

## **Pastor Roy's Sermon from Sept. 23, 2012**

Readings: Jeremiah 11:18-20, Ps. 54, James 3:13-4:8, Mark 9:30-37

Children's lesson: How is school going? What are you learning? Who can you help? Can you pray for your teachers? Do you think they need your prayers? Can you say thank-you to your teachers?

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus lifts up a child as an example of who to welcome. Our instincts tell us to welcome those who will help us. Instinct tells us that greatness is about extending one's influence and reputation as far and wide as possible. In first century Palestine and the desert areas all around, hospitality even to strangers was essential. In dry places you can only travel so far on foot before you will need provisions. But even hospitality to strangers was influenced by selfishness. Most householders hoped that if a stranger's needs were met, that after they left your house, they would brag about your hospitality to everyone they met, thus increasing your social standing far and wide.

Jesus knew that it was our nature to take care of ourselves—to even practice acts of kindness for quietly selfish reasons. He was looking for a way to teach selflessness and passion for the concerns of others without regard for ourselves. In Jesus' day, children were not valued as they are today until they became adults. Many children died at birth or at young ages because of disease. In an age in which it was not a given that a child would grow to maturity, they held back their hopes and dreams until they were more certain.

So when Jesus places a child before the disciples and says, "If you welcome this child, you welcome me and my father who sent me." They must have thought to themselves, "But...but...but why would you place your hope in someone so uncertain?" "Jesus, that's random. You're making no sense at all!" No wonder they were afraid to ask why he was talking about being killed and rising again. What does that mean? How is that helpful for their cause? Both teachings are totally opposed to all of their assumptions! Its not that they weren't listening. They were listening and it made no sense because Jesus was starting with a whole new foundation. Greatness is found in love, not in security. Jesus is not training his disciples to create a grand empire to take the place of Rome, he is stretching his disciples' capacity to love as God loves. Jesus is teaching his disciples about mature spirituality.

So, when Jesus places a child before his disciples, it doesn't confuse us as it did his disciples. We miss Jesus' teaching. We think he's giving us permission to take care of ourselves as we take care of our children. Simply not his point.

To get Jesus' point today, we do better to focus on his command to love our enemies. (name some enemies) True enemies are not personality conflicts. True enemies hate us because we stand between them and whatever they see as success. Our enemy is a neighbor who doesn't like the way we do things. A true enemy is someone who causes you trouble. A true enemy has teeth and won't hesitate to use them against you. Of course, sometimes we can be the enemy because we have been wounded or feel our space has been violently invaded. We don't have many true enemies in life, fortunately. But loving an enemy is discipline which prunes away our selfishness as love grows within us. We cannot do good for our enemies without learning the foundation of love. Love is when there is nothing in it for us at all. We have the capacity to love this way. But we must be stretched to do so.

We might also substitute a mentally ill homeless person. We might substitute someone on death row. We might substitute someone who has been lured into a terrorist group—to be deceived into thinking that violence will accomplish anything good at all. We might substitute a man or woman addicted to drugs who is most concerned about their next “high.”

Jesus says, if we welcome such people, we will learn how to love. We will live the reign of God.

If we only welcome people when it benefits us, we do not get the reign of God. We have not yet experienced the grace of God. We have not yet found the freedom of loving unconditionally. In James' words, we have not yet discovered that the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.

Learning to love is a matter of discipline. Its a matter of letting go of our own stuff for the sake of others who cannot return the favor. We all have the potential to grow our faith, to grow our love. Perfect freedom is not gained by extending our power over others, but by loving freely, living in God's grace where we freely receive and freely give, expecting nothing in return. That's what Jesus taught his disciples, his final lesson was the cross.