



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

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A Stephen Ministry Congregation

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Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost September 20, 2015

“Welcome the Child”

(Mark 9:37)

Rev. David K. Groth

“And he took a child and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in his arms, he said to them, ‘Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me’” (Mk. 9:37).

COLLECT: O God, whose strength is made perfect in weakness, grant us humility and child-like faith that we may please You in both will and deed; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

It was bound to happen. As the disciples were walking on the way to Capernaum, they started arguing about who was the greatest. It was bound to happen because of what had just happened. Three of them – Peter, James, and John – had been with Jesus during the glory of his transfiguration. Though it had nearly frightened them half to death, they had been privileged to get a glimpse of Jesus’ divine nature. So three of the disciples were given this experience; the other nine, for whatever reason, were not. Can you picture the dynamics between the two groups changing? Peter, James and John might be feeling privileged and a little proud to be part of his new inner circle, while the other nine might be feeling a little left out, overlooked, excluded. I picture it mostly beneath the surface of conscious decision, but I can see Peter, James and John casting little signs and signals indicating status (nothing blatant, nothing unabashed) but doing more of the talking, making more of the decisions, giving instruction, even interrupting, until finally the others have had enough. Of course, it was bound to happen. Pent up irritation breaks through and the argument over status is now out in the open. Arriving in Capernaum, Jesus asks them about it. “What were you talking about back there?” No one says a word. They know he would not be impressed or pleased.

So Jesus sits them down and initiates a discussion about greatness. He says “If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all.” And then he takes a little child and puts him in the midst of them. I picture a toddler just waking up from a nap, quiet and still, his arms hanging limp at his side, breathing audibly through a congested nose. Jesus wraps his arms around that child and says, “Whoever welcomes one of these little children in

my name welcomes me.” This is a picture of greatness: welcoming the child. It’s greatness because it takes a servant to welcome a child.

In that day, a child had no status but was under the authority of everyone else. To become like a child is to forgo status and to accept the lowest place, and to welcome a child, in a sense, is to join them in their littleness and unimportance.

A young child is vulnerable, completely dependent, and at the mercy of others. He must be served because he’s unable to serve himself, which means a child’s life and needs must come before our own. A child’s smallness must take precedent over our own plans for greatness. That’s what Jesus is teaching his disciples. If you want to be great, you must be servant of all, even of those who have no status. “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.” And in Matthew he says, “Whatever you have done for the least of these you have done for me” (Mt. 25:34ff). Seeing Jesus wrap his arms around a little child as he talks about greatness, I don’t think the disciples would ever forget the lesson. Unfortunately, I think our nation has forgotten the lesson.

Did you watch the video of an abortionist talking about the sale of various parts for medical research? She didn’t realize she was being filmed and spoke openly about altering abortion procedures to preserve vital body parts for sale to researchers.

They’re in a swanky restaurant. She’s well dressed, pretty. She spears a bite of salad and says “A lot of people want the liver”. She takes a sip of wine and talks about taking care not to crush the valuable parts with the forceps. She talks about the eight “cases” she worked on the day before, including what she calls a “17 weeker” . . . notable because the organs are more mature and therefore more valuable. If you watched it, my guess is it turned your stomach. It parted the veil of antiseptic tidiness behind which the abortion industry has operated for so long. It laid bare the brutal nature of abortion.

And the surroundings, the sleek, contemporary restaurant, white tablecloths, fine plate settings . . . it all reminded me of a quote from C.S. Lewis. He writes, “The greatest evil is not now done in those sordid ‘dens of crime’ that Dickens loved to paint [with words]. It is not done even in concentration camps and labour camps. In those we see its final result. But it is conceived and ordered (moved, seconded, carried, and minuted) in clean, carpeted, warmed, and well-lighted offices, by quiet men with white collars and cut fingernails and smooth-shaven cheeks who do not need to raise their voice” (*The Screwtape Letters*, p. x).

In the Supreme Court decision of 1973, the right of a woman to choose an abortion was deemed greater than the right to life of her unborn child. In the years since, a woman’s right to choose has become elevated actually. They’re now calling it a “sacred choice”, a choice that must be defended at all costs. Can you imagine? Sacred means divine, holy, sacramental. How can something so wrong, so brutal be called sacred?

This is hard to face. We all want to look away, but we must not. We cannot be complacent and lackadaisical while this is happening. This is not the time for timidity and lengthy contemplation. We can’t just shrug our shoulders and say, “Who are we to judge?” Can’t you see how the right to choose death goes against everything Jesus is saying in this text about being last of all and servant of all? Can’t you see how choosing death and then selling off the parts is the extreme opposite of welcoming a child? Can’t you see how abortion is the extreme opposite of wrapping your arms around, swaddling an infant, kissing an infant on the top of the head? Friends, this is not a political issue. This is about heart and faith and life, about what’s right and what’s wrong. Even if there are medical advances made using the remnants from an abortion, we simply cannot support the exploitation of one group of human beings (the preborn) for the benefit of another group (the ill). The right to choose takes advantage of the vulnerability and helplessness of a child, and it takes advantage of the vulnerability and feelings of helplessness of

a pregnant woman.

When God looks upon a woman in an unplanned pregnancy, I think he sees two children. He sees the mother as a “child,” someone who is in a very difficult situation, someone whose life has come crashing down around her, someone who has deep regrets and just wants it all to go away. He sees someone in need of love and forgiveness, someone in need of a servant’s embrace, someone in need of support and a listening ear. God sees someone who needs help in becoming a servant herself.

She needs this help and support to be a servant because the other child God sees is the child in her womb. This is a child completely at the mercy of the choices of others. This child needs to be welcomed. This child needs a servant’s embrace. A woman in this situation provides opportunity to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the hope and healing he can bring to all circumstances. The Gospel can help her see through the pain of her situation so she can become a servant and welcome the child within her. The message of the Gospel can help her lay aside for a time her goals and plans, and start making goals and plans for her child.

One of the best ways a young mom, especially a pregnant teen can do this is by making an adoption plan for the baby. Notice I didn’t say, “give your baby up for adoption” because that feels and sounds like abandonment, and for many abandonment can seem worse than death. Adoption, however, is not abandonment. It is a plan for the life of that child. It is an ultimate form of servanthood. And often it is best for both mother and child.

Today you can be involved in the adoption plan for your child in so many ways. You can exercise your right to choose by making some loving choices for you and your child. You can choose to have your child baptized, a choice never available in abortion. You can choose Christian parents. You can choose to receive pictures of your child and reports of his or her development. You can choose to write a letter to read when your child is older in which you

can share the assurances of your love and the desire you had, to do what was best.

Two months after a young single college student aborted her first child, she was pregnant again. This is not all that uncommon. This time, however, with the help of Christian counsel from a pregnancy center, she chose life for her child. She chose to plan a good future for her baby through adoption. Here is what she says about it now. “I still think about my baby girl every day, but those thoughts don’t consume me the way the abortion did. I know that my daughter (the adopted one) is in the loving home of a married couple who cherish her. I am absolutely certain that I made the right decision. Today I have a loving husband and family and peace of mind about my adoption decision. And that has made all the difference.” This young woman learned what it meant to be a servant, to welcome a child. That is true greatness, to lay aside her own plans for a time in order to make plans for her child. It takes a servant to welcome a child.

Let’s go back to Capernaum for a moment, with that wet-nosed toddler standing before Jesus. To embrace that child, Jesus would have to stoop. He would have to get down to the child’s level. But Jesus was accustomed to “stooping” wasn’t He? Hebrews 2 says, “Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death – that is, the devil.” (v. 14). Paul reminds us just how far Jesus had to stoop to serve his children. Though “being in very nature God, [he] did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness and being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross!” (Phil. 2:6-7). It takes a servant to welcome a child, it takes sacrifice. On the cross, Jesus became the ultimate servant for us all, also for those who have had abortions. Jesus gave the ultimate sacrifice so that he could “take us in his arms” and welcome us, embrace us, each of us, every one

of us, as his forgiven child. No matter what you've done, Jesus died on the cross for you and for your sin. There is no sin so great that he cannot forgive it. If you have repented of that sin, you have been washed clean of it by the blood of Christ and there's no need to feel on-going guilt and sadness. There's no need to perpetuate the penitence or keep alive the shame and guilt. You don't have to stoop under the weight of it anymore, because Jesus already did that for you. He stooped under your sin so you can stand tall as one forgiven and loved by the risen Lord. That's what forgiveness does for us. It gives us new life.

The disciples had been arguing about greatness. But they were working under the world's definition of greatness, a common malady for us all. We like to think greatness is having power and authority and wealth. Greatness is being recognized for some achievement. Greatness is being a famous athlete, or actor or musician. Greatness is having enough money that you never have to serve anyone.

But Jesus turns all that on its head and says true greatness is found in serving others. It's putting the needs of the vulnerable and helpless before your own. It's welcoming the child.

Do you want to be great? Do you want to do something that will really matter in this world and make the critical difference in someone's life? Welcome the child. Amen.

