

Proper 20  
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### To Sit at the Feet of our Teacher

Thursday evening Daniel and I attended the Parent Orientation Night at Maggie's preschool to meet her teachers and learn about the program. Sitting in her classroom with all the other parents, Maggie's teachers told us about their teaching styles and techniques. They talked about how their own skills of listening and observation are key elements in helping our children in their early development. They spend the first hour of each morning going around the room simply watching the children play and listening to them in order to get an idea of how to direct them in their learning. It is a very open process- what they call emergent curriculum. Their teaching often emerges out of the students' own questions and experiences which they bring to the classroom. Everything for these teachers is seen as a teachable moment, an opportunity to help their young students begin to make sense of themselves and the world around them.

This is the kind of teacher I imagine Jesus must have been. He never wasted an opportunity to help guide and direct his own students. He, himself, had keen listening and observation skills. Every moment for him was a teachable one, whether he was sitting in a boat or on an open field, at a table with complete strangers or even in an argument with his adversaries. Jesus had an amazing ability to connect people's own life experiences with his message and to use his own encounters with others as a way to illustrate his teaching. He wanted his students to make sense of their own lives and the world around them in light of the message he was bringing to them.

Today's Gospel story is no exception. Away from the crowds Jesus has gathered his

disciples in private for some quality time with their teacher. Having quietly listened to their conversation as they were journeying to Capernaum Jesus now asks his disciples what they were arguing about on the road. A deafening silence fills the room. It's as if the disciples are embarrassed to tell their master about their conversation-arguing about who among them is the greatest disciple. With his keen sense of observation, Jesus is fully aware what has been discussed and decides to use this as an opening to teach. We know that Jesus has something profound to say by the fact that Mark says he sits down. All traditional Jewish rabbis sat down when they were to offer an important teaching. Then, Jesus decides to pull out a visual aid to illustrate his point. He gathers up one of the children in the room and places her on his lap. "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me." Just like our Gospel story last week Jesus is reminding his disciples and us that a little child will be the first in the kingdom-the last shall be first and the first shall be last.

Looking through the lens of our 21<sup>st</sup> century culture we can easily sentimentalize these stories. For us they are sweet scenes of Jesus tenderly caring for children. During his own day, however, Jesus' actions and words would have not been viewed as sweet or tender, but rather uncomfortable and even provocative. In the disciples' culture, children had little worth. Even in medieval times, children were not considered of value. Theologian Thomas Aquinas taught that in a house fire it was the duty of the husband to save his father first, mother second, then his wife and last of all his young child. This kind of thinking is appalling to us in our day and age. However, in the ancient world children were seen as dispensable because they didn't contribute or produce anything. Barbara Brown Taylor writes, children in Jesus' day "were fillers, not main events. They were gifts of God who would be useful someday...fuzzy caterpillars to be fed and sheltered until they could turn into butterflies. (That is, if they

even survived to adulthood, and the odds were against them.)” Children were found on the margins of society with all the other vulnerable and powerless. They were among a long list of those who did not count.

This teaching is no sentimental moment for Jesus’ students. Rather, it illustrates to his followers then and now the radical, paradoxical and topsy turvy nature of discipleship and of God’ reign. Henri Nouwen writes that “our whole way of living is set to climb the ladder of success and to make it to the top. Our very sense of vitality is closely connected with a positive response to the upward pull...The problem is not in the desire for development as an individual or a community, but in making upward mobility itself a religion. It is the religion through which we make ourselves believe that success means God is with us and failure means we have sinned.”

Time and again Jesus upends these assumptions of ours with his radical call to follow him to the cross. When God’s love and favor is tied to our individual or communal success, then we are no longer worshiping God in Jesus Christ, but worshiping our own sense of success and upward mobility. If an innocent, powerless, child is prized in God’s Kingdom, then why do we continue to believe that our own success somehow determines our favor with God? Nouwen says that Jesus call us to “downward mobility” -that is to say we should worry less about our ambition, self-sufficiency and worldly success and more about standing alongside those who are considered least among us. It is in welcoming those on the margins, those with no voice or power into our midst that we encounter Jesus and are welcomed into the Kingdom.

As soon as we think we’ve got it all figured out, we think we know what to expect from Jesus and his teaching, he throws us another curve ball. Jesus is always reversing our set of expectations and assumptions about what it means to be his followers. And he is

constantly challenging us to reorder our priorities, to embrace being a people of downward mobility. For us, as it was for those first students of Jesus, the way of discipleship is not a walk in the park. It is often confusing and never without demand or risk. And yet, to sit at the feet of this great teacher is to come to know the way which leads to life in all its fullness and glory. May we never walk away from the opportunity to sit at Jesus' feet, to be both challenged and encouraged by his message. And may we accept his invitation to journey with him into a world of new discovery and learning so that we may experience together the radical transformation to which he call us each of us.