

September 20, 2007
Mark 9: 33:37; 10:13-16
First Parish UCC, Brunswick
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Welcome

When I was visiting with Bob Woodbury's family in preparation for his memorial service this past week, they told me this story. The day after Bob died, his four-year-old grandson Miles was sitting at the breakfast table. He looked up and waved, saying, "Hi, Grandpa." Then turning to his dad, he said, "Grandpa's with God, right?" His father nodded. Then Miles said, "So Grandpa knows how tall God is." For a four-year-old this can be a significant theological question. Miles is blessed to be in a family that appreciates him and his theological questions.

We all have theological questions. At our opening confirmation event this weekend, with youth and their parents, we began to generate a list of our questions. They covered the gamut. Here are a few:

- 1 After confirmation do you have to believe everything in the Bible?
- 2 How do you know God is present?
- 3 Where was God born?
- 4 Why does God create war and bad people?
- 5 How do we connect science and religion?
- 6 Why are none of the disciples women?

In the next couple of weeks, we'll post all of the questions on the bulletin board in Pilgrim House.

Today's first gospel lesson says that the disciples were discussing a question on the way to Capernaum. The question was, "Who among them is the greatest?" Maybe the argument was as crass as comparing grades or who had the biggest house or who had been on the most luxurious vacation. Or maybe it had some subtleties, at least for them, because the argument was about their faith. Maybe they were arguing about whose theological thinking was best, or who loved Jesus the most, or who had the most amazing spiritual experiences, or who had offered the most hospitality to others. Pride creeps into all areas of our lives.

When Jesus asked them what they were arguing about and they simply grew silent, he sat down. This tells us something significant is happening. Whatever is coming next is no throw-away comment. Sitting down is a sign of a significant teaching. It is like when your parent uses both your first and middle name. So, in good rabbinic fashion, Jesus sat down. Then he shifted the focus, away from the disciples. It is not all about them.

Jesus selected something ordinary for his teaching. He almost always did. He took a little child. Probably no one had noticed the child. Maybe the child was washing someone's feet. Foot washing was necessary after a long trek on dusty roads. And it was good hospitality to provide someone to wash a guest's feet. However it happened that the child

was there, Jesus selected someone who ordinarily blended into the wallpaper.

Then, he put the child in their midst. Imagine a small child in the midst of a circle of adults. It can be a frightening place to be. One person I read suggests that in Jesus' day a circle with one person in the middle hints at a group preparing for a stoning. However, this is no stoning. Jesus immediately picks up the child and holds the child close. This is one who is beloved.

It may be easy for us to be dismissive of these images of Jesus with the children in today's readings. We may see them as overly sentimental scenes. Of course, Jesus loves the children. Everyone loves children. We live in a time and culture where children are valued. Their needs and wants are often center stage. In fact, sometimes they are too much the center of attention. But, it has not always been this way.

For example, Thomas Aquinas, a famous medieval theologian, presented this ethical dilemma. A man's house is on fire. In the house are his parents, his wife and his children. Who should he save first? Aquinas' answer was that he should save his father, then his mother, then his wife, and if possible, then his children.

Children were at the bottom of the priority list in Jesus' time, also. It was no "women and children first" society. Barbara Brown Taylor suggests that children were considered "fillers, not main events....fuzzy caterpillars to be fed and sheltered until they could turn into butterflies." That is if they survived. One third of all children died in infancy. Two thirds of all children died before age sixteen. Until then, they generally were treated more like servants. In fact the Greek words for 'child' and 'servant' have the same roots. Peter Marty writes that both children and servants "live life on the receiving end of things. Neither one possesses...the power of being able to give." Jesus radically tells the disciples that they are to welcome one who has no capacity to reciprocate. (www.ucc.org/weeklyseeds)

The disciples must have been shocked. Here is one more paradox. Jesus always has their heads and hearts spinning. In Mark 8:35 he told them he must give up their lives in order to save them, and now to be the greatest they must become the last, the least, like a little child, like a servant, like one who is clearly and truly vulnerable.

Children were not the only ones in Jesus' culture who didn't "count." There were also the shepherds, the lepers, the lame, the widows, the prisoners, the homeless, and those who were of a different religion. Some of that list sounds familiar.

Children in our families and in our church count a great deal to us today. We celebrate their life in our midst, we expect they will live and we grieve deeply when they don't. Still we are caught by Jesus' statement; *Let the little children come to me, for it is to such as these the realm of God belongs.* One of the challenges for us is to look beyond our own children, to all God's children. Children around the world are still among the most vulnerable of people. According to UNICEF studies, half of the world's children live in poverty. I suspect Jesus might put one of them in our midst today. How will we welcome the poor children of the world?

In addition, there are children who are close to home who are in crisis, often struggling silently and aching with many painful things - domestic violence, adult drug abuse, poor nutrition, inadequate medical care...

Many years ago I was doing a hospital visit, when I bumped into a man who was a member of my congregation, a physician who worked at that hospital. Bob is a pediatric urologist. He had just finished surgery on a young boy, who had been born with a urinary tract abnormality. The surgery had gone well, but what I remember is that Bob was upset. I didn't know Bob very well until that day, but he wanted and needed to talk, so we did.

He told me the surgery had been much more difficult, and the child had struggled for many years, because the problem had not been corrected when the child was just an infant. It hadn't been done because the boy's family had no health insurance. And the problem had not qualified as an "emergency" when he was born. So now a surgery that would have been much simpler had become much more difficult.

Bob and the hospital had done the surgery for free, but it had taken a long, emotionally draining process for everyone to make that possible. We all know it isn't really free. Others who have health insurance are charged more because the overall expenses of the hospital need to be covered.

Then Bob posed a question that has stayed with me and nudged me ever since. Why in our country we are willing to provide health coverage, under a government program, to all people over sixty-five and we are not willing to provide medical care to our children?

It is just such questions that we are struggling with as a country in the current debate about health care reform. Who counts when it comes to health care? How do they count? How should health care needs be met?

One statistic that I heard on the radio the other day surprised me. Sixty one percent of Americans already have health insurance through a government program -Medicare and Medicaid, military and veterans, government employees, and prisoners. Courts have ruled that prisoners have a right to health care. I've heard stories of people who intentionally committed a crime to put themselves back in prison in order to receive medical care. Prisoners have a right to health care and Bob's patient doesn't? It's a strange world.

We find ourselves in the midst of such ethical and moral dilemmas. In an article in the Times Record this past week about a young adult woman who developed Lupus, a serious auto-immune disease, the author suggested the young woman should have committed a crime so that she could have received treatment in a more timely manner. The woman had a good job and health insurance when she developed the disease, but once she could no longer work she lost her insurance. She couldn't afford ongoing preventative care. One might say she didn't "count" anymore. Once she was in a crisis, she was admitted into the hospital, even though she couldn't pay because that's the way it works. She underwent multiple surgeries, long-term care and then died. It cost everyone a great deal

– financially, emotionally, and spiritually.

We are all more vulnerable than we want to admit. We all have a little child within us, in many different ways. With regards to this health and health care, we are all vulnerable. Some of us already have no health care. Some of us are only one job lay off away from no health care. Some of us have diseases that even the best health care doesn't know how to cure. Some of us are caring for and walking side by side with those who are hurting.

Jesus puts the vulnerable ones,
and each of our vulnerabilities,
in the midst of us, saying,

*Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me,
and whoever welcomes me,
welcomes the one who sent me.*