

Mark 9:30-37 18th Sunday after Pentecost September 21, 1997

30They 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.

33Then 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 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."

She was three or four when I first saw her. "Hi," I said. She looked at me with an icy stare. Hardened, tough, like leather grown old, no longer soft and pliable - she was three or four but looked with eyes that had seen thirty or forty years' worth of abuse and disappointments. I did not encounter her in some war torn land, nor in some refugee camp in a country wracked with drought and famine. She lived just a few blocks from where I lived then. Yet her eyes told me that inside her house there must have been a war zone every day, and every night. Inside her house there was a famine of love and affection.

Jesus says, "*Whoever welcomes one such child in my name, welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.*"

I followed a car down Lake Road the other afternoon. As always I was in a hurry. Ahead of me was a beat-up car going less than thirty. Double yellow lines - traffic coming the other way whenever the double yellow disappeared - more of my day being lost with each slow moment of travel - my level of frustration was quickly growing.

"What's this person doing on the road?" I am complained in my mind. "Probably someone too old to be driving anymore," - forgetting that my day to be too old to be driving anymore is coming also.

Finally there was a break, I hit the gas and zoomed around, taking a good look at the driver. The face I saw told me she was not very bright. I suspect she was driving the finest car her talents and hard work would ever bring her, and going as fast as she safely could. I was ashamed of my impatience – ashamed for having stared at her as I passed.

Jesus said, "*Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.*"

I am always afraid of them when I see them coming: teenagers together - especially young males prowling – loud - shoving everyone else aside - bullies looking for some bullying. I think they smell my fear, sense that I do not see the persons behind all their toughness. I hope someone will do something about them. I'd be glad if someone would just lock them all up.

Jesus says, *"Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."*

Have I gone too far? What do you think? Is Jesus talking about loving the sweet little children on the cover of today's bulletin? Why I would adopt any one of them in a moment! So would you!

But look at them, they already have someone to iron their clothes, and brush their hair, someone to send them off to school with a loving kiss, and wait at the bus stop for their return. I see these kids lined up every morning and evening on my street and yours. Life may not be perfect for them, but I have no trouble imagining our welcoming them. We do it here every Sunday.

It is good when we welcome them, pleasing to God.

But I am sure Jesus was not killed for suggesting we love loveable children. I am sure the scribes and the Pharisees and the crowds did not cry, "Crucify him!" because Jesus said to welcome their own loveable sons and daughters. I am sure welcoming their own friends and neighbors would have proved no obstacle to the disciples seeking to be known as greatest.

But Jesus put a stranger in their midst. Like the girl with the hard eyes, or the one whose eyes and mind are dull, or the ones whose presence threatens violence. I not only do not know their names, but I do not know how to love them, or better yet, how to change them into someone who is loveable. Why if I open myself to them - welcome them - they might hate me or hurt me or need too much from me.

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.

Jesus has opened himself to you, and me, welcomed us into his family, offered himself to us. How do I treat him?

Sometimes my eyes are cold to his love. I am too busy pursuing my happiness, my success, my pleasure to really give myself to him.

Sometimes he speaks and my mind and heart are dull. How many times does he have to tell me that if I save my life I will lose it and still I spend all my time on me.

Sometimes he comes to me in those weaker than I and I violate him, threaten him, me and my gang of white middle class Americans disdaining the immigrant, the poor of Mexico, Indonesia, New Guinea. Whatever is good for us, our way.....

And Jesus loves us still - died for us even as we are the very ones who inflict death on him.

Jesus died for sinners, all the weight of our sins upon him. And we are received, welcomed as his sisters -brothers. The very ones whose unfaithfulness brings death upon Jesus he welcomes. In his dying he became first by being last of all and servant of all.

When you and I know the truth of Jesus dying for us in our hearts, then we know Jesus in the girl with the hard eyes, the girl with the dull eyes, the teenagers with the mocking eyes. We in them and they in us because Jesus is in them and Jesus in us.

It is not about being first or last at all. Everything Jesus does and intends to do is about love.

Love is patient and kind, love is not jealous or boastful, arrogant or rude, love does not insist on its own way, it is not irritable or resentful, love does not rejoice in the wrong but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things. endures all things. Love never ends.

What St. Paul described, Jesus lived on the cross -for you - not because you deserved that love, but precisely because you do not, cannot deserve or merit his love. Still he loves you to death - his death.

How can you say, "Thanks"? How can you say, "I love you too, Jesus"? Love one who is as unlovely as yourself - love another who is as much a burden to you as you have been to Jesus.

Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.

God grant that you may do just that. Amen.