

On Putting a Child in the Center

Presented By Pastor Scott Walters on 09/29/2019

At Crossroads United Methodist Church

Waunakee, WI

Today we are having a dedication for a new children's play area and we are having a picnic celebrating that play area.

Jerusalem in the year 70 A.D. was no picnic. The Romans decided they had enough of the Jews, their riots and revolts: if the Jews could not live as an occupied people of the Roman Empire, the Romans would take care of the situation. And they did.

And thus in a war, in which Judaism would forever be changed. When Mark was writing his Gospel, Jerusalem was burned, and the temple – the center of the Jewish faith – was utterly destroyed.

Surrounded by ashes, corpses and violence, the early church debated its future. Was this war, they wondered, really the beginnings of a new social order, the kingdom which Jesus promised? If so, how would things be arranged after the war?

Can't you hear them now? "I'll support you for Mayor of Jerusalem, if you'd back me to become Bishop of Antioch." I'm trying to be the new pastor of First United Methodist Church of Athens. It would seem that with the destruction of the Temple, the world was falling into the hands of those early Christians.

Mark was not so sure. Mark offered a critique of those early Christian leaders arguing over positions of leadership and power. And Mark couched it in a story he remembered about Jesus and his disciples.

Remember? During the last months of his life, Jesus repeats the refrain of his having to go to Jerusalem and be put to death. The first time he announced it, Peter was adamant in his refusing to believe that Christ could be touched by suffering. He argued with Jesus about it to the point that Jesus cursed Peter to his face.

And in this second instance, the disciples hear another prediction of rejection, suffering, and death. And their response? Confusion, maybe a little panic, but in the end they ignore Christ's warning and reopen their heated argument over the spoils of the kingdom. Jesus hears their bickering and asks a question: "What's the point of your arguing?"

Jesus doesn't wait but confronts the disciples with a parable to address their plans about who's going to be at Jesus' right hand. A parable that answers the question, "What distinguishes a Christian in today's world?"

So, Jesus takes an unwashed kid off the street, in a culture that dislikes children, and sets that child amid the disciples and says: "Discover your Christianity here. See what it means to be my disciple in this child. Where is his reputation? Can you find her privilege? Show me his status? He or she is weak, defenseless, vulnerable. Being my disciple and this child are cut from the same cloth."

One writer puts it this way: "In this world people are not respected because they are people; they are respected because they are influential, because they are important.

"The have-nots, who respects the have-nots? The people without a function. The people who are not important, who respects the people who are not important? Who speaks to them; who cares for them? And that is why so many children run around half-dressed and half-fed."

Jesus smashes our precious human distinctions forever. When he sets that child among the disciples, my friends, to an extent he even wipes out the designation "Christian."

Today after worship, we dedicate an outdoor playspace for children -- A playspace that has not fence around it. No sign that it is for members only. I and the members of Crossroads Church want to

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thank Frank and Trent and Troy and Jill for the vision to see this as a beautiful and fitting way to celebrate Sandy's life and what was important to her.

I could easily imagine Sandy instead of Jesus, placing a child amidst the disciples. I think that she would remind us of a few things in that solitary act.

In that single act, Sandy would remind us of the inherent beauty and dignity of every child, simply because they are a "Child of God," created in God's image. I think Sandy would also remind each one of us to be as open to the wonders of this world – and the people we meet in this world – as children are open. Children and not born despising some one because of their sexual or gender orientation or race. And finally, I think Sandy would also remind us of the crucial importance of education – the education received in the public schools and in Sunday School.

Today we are reminded by Sandy – and by Jesus – that to follow Christ means we immerse ourselves in the common life of humanity. Our identity reflects that child in the middle of those disciples. Our identity reflects that child; our calling as Christians serves that child.

I think Sandy lived this out so beautifully. She volunteered at the Arboretum School – the school in what was her local neighborhood. And she volunteered at the Frank Allis School in a challenging neighborhood on Buckeye Rd. on the near East Side of Madison.

I believe that Crossroads Church calls us to be those disciples amid this broken and the bruised. Jesus encourages us to speak for those without a voice and those who have been shoved to the bottom by the agendas of our so-called leaders – political and religious.

That child amid those disciples is not only our identity; he, she, is our ministry.

How to be a Christian in today's world? With that unkept, unknown child in our midst, dare we need ask that question any longer?