

When you come here on Sunday, do you sometimes feel like you're hearing some of the same things over and over again? Possibly experiencing a bit of déjà vu?

You aren't imagining that! Just last week in Mark's Gospel, we heard Jesus saying similar words as we heard today, foretelling his imminent death and resurrection. If we read just one chapter ahead in Mark's gospel, Jesus will say something similar for a third time.

If you have been paying attention over the last few weeks, you may have observed some sayings like this: "and they were afraid" or "Jesus told them to tell nobody" or "they did not understand him". Just last week, Peter admits that he thinks Jesus is the Messiah, but Jesus "sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him." Today, after Jesus foretells his death and rising again, the narrator says, "But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him."

Again, you are not imagining that similar themes are repeating themselves. Biblical scholars will tell you there are many possible reasons why Mark uses this language of mystery and confusion, but for today I will focus on one reason: just how revolutionary and strange it must have all seemed to the disciples.

As if that isn't enough repetition, the Gospel passage we just heard weaves its way in and out of the other three Gospels. Questions over who is the greatest appear:

- 1) once later in Mark
- 2) twice in Matthew
- 3) twice in Luke.

Jesus' example with the little child is told:

- 1) later in Mark
- 2) twice in Matthew
- 3) three times in Luke
- 4) twice in John.

Needless to say, in the minds of many historians and biblical scholars, the fact that this passage has echoes in so many other places in scripture increases the chances that Jesus really did have a teaching like this, a point I will return to momentarily.

Last week my colleague Sara Misgen stood here and preached a beautiful sermon that I've been reflecting on over the past week. I've been reflecting on it because it because it contained what I think is a rather profound truth.

She offered us all a suggestion that rather than viewing the Gospel verse "let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" as some sort of suffering or punishment that God has given us, we might instead view these "crosses" and "self-denial" as something the world has constructed. That is to say, God gives us an attribute about ourselves or about the world that is not necessarily good or bad, but rather it just simply is—say, the concept of race—but then the world assigns value

to that characteristic that makes it good or bad in a given context. In this way, we might say that the world has given us a cross to bear in the categories and values of race.

Yet we can reject the world's categorization of people. We can reject the world's tendency to label people's innate characteristics as "good" or "bad", "in" or "out", "valuable" or "having no value", and begin to turn towards God's categorization of people: "people as beloved children."

And everything begins to change. We begin to look different than the world. And the world begins to look different to us.

Instead of denying oneself, we are denying what the world has told us about oneself and about others. We are saying "no" to that, and "yes" to God and what God has revealed through Jesus Christ.

Jesus takes the value that the world has assigned to something—the cross—and does not let the world have the final word in defining it. You see, the cross in Jesus' time wasn't beautiful. The cross wasn't precious. The cross was a means of torture. The cross was a means of killing. The cross was a means of political violence, execution and silencing of those people deemed criminals or threats by a government.

Jesus certainly wasn't the first to die on the cross. Certainly he knew that as he said: "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."

No, Jesus knew exactly what was done with people like him. And yet, in that very literal cross and also in the metaphorical cross that Jesus took up, Jesus doesn't let the world have the final word in defining the crosses given to him.

What happened with Jesus on the cross is the exact opposite of what was supposed to happen. You might say the cross was filled with the tension of opposites. What was supposed to bring death brought life. What was supposed to end something became the beginning. What was supposed to silence someone's message made it resonate all the more clearly.

But still, the cross was an ugly, ugly thing. In one sense, the cross represents the values and categories that the world has come up with and assigned to it, but they are rejected by Jesus and used for his own agenda.

That brings me to the child in today's Gospel passage. You see, Jesus does the same thing with the child. Jesus takes this child and places them into the middle of the disciples.

Jesus rejects the category that society had created for the child.

In those days, children were among the lowest of the low. Not only were they small physically, but they were small in every other way. They were property, lacking rights, lacking the status we might hope children have today as beloved and important members of the religious community and of society. One might say that children were vulnerable in Jesus' time, even more vulnerable than they are now.

Children were vulnerable like so many other people in Jesus' time, and in ours. And remember where that vulnerability comes from—what some people might call a cross to bear—it comes from what we as a society make of it. One does not have any less value because of the color of their skin or the language that they speak. One does not inherently have a greater vulnerability of being murdered or dying young because of the color of their skin—God didn't create people that way—that is what society has created.

Jesus knows what it means to be vulnerable. Think about it. Can you think of a more fragile, feeble, vulnerable way for God to make things right in the world than the way we are presented in the scriptures? To come into this world through a young mother's womb, to be born like every other child, to nearly be killed by a tyrant, then after some years wander around preaching, teaching and performing miracles until he is killed. His whole life, Jesus was vulnerable. One might even dare to say that God was made vulnerable when God was made human.

And in this story today, God in Jesus Christ uses another human, a small child, and tells us that we should welcome the child.

As I've been preparing this sermon, I've been reflecting on this child, wondering how much the child is a reflection of Jesus himself, how much Jesus saw himself reflected in that child, remembering his own youth, remembering his own vulnerability, remembering his own rejection by society.

Jesus tells us that we should welcome the child, and in doing so we will welcome Jesus and the one who sent him. Vulnerable Jesus takes a vulnerable child and tells us to welcome the child.

And if children's status in society at that time is any indication, today we might well expand the idea of welcome beyond welcoming small children to welcoming anyone who is vulnerable or forgotten in society, anyone who is dependent upon the mercy of others.

Dorothy Day, the 20<sup>th</sup> century Catholic activist, writes the following: "I really only love God as much as I love the person I love the least."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Dorothy Day, "On Pilgrimage" section entitled "December"

Let me repeat that. "I really only love God as much as I love the person I love the least."

Our love for the person we love the least is perhaps the truest reflection of the love we have for God. In understanding this, we can better understand how the child in this story functions as a revealer, revealing something to us about Christ, about God and about the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus placing the child amongst the disciples and saying what he said must have been terribly disorienting. We aren't told how the disciples received this information, but I have to imagine that it was likely the same way they received much of the Jesus' other teachings, with great confusion and lack of understanding.

Given the way society viewed children, we might even say that the disciples had been given a cross to bear, in Jesus' command to welcome the children in his name.

And not a cross to bear handed out by Jesus or God, but a cross for the disciples to bear because of the value that society assigned to children.

The child reveals to us that the kingdom of God is not only in the hands of those who society likes, or those who society idolizes, or those who society says are "in". The kingdom of God is also in the hands of those who are denied by society and cast aside. And as I pointed out earlier, this very same teaching is revealed not only in Mark's Gospel, but in all four of the Gospels.

And here is a secret: you, right here, right now, have the opportunity to do what Jesus has called us to do. You can deny what the world has told you about how things are, or how they must be, or how they have always been. You can take up the cross society has given you to bear, and turn it back on society and say "no." This is not the way of God, for the Living God is a God of love. In our society, each person should be welcomed as though we are welcoming Jesus Christ himself. Each person we pass on the street, each person that annoys us, each person that doesn't look or talk or act like us.

We cannot control other people, but we can work on ourselves and how we respond to others. You see, we are often like the 12 disciples. We, and by we I mean all of us as a society, can find ourselves so busy arguing about who is the greatest that we lose sight of the fact that possibly we are often looking in the wrong places. And just like Jesus' words were likely disorienting for the disciples, so should the Gospel be at times disorienting for us, and at the same time function to *re-orient* us towards God.

A good place to start in this reorientation might be to embody the actions of the children in our lives towards the "other". Children with their joy, children with their happiness and humbleness. Children with their thankfulness. Children don't start

wars. Children don't hate people for who they are. Instead, children love. Children love like Jesus loved.

I pray that we may do the same. Amen.