

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

September 19, 2021, The 17th Sunday After Pentecost/ The 24th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Psalm 1, Mark 9:30-37

AND JESUS TOOK A LITTLE CHILD...

I was at a Presbytery workshop many years ago and one of my colleagues told this story of a recent Sunday at church. He had been at his current church for about a year. He said that when he arrived it was a very divided congregation. It was a church of long-time members who wanted the church to grow, but when they got new members, they weren't quite the people they had in mind. In fact, the church was so divided that the long-time members sat on one side of the aisle and the new younger members sat on the other. The new people knew the pastor was glad they were there, but the rest of the church had not been very welcoming.

He said that when it came time for the peace and greetings those on one side of the aisle turned and greeted the people on their side. While the others turned and greeted the people on their side, their backs to each other. He said he'd tried all kinds of things to get the two sides to blend but nothing had worked.

But all that changed one Sunday because of a 3-year-old in the church. Whenever the children came up for the children's sermon this pastor gave them a small candy bar to take back to their seats. He admitted he knew this wasn't a good thing, but it was a candy bribe that got the children to come up.

On the Sunday that changed everything, he was about to start his sermon. As he looked out at the congregation, he saw this 3-year-old boy come marching down the aisle, headed directly for the pulpit.

Out of the corner of his eye he could also see the old guard of the church frowning and whispering to each other.

And since pastors can hear quite a bit from the pulpit, no matter how quietly you think you are whispering, he could hear the same complaints he'd been hearing for a year.

"These people! They can't even control their children. In our day, our children had manners and knew how to act in church."

This whispering had no effect on this boy as he got to the step below the pulpit and reaching up his hand asked: "Candy?"

So of course, my friend handed him a candy bar which just added to the grumbling from one side of the sanctuary.

This young boy took his candy bar, turned around, and looked at the grandma in the front row of the other side. Everyone held their breath as he walked up to her. Not only was she the reigning matriarch of the church, but he was choosing the ring leader of the grumblers, who kept all the unhappiness stirred up.

He stood in front of her, looking up into her face. Then he handed her the candy bar, and went back down the aisle to sit with his mother.

And the people looked at each other across the aisle that divided them and smiled at each for the first time. And that congregation began to change.

Then the disciples came to Capernaum; and when Jesus was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?"

But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."

*Then Jesus took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me."
Mark 9:33-37*

One All Saints Sunday my friend Jane was teaching during the "Children's Church" that happened during the Sunday School hour. She was explaining to the children that everyone was a saint. She told them, "Saints aren't just people in pictures with halos above their heads. And saints aren't just people who have died and gone to heaven. Everyone who loves Jesus is saint, and that means that all of you are saints."

Following worship, during the Fellowship Time, one of the boys came running up to her and began to tug on the sleeve of her robe. He was one of those boys who had quite a reputation for being a trouble maker, at church and at school.

Tugging on her sleeve, he asked in an excited voice: "Do you remember what you said at Children's Church today?"

"Yes," she replied, "I said that all of you are saints."

"And you meant even me, didn't you?" he asked.

"Yes," she answered, "You are a saint."

With great seriousness he then asked, "Would you come tell that to my mom?"

Then Jesus took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me."

Jenny was another child, in another church who also had a certain reputation. She was very bright and very strong-willed, and her parents never had time for her, and she knew it. By 2nd grade she had learned the art of being loud, demanding and forceful with all the adults in her life at home, school and church. But there were very few who looked past the noise to the child behind it.

Her grandparents brought her to Sunday School and later confirmation and youth group, but the leaders and teachers didn't like her much, and she knew that too.

People at church would talk about how she was just like her mother, and look how that had turned out.

She was judged by church members for who her parents were, where they lived, and how they lived, and she knew that too.

When her pastor who listened moved away when she was in high school, the other pastor kicked her out of confirmation for not meeting all the requirements in a timely fashion.

She had her first child when she was 17 and left high school behind. She chose not to bring her daughter to the church.

Then Jesus took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me."

There is a story that made the rounds in emails a few years ago. It is written by the mother of a young boy and it goes like this:

Last week I took my children to a restaurant. My six-year-old asked if he could say grace. As we bowed our heads, he prayed, "God is good, God is great. Thank you for the food, and I would even thank you more if Mom gets us ice cream for dessert. And liberty and justice for all! Amen!"

Several of the customers nearby laughed gently when they heard my son's prayer. They were delighted to hear such a young boy pray in public. One woman, however, took a different viewpoint. She said, "That's what's wrong with this country. Kids today don't even know how to pray. Asking God for ice cream. Why, I never!"

Hearing this, my son burst into tears. He asked me, "Did I do it wrong, Mom? Is God mad at me?" As I held him, I assured him that he had done a terrific job and God certainly wasn't mad at him. Just then an elderly gentleman approached the table. He tenderly looked at my son and said, "My boy, I happen to know that God thought you prayed a great prayer." "Really?" my son asked. "Yes indeed," he said. Then whispering loud enough so everyone (particularly the critical woman) could just barely hear, he added, "I think that God would be pleased if more people asked for ice cream. It's too bad that some people never ask God for ice cream. A little ice cream is good for the soul."

I thanked the dear gentleman for his kind words. And, quite naturally, I ordered ice cream for dessert. For a moment, my son quietly stared at his dish of ice cream. Then he did something I will remember for the rest of my life. He picked up his ice cream, walked over to the nearby table, and placed it in front of the critical woman. With a big and completely innocent smile he said, "Here lady, this is for you. A little ice cream is good for the soul, and my soul is good already."

Then Jesus took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me."

I met Jonathon when he was four years old. I met him the day I baptized his baby brother. Later that week Jonathon's mom stopped by my office to bring me a present from Jonathon. He told her to bring me rocks that he had carefully chosen from their back garden, because he wanted to thank me for baptizing his brother.

Several weeks after the rocks, I received a card from Jonathon. He had painted a watercolor picture of a garden on the front of the card and then told his mother what to write on the inside. It said: "Will you come to supper? Jonathon will be cooking. Our house is blue." When I arrived chef Jonathon had on his own chef's apron and a real chef's hat. He cooked sloppy joes and during dinner he whispered to me the secret ingredient: Worcestershire sauce!

Later that spring I was attending his older brother's baseball game and had to run to my car to get something. Jonathon came with me and when I opened the passenger door, he pushed past me to see exactly what his minister kept in her car. On the seat was my Bible and Sunday's bulletin and some papers from church. Jonathon took one look and then stepped away and turned to me and asked in a hushed voice, "Are those your Jesus things?"

Then the disciples came to Capernaum; and when Jesus was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?"

But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."

Then Jesus took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."