

PSALM 1

Happy are those

*who do not follow the advice of the wicked,
or take the path that sinners tread,
or sit in the seat of scoffers;
but their delight is in the law of the LORD,
and on his law they meditate day and
night.*

They are like trees

*planted by streams of water,
which yield their fruit in its season,
and their leaves do not wither.
In all that they do, they prosper.*

*The wicked are not so,
but are like chaff that the wind drives
away.*

*Therefore the wicked will not stand in the
judgement,
nor sinners in the congregation of the
righteous;
for the LORD watches over the way of the
righteous,
but the way of the wicked will perish.*

Mark 9:30-37 (NRSV)

(Jesus and the disciples) went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, 'The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.' But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, 'What were you arguing about on the way?' But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, 'Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.' Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, 'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.'

The Word of the Lord...

This is the scene from the Bible that Sunday Schools throughout Christianity are made of.

Somewhere I have a picture given to me at the conclusion of my first ministry position in youth and children's ministry. It depicts a smiling Jesus with children of all ethnicities gathered around him. There he is. Jesus, all meek and mild with the innocents gathered around him to hear his stories and maybe watch him change into his sneaker sandals and a sweater like some 1st century Mr. Rogers.

But there is no Mr. McFeely good story here. The harsh reality is that the child is a prop for powerlessness, not innocence. "In the first century Mediterranean world, the characteristic feature of children was not thought to be their innocence, but their lack of status and legal rights."²

That's a little hard to understand in the midst of our culture where every year seems to be the Year of the Child. We live in a place where \$250 organic crib mattresses, \$350 diaper bags, and

chandeliers for the nursery are a mere click and credit card number away³. We live in a world of preschools with waiting lists and tuitions worthy of loans; of baby wipe warmers and entertainers and pop stars who base their career strength on their ability to market to children and teens.

But we also live in the world where four little girls were killed in a church bombing in 1963. We live in the world that recently celebrated the 10th anniversary of the Columbine shootings. We live in the world of the Children's Defense Fund and of organizations like Love 146 that gathers its name from a child prostitute that had no name, but simply a number by which she could be "ordered" – 146.

We live in a world where almost 25,000 reports of suspected child and student abuse are received by the Department of Public Welfare in Pennsylvania per year;⁴
A world where according to the Children's Defense Fund in Pennsylvania alone there are 209,545 children living in extreme poverty;⁵
A world where we can expect some 3,000 children in our nation to die by firearm-related injuries in a given year.⁶

No matter the times, children are as vulnerable as ever, and so these words from Jesus are still as relevant as ever:

Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me...

We have a choice to make.

If you pay any attention to the marquis outside through the week then you may have noticed that my sermon title was *Taster's Choice*. My guess is that with my sermon titles being due at least a month in advance that I will average changing my title about once a month.

My original plan was to preach Psalm 1: *Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers.... In all that they do they prosper. The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away... the way of the wicked will perish.*

I believe the paths we tread are a choice left up to us. The Bible has taught me this. Life experience has taught me that the path of joy is not an easy one to stay on. Remaining true to the Gospel takes the constant and conscious choice to do so.

Evil is camouflaged and waiting around every corner.
Dig through most piles of excuses and you will find apathy.

We live in a culture that has its own view of who is the greatest. Through our selected status symbols we jostle with one another for position. The path of status is ultimately empty but the mile markers of bigger houses, shinier cars, 5,000 channels and club memberships trick us into believing we are actually getting somewhere other than judgment.

One wonders if Jesus was really in the driver's seat and turned to question us as he did the disciples about our priorities and choices just how deadly silent the car would get.

...(Jesus) asked them, 'What were you arguing about on the way?' But they were silent... (He) said to them, 'Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.' Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, 'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.'

"When a child's gasping for air, it's amazing how quickly your priorities change." This was a statement made by a parent after their child had a late night respiratory scare. A child in your life means that suddenly there is this person and there is nothing you wouldn't do to protect them, no matter what the cost. When they're gasping for air, you would give them your last breath.

Jesus didn't have children, not in the traditional sense at least, but I think he understood that kind of love...that protective instinct born out of a parent's compassion. I think there was room enough in his heart for every child, for every vulnerable human being gasping for air.

I think he wanted his disciples to have that kind of protective, receptive love in their hearts...not just for their own children, but for all children. I think he wanted disciples like us – the Church – to tune our ears to all the little people struggling to be heard, straining to take a breath of fresh air. I think that might have been why he enacted a parable of sorts when he took a child in his arms and told his disciples to welcome the voiceless child like that...in a total embrace.

I think it might be for a similar reason that another famous story-teller, the author of some of our favorite contemporary parables, wrote a story about a certain Elephant. That story-teller is Dr. Seuss and the Elephant's name is Horton, and this is the story of how he heard a Who:

*⁷On the fifteenth of May in the Jungle of Nool;
In the heat of the day, in the cool of the pool,
He was splashing...enjoying the jungle's great joys
When Horton the elephant heard a small noise*

Horton searches for the source of the sound and discovers that it is coming from a speck of dust floating through the air. Horton reasons he must be hearing some tiny people living atop that speck of dust. He says:

*So you know what I think?...Why I think that there must
Be someone on top of that small speck of dust!
Some sort of a creature of very small size
Too small to be seen by an elephant's eyes
Some poor little person who's shaking with fear
That he'll blow in the pool. He has no way to steer*

*I'll just have to save him. Because, after all,
A person's a person, no matter how small.*

Well, news quickly spreads through the Jungle that Horton believes there to be tiny people living on a speck of dust...and the other animals begin to ridicule him:

*Through the high jungle tops, the news quickly spread
"He talks to a dust speck! He's out of his head!
Just look at him walk with that speck on that flower"
And Horton walked, worrying, almost an hour
"Should I put this speck down?"...Horton thought with alarm
"If I do, these small persons may come to great harm.
I can't put it down. And I won't! After all,
A person's a person no matter how small."*

Horton's story continues and all the other animals try to rid him of this illusion that there are tiny people called Whos relying on him for protection...but Horton remains steadfast in his commitment to protect his vulnerable friends.

I wonder if Christ had something similar in mind for the Church. That we would be the voice for the voiceless, the defenders of the defenseless...even when we look and sound ridiculous – even when nobody seems too terribly interested in hearing that voice.

In the 21st century the children are still vulnerable and there are so many who remain invisible. There are children who are abused. There are children who live in poverty. There are children who are soldiers and casualties in wars not of their own making.

Jesus calls us to welcome the children, welcome those who are most vulnerable. Jesus calls us to stop and listen to their breathing, to check their vitals. Jesus calls us, the Church, to be that awkward elephant in the room...the elephant that says 'a person's a person no matter how small;' the elephant that says the loss of even one child is never a part of God's plan.

That's the call of the Gospel...

Horton heard it...he heard a Who.
But who do we hear?

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

1 This sermon is heavily influenced by a paper written by The Reverend Jarrett McLaughlin. *Mark 9:30-37 – Text for September 20, 2009.* The Well – Austin, TX – 2009.

2 Eugene Boring. *The New Testament Library: Mark.* Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006. p. 276.

3 If you must know: <http://www.babyandmeboutique.com>

4 <http://www.dpw.state.pa.us/ServicesPrograms/ChildWelfare/ChildAbuseAnnualRpts/2006ChildAbuseRpt/003676184.htm>

5 <http://www.childrensdefense.org/child-research-data-publications/data/state-data-repository/cits/children-in-the-states-2008-pennsylvania.pdf>

6 <http://www.childrensdefense.org/child-research-data-publications/data/protect-children-not-guns-report-2009.html>

7 Dr. Seuss. *A Hatful of Seuss: Five Favorite Dr. Seuss Stories.* "Horton Hears a Who." New York: Random House Children's Books, 1996.