

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd Ronald Royce Miller
The Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost
20 September 2015

Scripture readings:

Jeremiah 11:18-20

Psalm 54

James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a

Mark 9:30-37

I remember when the issues of feminism were young among us when we were younger. The business of language became important, and gender in language is still an incredibly important issue, I believe. But I must tell you I'm unsettled by the gospel today when it talks about children as "it." I think I know what's trying to be done. *"Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, 'Whoever welcomes such a little child in my name welcomes me.'*" We don't know if **it** was a male or a female. All children have gender. **It** seems to be genderless, but **it** also tends to objectify a human being.

I don't think Jesus was ever engaged in the business of seeing people as objects, but people as individuals with whom to have a relationship. In that day and age children were probably seen as *things*. They were dependent. They were demanding. They were noisy. They were dirty. And two thousand years ago it wasn't a very good bet that they would survive into adulthood when they could take care of themselves, help with the farm, be contributing members of the economy, and serve society better than just being demanding for their own needs.

So I think that maybe the point that Jesus is trying to make - when there is somebody who is at the very bottom of the scale of human evaluation, and sometimes it's not just children in scripture. Jesus does this with other folks like women, foreigners, cheats, thieves, sluts, tax collectors, sinners, non-religious people, gentiles, outsiders, Mexicans, Syrians, Turks, others who invade our religious territory, our national boundaries, people who we would prefer not to have to think about or deal with, people who we would like to say have less value than we. Jesus instructs us today that if you receive any of these, welcome them...

What did he do to welcome that child? First, the child is put among them. *"Then taking it in his arms."* The child is embraced by Jesus, hugged, I imagine lifted onto his lap. *"If anyone welcomes, receives gladly, joyfully, willingly the very least of these such a child in my name welcomes me."*

Well, what are Christians about? People who take the name of Christ, who say, *"We welcome Christ into our lives."* We even are bold enough at times to say, *"By Christian we mean we are little Christs. We're going to act like Christ."* St. Paul helps us to think of the Church as the Body of Christ. We in fact en flesh and constitute the living Body of Christ. We are not only going to worship; we are going to **be** Christ in this world.

Well, then I ask you, for Christ's sake, how could you **not** welcome anyone for whatever reason because there is an opportunity according to the scripture today, there is an opportunity according to the gospel today, there is an opportunity according to Jesus today, to welcome Jesus himself.

The interesting thing about this to me is Jesus isn't saying, "*I am God.*" Jesus is saying, "*If you like me and you like what I say and you welcome someone else, you welcome me and if you welcome me...*" If you want to call yourself a Christian or a follower of Jesus or if you want to proclaim yourself as a member of the Body of Christ and you receive even the least of these, my brothers and sisters, in that fashion, you will welcome not me, but God herself. Oh, God's a man! She wears pants. God does not have gender and that's where we're going with this. God is greater than all of the little pieces of our identity that we hold on to so carefully which would separate us from others rather than invite us into the lives of others and them into our own lives by receiving any comers as little children who have been set in our midst and to whom Jesus responds by embracing them and picking them up and putting them onto his lap and into his bosom. "*Rock-a my soul in the bosom of Abraham.*" There is probably no more affectionate image in scripture than being clasped to the bosom of a loving God.

My father's mother was a large woman - always very well contained. You remember the days of corsets, don't you? So do I. But I'm slightly claustrophobic and one of the threats was that if I didn't behave, my grandmother would hold me tight into that bosom where it would be impossible to move, much less breathe. I also knew that if I was snuggled in that bosom I was safe and loved and cared for and nurtured and really beyond any danger that could come my way.

I think there's a simple appeal in the gospel today for us to believe that all of those we would be invited to consider excluded constitute an opportunity for us to come to know and encounter Jesus and thereby to come to know and encounter God. Now that's a very different story than you hear from most politicians today. It's a very different story than those who claim patriotism - and I'm not just talking about this country but anywhere else. It's a very different story that Christianity has for the world about who is foreign. My friends, our sin makes us all foreign and God's love makes us all "bosom buddies!"

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