, "Granny, when you die, may I please have this rocking chair?"

In a state of shock the girl's mother explained to her daughter that she should never ask questions like that. Of course, Edna, who was truly a saint didn't mind at all, but she stayed out of it.

A couple of months later this same granddaughter came to visit again. Edna said that during the visit she could tell that the little girl was working on something in her mind. Well, finally she had it figured out, so she spoke up again and asked, "Granny, when you are deceased, may I have this rocking chair?"

She didn't think she was being inappropriate. She asked the question in innocent honesty, because she simply wanted to know. Most young children have a kind of excited optimism that just knows that all is right with the world, and a sense of joy and wonder about creation. When something is good, it's wonderful. Sowbugs, those little roly-polies, are incredible! The skeleton of a leaf is a precious treasure. The way a caterpillar walks is a miracle. Every discovery is a major discovery, and they're amazed by what things look like, and by the way they work. Most young children are in touch with an inner world that most adults have been trained to leave behind.

Once during a time of family sadness, it was our daughter, Susan, who did the best job of verbalizing the grief and the anger and frustration we were all feeling. No stoic keeping a lid on things, just a forthright expression of emotions. And there was the night before the first day of kindergarten when there was a dream about crocodiles trying to snap up at her from under the bed — strange creatures coming after her from the dark unknown. It was the same way when it came time for us to move when she was eight. One day when Susan was having a tough time with the whole prospect Jane said, "Susan, it's OK to be sad. Your dad and I are sad, too." Susan shot back, "'I'm not just sad, I'm angry and I'm afraid, too."

Jane and I were feeling those same things, but it took a child to name them for us, a child who was still in touch with

that inner world that we no longer knew as well.

Finally, and this may be the most important one of all, finally, a young child is deeply dependent. When a newborn comes into the world that baby depends on others for everything, shelter, food, comfort, a dry diaper, everything. That child is going to need some help in order to get along. And don't we all?

You and I are utterly dependent upon God, and also upon each other if we're going to survive and thrive in this life. If we isolate ourselves and if we fool ourselves into thinking we're self-made or self-sufficient, it can only lead to our emotional, physical and spiritual ruin.

So Jesus said, "Be like children. Become like children again. Regain that straightforward honesty that a stuffy grown-up world has taken away. Reclaim the optimism and wide-eyed wonder and joy that will make you newly aware of what a gift it is to be alive. Acknowledge your dependence — the dependence that unites us, the dependence that is crucial to becoming fully human."

For the past 11 months the members of the Search Committee have been hard at work. They have assessed the state of the parish. They have listened to your concerns and frustrations and hopes and dreams. They have drafted a Parish Profile. They have spent countless hours doing research, gathering names of potential candidates, reading and listening to sermons, contacting

references, conducting interviews, working with Bishop Mathes and Canon Alyson Thomas. And in all of this, a diverse group of individuals has been wonderfully and closely united by a common sense of purpose, and by fervent, constant prayer.

Now, their work is nearing completion, and by the grace of God a new rector for St. James will soon be called. When that happens and your new rector arrives each of you will be invited to welcome the dawning of a new day in the life of this parish church. You will have a choice about how you greet that new day, and I want to urge you as strongly as I can to choose wisely and choose well.

You can greet the beginning of this new time with skepticism, cynicism, pessimism and doubt, or you can greet it with wonder, excitement, joyful anticipation and hope. It's your choice to make, and I urge you to choose wisely and choose well.

There is a child who is waiting and longing to help you make that choice. Within every single one of you, that child is right here. [gesture to heart] For most of us, the world has told that child to be quiet and sit still.

Stop listening to the world. Stop listening. Today Jesus is inviting us to call out that child to help us enter the kingdom of God.