***“One Such Child”*** by S. Finlan, at The First Church, September 19, 2021

**James 3:16–4:3, 7–8a**

16For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. 17But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. 18And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.

4:1Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? 2You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask. 3You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures. . . 7Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. 8Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.

**Mark 9:30–37**

30 They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; 31for 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.” 32But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

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.”

Sometimes we get used to hearing the same familiar words of a story, and we don’t stop and think about what is being said, as when we say the Lord’s Prayer but don’t think about God’s will being done, and for us to learn forgiveness.

Here we have “welcoming the child.” I think that means two distinct, but related, things. It means becoming innocent and trusting toward God, the way a child trusts its parents. But it also means, of course, welcoming actual children and being kind to them. “One such child” is a concrete expression, and refers to an actual child being welcomed, being cared for, and no “stumbling block” being placed in its way (Matt 18:6–7). Actually, one of the fruitful results of Christianity is that we now are sometimes more welcoming toward children than we are towards adults, although we should be welcoming to all.

No other religion puts such a premium on children. Most religions have a place for honoring parenthood and encouraging the bringing of children into the world. But Jesus gives value to the actual child as a person, and a person possessing religious qualities. Children were considered to be the least and the last, but Jesus says “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all” (9:35), and “some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last” (Luke 13:30). Elsewhere he says “unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 18:3). And this resonates with a line from the letter of James, the Lord’s brother: “Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you” (James 4:8). Drawing near to God is what the trusting child is able to do. Adults are often craving for something else, such as the status and power for which the apostles were arguing on the way (Mark 9:33). According to James, such “cravings that are at war within you” cause envy and can even lead to murder (4:1–2). Envy and competition spring eternal in the human heart, and James sees these as causing a potentially violent craving within. Coveting can lead to violence. The craving is painful and moves one to take action, maybe lying or plotting, rather than physical violence. All these selfish actions separate us from God. When we place our primary craving for ourselves alone, we only have room for those cravings, and we become a vortex of violent feelings.

But when one craves wisdom and God’s guidance instead of status, one learns how to be pure, peaceable, gentle, and full of mercy (James 3:17). Wisdom yields “a harvest of righteousness sown in peace” (3:18). Sometimes James’s words sound a lot like his brother, Jesus’. The harvest of righteousness is the result of having spiritual motivation, and *that* can be compared to becoming like a child, which means being spiritually receptive and pure of motive. Not necessarily pure through and through, but pure in our intention to turn to God. God will meet us where we are and as we are, warts and all, and take us where we need to go.

This involves the eyes of our heart being opened, enabling us to perceive truth and receive spiritual power. We have an experience of spiritual illumination and warmth. We are drawn by the attractive power of love, and the satisfying power of truth. Sometimes Jesus said things that were shocking, like the remark about welcoming a child being like welcoming God. The mild shock that Jesus’ sayings cause is paralleled by the more intense shock when we experience an inward change of heart. He tries to train his disciples to be ready for that experience of surprise and reversal. He would turn us upside down. He would get us to let go of our prejudice against Samaritans, or whatever is equivalent to that prejudice. He would get us to drop our feelings of massive superiority to children, or to women, or to Gentiles—that is, foreigners. He would get us to drop our feeling that we are *owed* something. That was the purpose of the parable of the workers hired at different times of the day, but being paid the same (Matt 20:1–16). He is intentionally shocking our sense of fairness, so that we can be prepared to accept the overflowing generosity of God. Unless we are periodically shocked by Jesus, we are probably not learning from him. Jesus wants us to grow and to expand our horizons, spiritually.

Surprisingly, Jesus recommends the spiritual simplicity of the child, joined with the cleverness of the serpent, as he says in Matthew 10: “be wise as serpents and innocent as doves” (Matt 10:16). Use some wise foresight and some psychological insight. Don’t be naively blind to the evil motivations that some people have. But retain your unselfish spiritual urge and your intellectual hunger and curiosity. Part of our child-like spirituality is to be always curious and learning. It might involve learning about history and psychology, or discovering other cultures. These fields of learning can augment our spiritual lives.

In conclusion, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all, and servant of all.” Progress in Jesus’ kingdom does not mean dominance or power, but learning to serve others. And “Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.” It does take a decision on your part to make that effort, and to trust that there will be results, even if the results are not accompanied by bright lights or heavenly voices. It might just be a “still, small voice” (1 Kings 19:12 KJV) whispering truth to your heart. But it can bring a harvest of good things into your life, if you cherish it. For “where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matt 6:21). May you be receptive to the still, small voice of God in your heart.