

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, UCC, Columbus, September 20, 2009, Pentecost 16, dedicated to the children of First Church and the memory of the Rev. Robert Hutchins, the fifth senior minister of First Congregational Church (1872-1882), and always to the glory of God!

“Servant Mentality”

Psalm 1, Mark 9:30-37

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Yesterday, we were blessed with two wonderful weddings here at First Church. At 1:30, Jayme Glamm was wed to Adam Thompson. At 4:30, Mike Weaver and Jen Casaletta were joined in holy matrimony. More than 600 people worshiped on a glorious Saturday afternoon to celebrate members and friends of our church being united in holy matrimony. I loved both weddings. They were great celebrations of God’s love, of life, marriage and family.

But, the two flower girls and ringer bearer in each wedding stand out most in my memory. As they came down the long aisle, they all looked so overwhelmed and yet so poised. Their necks seemed to lengthen as they looked up to take in every face looking down. They soaked in each look and accepted each smile.

Madeline was a flower girl at Mike and Jen’s wedding. She was so happy. She just wanted to dance. She couldn’t contain herself. Her 3-year-old happy feet were moving. Her dancing toes were ready for action. Having been promised a party filled with dancing, she finally asked her bridesmaid mom, “When are all these people going to

start dancing?” Move over Ginger and Fred. Here come Madeline and her dancing wedding party! With a beautiful party dress and spectacular dancing shoes, how can you stop such boundless energy and joy from taking off on the tip of her toes?

Now, I wish Jesus had been doing the service instead of me. I think he would have stopped the ceremony and taken a twirl with Madeline. Jesus loved children. He really loved being with kids. Barbara Brown Taylor puts it this way:

“While others tended to ignore anything shorter than their kneecaps, Jesus saw what was going on down there. He saw toddlers hanging onto their mother’s skirts and shrinking away from stray dogs, the wagon wheels, and donkey dung that no one up top seemed aware of. He saw them trying to keep up with the grownups when they walked -gamely at first then quickly defeated, limping along with one arm pulled half of its socket by tall people with giant strides. He saw how adults coo-cooed to them when there was nothing else going on, but quickly lost interest in them the moment another adult appeared. (*Bread of Angels*, “Last of All,” Cowley Publications, Boston, Mass, 1997, p. 24).

Others saw children as fillers, not main events. They were useful for their future value. Someday they would grow-up, look after their parents, hold down a job, have children of their own. Until that day, children were simply tolerated. “They were fuzzy caterpillars to be fed and sheltered until they could turn into butterflies.” (Ibid., p132) This is how it was in Jesus’ time.

But this was never how Jesus was. He really seemed to like them just the way they were. He liked being with them. He wasn’t afraid of babies. He took them in his arms and blessed them. He knew how to hold them gently behind the head when handing them back to their moms. He didn’t ask toddlers to be taken to the nursery or outside to play during his masterful synagogue sermons. As a matter of fact, when his disciples tried to keep the children from him, he scolded the big people for keeping the little people away. He was

outraged and indignant. He got up and in the face of his disciples saying, “Let the children come to me and don’t try to stop them. They are the ones who grasp the meaning of God’s kingdom. In fact, if you can’t welcome the kingdom like them (that is dancing during the wedding), you will never get through the doorway of the Kingdom of God!” (Roughly translated from the Gospel according to Tim).

Let me be clear. When Jesus took the children in his arms and blessed them, he wasn’t trying to say you had to behave like children all the time. There are times that would be a really bad idea. Rather, he was saying when you “welcome people” like a child welcomes others, you welcome Him, and when you welcome Him, you welcome God. A child’s spirit of welcome, their tolerant and open way, and their delight in life is what we are called to have in our hearts and lives. In a nutshell: If you want to spend time with God, spend time with a child.

Let me break it down. Get down on the floor with Samantha. See the world through the eyes (and feet) of Madeline. Get finger paint all over your clothes with Lincoln (remember his “smock” is your favorite old T-shirt). Get dirt on your knees with Ethan. Listen to all the “knock-knock” jokes of Jack and Sarah (over and over again as if you never heard them before). Roll a ball back and forth for extended periods of time with Carmen and Chase (it helps your hand-eye coordination!).

Do all of this when no one is watching. That is the key. You earn no credit for this. There is no payback. No job references can be filled out by these little ones. Not one of these children has status, influence or income, which makes each one of them great in the eyes of God. They will not invite you over to dinner or remember significant birthdays in your life. But each one of them is just what you need to see the face of God and be alive!

Now, do you see what Jesus is up to in Mark 9:30-37? First of all, the disciples are anxious. They are giving all the wrong answers to Jesus’ questions (and been doing so for a couple of chapters). They

are anxious when they should be sleeping and sleeping when they should be anxious. So they do what most people do when they are anxious. They change the topic of conversation.

Rather than face the truth, pain, and mystery of Jesus' comments about his own persecution, suffering, death and resurrection, they skip over everything he says, and begin to argue about who is the greatest among them. Peter, James and John feel like they are the frontrunners for "greatest disciple" because they were on the mountain of transfiguration with him a few chapters earlier. They feel confident that they will be the new "Disciple Idol." (Be sure to send your vote in to "1-800-disciple," adding 1 through 12 for which one is your favorite). Make your decision based on the cutest, the smartest, the most faithful, the most likely to succeed after Jesus is gone. Let's face it, the status game always gets you as far away from facing the truth as is possible.

It's at this point that Jesus sits them down and starts (again) to refocus their thinking. He gives them a leadership seminar by saying, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." He wants them to have a "servant mentality" not a "superman mentality." That's when the children come to mind. He takes a child in his arms and refocuses their attention from themselves to this little one. They want to be great? Think 24 inches tall, just a handful of words, unemployed, net worth of zero. Think nobody. Then remember, you are looking at God's agent. The last, the least, the lost.

Some of you may be thinking, this "kingdom value" is pretty worthless. You may be wondering if you are supposed to turn over your household, your business, your profession to a child? Do we want the church treasurer, moderator, chair of trustees and deacons to be a child? Should we turn over church administration and all the program life of the church to the kids? (This is not so far off for us . . . since Chase Washington from his earliest weeks of life has been attending church council meetings!).

Moreover, are we supposed to fix the health care system by

letting the children write the legislation? Or if children were in charge, they would probably stop the cruel system of the death penalty in which we, as citizens of this state, kill people to show that killing people is wrong. Perhaps the laws might be more equitable and the debate much more civil.

To tell you the truth, I don't know the answer to all these questions. I don't know how you turn over the church or a business to those with the least ability to balance books and lead a meeting.

But I do know a few things about this topsy-turvy Kingdom of God. I know we have to listen to the children and those who seem to us to be nobodies! They may lead us to where we need to go! Like the disciples, that is a way we may be too afraid to go ourselves.

I do know when the Byer's lot next door went up for sale three years ago, my daughter Sarah, then 10 years' old, made Buckeye necklaces to raise money to buy the lot. She gave her best necklace to Bill Willis. Then she sold all the others – first buying a lama for Heifer Project International and then giving \$250 dollars in cash to buy the lot. She said, "Dad, here's the money you need to buy the parking lot. Can we build something really cool there? It's okay if we can't, but I thought I'd ask." Sarah was the first one to see the dream and invest in our future. "And a little child shall lead them," scripture proclaims.

I also know, when I receive and share the sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion with children, I feel closer to God. As I hold an infant in my arms at baptism, I feel the power and presence of a loving and blessing God. When I receive communion at 9 a.m. from a child, I feel closer to God. When I see the joy and delight each child gives me when they present the bread and cup to me, I feel like I am at the threshold of the Kingdom of God.

I also know that in God's kingdom, things are different. In God's kingdom, we hold babies who gurgle and barf on us in worship and bring them out of the nursery in the meeting rooms. In God's kingdom, the servants sit down at tables and the disciples wait on

them. In God's kingdom, the "greatest disciples" are most likely Thaddeus or Bartholomew (do you remember them?). In God's kingdom, we stop weddings to dance in the middle of the sanctuary with people who barely reach our kneecaps.

In you want to enter God's kingdom, go find a child or someone who others see as nobody – perhaps they are invisible to others. Put your arms around them and say hello to God. But, please remember, if you are going to get down on the floor and play for a while, you need to have a plan for getting back up. Otherwise, you may be there for a very long time. But if are there a long time, that's okay because you will see the world from God's perspective. And that, my friends, is VERY Good News. Amen.