

If you have been paying attention to the national and local news, you know that in response to an overwhelming number of new pediatric covid cases across the country, Pennsylvania returned to requiring masks in schools. Some school districts have complied while others have chosen not to implement precautions, and parents arguing on both sides have protested at school board meetings. I obviously have an opinion about all of that, but I'm not going to share it this morning. I merely want to point out that our children are right in the center of some of our most passionate public debates these days as parents, politicians, doctors and educators advocate for children as individuals and as a protected class. It's hard for us to put ourselves in the sandals of Jesus' contemporaries, but to understand today's gospel reading in its proper context, we need to know that our view of children is very different than that of first century society. In antiquity, children as a social group had no status or standing. That's not to say that parents didn't cherish their children; scripture narrates many characters who longed for children and parents who loved their children and grieved deeply over their loss. But in a culture that was laser-focused on honor, power, and which rung each person occupied on the social ladder, children simply didn't figure into the equation. Of all the unlikely characters whom Jesus lifts to starring roles in the gospels—Gentiles, women, Canaanites, tax collectors, lepers—the very least of them all is this child he puts in the midst of the disciples.

Jesus keeps teaching his disciples about his upcoming betrayal, death, and resurrection because over and over again, the disciples demonstrate their complete misunderstanding of who Jesus is and what he's doing. In last week's gospel reading from the previous chapter of Mark, Jesus warns the disciples of his impending suffering, then he has to rebuke Peter for trying to talk him out of it. Here he says it again, and again they misunderstand and are afraid to ask him to explain himself. But even if Mark hadn't told us outright that the disciples have missed the point, we can tell from their side conversation that they don't understand what Jesus' mission and messiahship are about: they were arguing amongst themselves about which one of them was the greatest.

While Jesus is trying to teach them what discipleship will cost, they are trying to determine who will get the biggest payout. It's not hard to see how they would have gotten confused: everywhere Jesus goes, crowds seem to find him. He's gaining a reputation and a following, and with enthusiastic public support comes power. They've just identified him as the

Messiah, God's anointed and chosen one. And they are the inner circle of those whom Jesus has chosen. They now see themselves as part of this movement, and they want to know who in the organization gets the most access, the biggest office, the most important title, the largest paycheck. It's a completely natural, thoroughly human way of competing for status. But Jesus has already told them that it's also setting their minds on human, not divine things.

Jesus invites a child into their gathering as an object lesson: *if you want to pick someone to be the greatest, it's the one who serves everyone, the one who even serves a child like this instead of serving themselves.* Again, when we think of children, especially the children in our own families and community, this seems like the obvious thing to do. Of course parents put the needs of their children first. But that's really not what Jesus is demonstrating here. He's not lecturing parents to prioritize their children or teachers to invest in their students. He's speaking to the disciples, who are arguing about who is going to be top dog. Jesus says give up your place of honor for this child—not your own child whom you love deeply, who loves you and who will care for you in your old age; not a prince who will one day be king and be able to reward your loyalty with favors. But serve this random child who has no status—no wealth to share so you can buy things, no power to help you get what you want, no influence to change anyone's opinion about you. In the grand economy of life, don't befriend people who will scratch your back if you scratch theirs. Seek out the lost, the lowest, the least who can't offer anything in return for the love you show them. That's how we become followers of Jesus; after all, Jesus served all of humanity who could give nothing back to him.

There are a couple other places in the gospels where children play a different role. But in this passage Jesus doesn't welcome this child because of their innocence or applaud their child-like faith. This child represents all of those who are so undervalued by society that they're not even on the social ladder let alone trying to climb up higher. In order to understand Jesus, not just his impending death but also his life, the disciples—and we—have to adopt an entirely different mindset: not a competition for who will be greatest but a quest to serve the lowliest—not for *our* reward but because *they* are in need. It might be an exaggeration to say that if we all welcomed the same people whom Jesus welcomed—the poor, the unpopular, the disabled, the very old and very young, the marginalized—that we would change the world. But it would be a good place to start, and it would be exactly what Jesus taught us to do.