

You're Welcome!

First Congregational Church Branford

9-23-18; Mark 9:33-37

Rev. Suzanne Personette

Just prior to today's story Jesus had just explained to the disciples that suffering and death lie ahead for him, but they weren't concerned with their teacher's lesson. Instead, this is what happened:

³³Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" ³⁴But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. ³⁵He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." ³⁶Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, ³⁷"Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

I was going to do this fun exercise with the children today, but I thought, no, it's not really fun - so, I thought I'd do it with you! And, then I thought, wait a minute, its too mean to do with you, too! I would've asked for a group of volunteers to come into the aisle, and I would've told you that I had some treats to share with you, and that, boy, I sure do hope I brought enough for everyone. Who would like to be first? And, you would've excitedly raised your hands, and jumped up and down, right?! I would've told you to line up and I'd pass them out. *Then*, I would've walked to the front of the line, and bypassed the person who was in first place and gone to the back of the line to give that person the first piece of candy!

Then, I would've asked each one how they felt about where they were in the line, how those at the back felt, those in the front; and then what it felt like to the first people to have me walk right past them and hand out treats at the last of the line. And, those at the *last* of the line, I would've asked, *how did it feel when I gave you the treats first?*

Jesus was always doing these kinds of reversals. He taught that if people wanted to be really great, then they'd put those who were usually last first. UCC Connecticut Conference clergy receive a weekly email with the week's scripture passage and a commentary by one of our clergy. This week's pastor wrote: "I think there's a lot of competition in our conference to be the greatest—to have the best attendance numbers or the most yearly baptisms, to have the biggest budgets or the largest percentage increase of pledged income from year to year. We

squabble at annual meeting, and slide not-so-subtle bragging into our sessions. Not outright arguing, but making a case for our individual greatness.” *We’re the best church! No, we are. No, we are!* Its true. And, Jesus must roll his eyes.

Right before I went back to college at 29, I went to a talk by a professor, and she enthralled me. Afterward, I went forward to speak with her about how *great* she was, and she turned the tables on my admiration by lifting me up, and asking me questions. That was almost 30 years ago and I still remember. If you’re someone with a lofty title, like me, and someone else doesn’t have one, be aware of that, and put them first. Our culture tends to put those with a title, or those who are celebrities first. We see them as more important! And, Jesus must roll his eyes.

On my drive in today I was thinking about how my husband cooks for our family and how, even though I don’t like to cook, I should probably serve him. Have him be first! Jesus has pointed this out to me before. I always see him rolling his eyes! Jesus, not my husband!

Jesus, the greatest of them all, put *us* first. Had he put his needs first, he wouldn’t have laid down his life. If he had been too scared, had he walked away from what he believed... there’d be no church. No *Jesus loves me* to sing. We wouldn’t know about that kind of love and forgiveness from heaven above. He laid down his life *for us*. He became last. To follow in *his* way is to welcome the least, the last, and the lost. Can you repeat that after me - the least, the last, and the lost....

In the story, when Jesus took the child up in his arms it would’ve been very shocking for a religious teacher to do such a thing. In our day, we’ve exalted childhood as a privileged time of innocence, but the child in antiquity was a non-person. But, Jesus says, when you welcome the child, when you welcome the least, the last, and the lost, that’s when you’re welcoming me. Their need is the most important.

Which is one good reason for our church to hold regular intergenerational events! It was so great this past Tuesday night with Carol Titcomb, and Pastor Theresa, children and adults being together. We had a huge crowd. You came out for the kids! All ages have so many gifts to build one another up. I was in a group where the dad was so *great* with his young child, because he kept putting her needs first, letting her do as much of the task as possible, making whatever mess she needed to. I looked around and was elated to see all of the adults treating the children first, welcoming the child into the life of the church. Not, *that’s not how you do it, let me show you how, clean that up!* It was *way to go, child!* Because it wasn’t about making the greatest looking pie. Right, Ms, Titcomb? It was about those kids and our relationship with them. And, *then*, those pies fed those who

frequent the Community Dining Room - the least, the last, and the lost - who don't often get pie.

In another area with children, I had some confirmation parents reach out to me during the week. One told me their child was questioning how do we KNOW that Jesus is the Son of God.... let that settle in, okay? The parent wanted to know what I would've said. What the parent had said was great - that it's a faith thing, and that we look to the Bible for answers, that we use it as our guide, and for our history. I affirmed the child's questioning, that its perfect for confirmation. I praised the parent for allowing the questions, not forcing them to believe as they do - at their age. Another conscientious parent worried about their child's behavior in worship and thought the child should apologize to me. I assured them that I didn't notice anything the child was doing, that I was okay. I told the parent that when I was in Episcopal confirmation and youth group, we'd all sit together in worship at the back and pass notes back and forth! And giggle. We definitely weren't paying attention. But, funny thing that.... *here I am!* Because those church mothers and fathers and priest didn't try to make us conform, its one of my best memories about church, a feel good about church. We should be careful about demanding too much proper behavior from our children during church, or they'll grow to hate sitting here. They'll equate church with discipline and punishment. Obviously, we can't have children pulling peoples hair in the pew in front of them - some things require some discipline, but we should check ourselves when we're being too disturbed by the cries and screams and running of children. *We need to remember that Jesus lifts the child over the adult.* I wish I'd been sitting in a pew to hear that message when Abe was a young child, and I was a stressed out mom always worrying what other people think.

And, now, that child, our only child, is in his last year of high school and will be leaving us for college in August. Ken and I are beside ourselves about saying goodbye. It's hard to believe you get 18 years and then that time under your wing is over. I cried and cried writing this.

I take solace in ONE thing. One of the greatest things about church - and you know what I'm going to say - is that you can rest assured that whatever you're going through, someone here has already walked that road. There's always someone to lean on. I think of how many of you watched your child leave. Thank you, in advance, for letting me lean on you... :) And, I know, I know, sometimes, because 18 year old children can be so awful that sometimes parents are more than happy to push them out of the nest! I know...

One other point. The truth is, *social commentators have begun to wonder whether we've lost our desire to make the well-being of children a central concern. Too many children are discounted, either by their caregivers or by policies that don't help provide caregivers with the resources they need to nurture children.

Again, according to Jesus, *the way we treat children is a good measure of our discipleship*. We privilege gun rights over safe schools. Leaders seem at peace with children of undocumented immigrants remaining separated from their parents. Leaders see programs that promote children's health and welfare as optional. Tax cuts for the wealthy trump care for vulnerable children. *They don't understand that greatness involves empathy and compassion, caring for the most vulnerable members of our community.*

But, here in *our* church, we do our best ministry with children when we make sure they know that God loves them, we love them, and show them that their lives matter and are full of possibility.

Finally, know this..... when Jesus took that child, he takes all of us kids, and speaks of welcome. We have all been welcomed by him. May we remember that as we extend hospitality to the young, to the old, to the in-between. You're Welcome! Amen.

*from an article in *The Christian Century*

In Life Among the Believers

Hello to you who are watching us from home. Peace be with you.

- Our Flowers this morning are in memory of Vivian and Fred Weese and Fred Jr. with love from Margot and Carl.
- If you'd like additional care and prayer today, Stephen Minister Linda Marchessault will be standing next to the piano after worship.
- Please join us in Pilgrim Hall for a time of fellowship following the service.
- It didn't work out with our administrative assistant. Please update your church email address as its listed in the bulletin. I've been covering office duties, and we're very grateful to Julia Novaco who was able to come in after hours Tuesday and Wednesday to put the e-spire together and to do the bulletin. The happy news is that someone new has been hired. Her name is Sophy Johnston and she'll start on Tuesday. Sophy received her Bachelor of Fine Arts in Art Education in 2016 from Concordia University in Montreal. She lives in Guilford, where she works at the Guilford Art Center PT, but her primary passion is as a jeweler. She needs 2 part-time jobs to support her passion.
- Are there any other announcements?
- Rev. Trucksess will now give our invitation to the offering.