

“Whoever Welcomes One Such Child Welcomes Me”

Mark 9:33-37

Richard C. Allen

September 13, 2015

South Glastonbury

Connecticut

I chose this passage for Homecoming Sunday because of Mark’s repeated use of the term, “welcome.” The act of welcoming is a demonstration of humility. And humility is the attitude Jesus asks of his followers. “Welcome” and “humility” are kissing cousins.

Though it states all this clearly in the Bible, I learned about the power of welcome from my mother. She did attend a two year college after high school, but she had a PhD in the way of hospitality. I wish you could have come with me on a visit to her home. The thing was, you never knew who would be sitting at her table or on her front porch or at her Baldwin piano or at her kitchen sink. It might well be students from Westfield State University. It might well be 6 year old girls from across the street having a tea party with Margaret’s fine linen. It might well be the UPS delivery guy accepting a cool drink of iced tea. It might well be Jehovah’s Witnesses handing out their literature. It might well be the gay couple on Western Avenue. It might well be the guest preacher from church earlier that morning. She had this operating assumption that everyone matters, that everyone holds the potential to be a light in the world, that everyone is welcome, and that in every human face is the face of God. She was my teacher.

In short, to welcome someone is to see in that someone’s face the very face of God. I believe that is what Jesus was trying to say to his disciples. I believe that is what Mark wanted his church to understand. It is most certainly what I hope we would all embrace on Homecoming Sunday 2015.

At the time Jesus walked the earth, children were literally to be seen but not heard. They had no civil rights, no voice, no authority; basically no welcome. I have a vague memory of my grandparents joking about children being seen and not heard, but we knew they were kidding around. It was clear to us that we were highly valued in their eyes. That wasn't the case 2000 years ago.

So, for Jesus to value children right up there on the same level as adults was a radical position to stake out. It was one of the things he believed that put him at odds with the local authorities. Throughout the Gospels, children become a symbol of any population commonly under-valued. Thus, if Jesus were welcoming children, he'd also be welcoming women and Samaritans and lepers and Gentiles and anyone else who didn't fit the definition of social acceptability.

He saw God in the face of the neighbor's child, in the face of the woman who had prostituted herself, in the face of the man who had cheated his friends on their taxes, on the face of Judas who betrayed him, on the face blind Bartimaeus, on the face of the Syrophenician demoniac, you get the idea. By seeing God in the face of everyone he met, he offered the world a kind of welcome previously unknown.

As the leaders of today's world debate the road to peace, they seem to stumble and trip over their own feet and never quite come to a lasting treaty. There is distrust and there is double talk and there often seems to be a lack of will for finding a lasting peace. None of them has asked for my advice. But if they should happen to include me on a conference call for peace, I would refer them to this radical idea of welcome embedded in the Gospels: to look into every human face, and to find in each face the very face of God.

When I begin to see my neighbor as a sacred creation, created in the image of God, I can not bring myself to want to harm that neighbor. We don't need to speak the same language. We don't need to eat the same vegetables. We don't need to enjoy the same music. We don't need to read the same books. We DO need to see the face of God in everyone we meet. There may be far more sophisticated strategies for peace. There are certainly more theories for peace-making. But this is the theological grounding for any lasting peace.

When I think of our church's homecoming Sunday, I think of my mother's front porch. She would sit out there for hours at a time. She'd marvel at the birds flying over head. She'd feel the gentle breeze upon her face and smile. But mostly, she'd have her eye peeled for anyone coming down the sidewalk she hadn't met yet. I can hear her voice right now, "Hello there! Have we met yet? Come in for some lemonade." And it wasn't the lemonade that transformed the moment into a moment of welcome. It was her way of looking you in the eye, convinced it was the face of God she was seeing.

May today truly be a day of homecoming welcome! May it be a day for living in the greatest of hope. Amen.