“***What Were You Arguing About?***” by S. Finlan, at The First Church, Feb. 28, 2020

**Mark 9:2–9, 33–37**

2Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, 3and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. 4And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. 5Then Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” 6He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. 7Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” 8Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.

9 As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead. . .

33 Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the way?” 34But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. 35He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” 36Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, 37“Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

How do you handle an experience that is completely unprecedented and inexplicable, at least in normal, daily terms? How do you interpret and accept a miraculous occurrence? At the very least, it is not easy. The three apostles probably did not know how to interpret what they saw on the mountain.

On this occasion, Jesus is transfigured before his inner circle of apostles, shines with some kind of heavenly light, and confers with two beings who suddenly appear there on the mountain. Peter, not knowing what to say, offers to build tents for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. Then a heavenly voice, probably the same one who spoke at Jesus’ baptism, says “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” You can’t blame Peter for being astounded and hardly knowing what to say.

After the revelatory moment is over, Jesus solemnly orders his disciples not to tell anyone about what they have seen until after the Son of Man should rise from the dead. So this goes along with the three warnings and predictions of his death and resurrection that he made to the apostles in Mark 8, 9, and 10. There is the glorious and transcendent self-revelation of Jesus, followed by a reminder that he will die, and then rise from the dead.

We don’t know exactly how this experience affected Peter, James, and John, but it is possible that it had no moral or spiritual effect at all, for these same men, later in the chapter, join in the argument amongst the apostles about who should be greatest in the kingdom, who should be Secretary of Defense, who should be Secretary of State. They still have as much proud and personal ambition after the Transfiguration as they had before it. Does this show that miracles have no real effect on people’s minds? That people learn nothing even from the most astonishing visions? Maybe. I want to keep this as one possible lesson from this passage. We see even Jesus’ inner circle of apostles subject to proud ambition. Are we that way, too? Do we also learn nothing from spectacular experiences, but only from moral reflection and humble insights, either through sudden revelation or by insight seasoned with the passage of time?

Because that’s where Jesus is leading the apostles. He schools them by placing a child in their midst, and saying “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me” (9:37).

He uses a child to symbolize himself. Reception of and respect for a child stands for reception of *him*, and respect for God. It’s a remarkable passage that raises the status of children. Instead of the image of his dazzling self-revelation, he chooses the image of a child in their midst to be a symbol of himself. You need to be welcoming and respectful of the child, to show your welcome and respect for Jesus and the Father.

So it’s a strange and unexpected lesson, certainly unexpected for the apostles who live in a very male-centered culture. Women and especially children are not considered very important at all, and here is Jesus making the welcoming of a child of *central* importance. A story that starts out with the miraculous and luminous Transfiguration ends up with a lesson in humility and respect for children. First there is a unique and unprecedented self-disclosure, and then there is an encounter with a child, and the event he treats as important for spiritual living is the latter. Both say something about Jesus. The Transfiguration shows his divinity. The saying about the child shows his tender-heartedness, and speaks of a line of connection from heavenly Father to divine Son to ordinary child. In the same way, Jesus welcomes each and every one of us as a child of God, every day.

All together, the passage is a caution against getting too self-important or religiously arrogant. The main command that emerges is to be servant of all and to welcome the child. Even if you’ve seen a blazing revelation, your job is to be good to the child. The whole implied command is: “don’t aspire to high position or dazzling power in the kingdom. The kingdom is about welcoming the child. Learn to live humbly.”

He was ready to treat an ordinary child as more interesting and important than a supernatural revelation. What a surprising message! No wonder they were continually amazed by Jesus. He was glorious, and yet he glorified humility. He had miraculous power in heaven and on earth, yet he called for them to be attentive to the least of their compatriots—the children.

So let us be as little children, trusting and loving Jesus and welcoming other children in the family of God. O God, be with us now and ever after as we grow ever closer to you through the miracle of daily living.