

s-P20B-09-Welcome the Children

Isaiah 41:17-20 *When the poor and needy need water* (NL)

Mark 9:30-37 *Whoever welcomes one such child*

Rev. Garnet Cooper McClure

Fremont Congregational United Church of Christ

13 September 2009 – Welcome Back Sunday (not Lection date)

## WELCOME THE CHILDREN

Almost two weeks ago now, a close friend of mine—I'll call her Ginger—fell off a ladder at work and broke both of her arms. Now imagine, if you will, what kind of situation that would leave you in. The shock of falling, the terror of having to summon help on your own, the hours in the emergency room, and of course plenty of severe pain... but beyond that, the inconvenience and humiliation of not being able to use either of your hands for even the most basic functions. Let me tell you, it's time like these when you really find out who your best friends are!

My friend is like a lot of us—we're quite comfortable offering and providing assistance, but we're not so good at accepting that we need it and letting others provide it. Ginger's an active volunteer, a natural care-giver; she works daily with children; she's always there for friends and family. Sound familiar? Could be just about any one of us.

So it has been a very humbling experience to be helpless, to have no choice but to rely on the kindness and the physical assistance of others. And so this situation with both arms out of commission is already proving to be quite a learning experience for my friend.

Now, Ginger's had a rough year or two already, and she's developed a practice of just spending a little while at bedtime thinking about moments of grace, and being thankful. She's discovered that, even when things look pretty darn dark, if you pay attention you can still identify a lot of grace in your life, and a lot to be thankful for.

You have to realize that my friend is not a religious person at all. In fact, if you asked her, she would tell you she's an atheist. And yet, here she is, thinking profound thoughts about things like grace, and blessings, and thanksgiving, and allowing these precious influences to comfort and reassure her.

After her fall another of her friends remarked, "See, Ginger, these things happen for a reason." Of course, Ginger doesn't believe that for a second. There was no good reason for her to fall and break both arms and loosen some of her teeth; it was just an accident. And I agree with her: the illnesses and sorrows and troubles we have to live through are not things that God has decreed for us just so we can learn some lesson about life. That would be cruel, and I refuse to believe that God is cruel.

But still—those little meditations when Ginger calls up the moments of grace in her life set the stage for her to understand what the silver lining in her injury might be. Having gone through a rough patch, when she felt like she had to face up to all kinds of problems all on her own, she has discovered just how many people love her, care about her, and maybe most importantly, are happy and willing to drop what they're doing and be there for her in all kinds of ways, both big and small.

Pastors often hear people say, "God made this happen for a reason." Or, "I believe God has a plan for me." Often folks are referring to some trouble they're experiencing or to a difficult

decision they have to make. They want to relate what they're going through to what they understand God's plan to be.

Maybe they're about to get married--finally. "I knew that God had a plan for me, but it took 38 years for me to figure out what that plan was."

Maybe they're unexpectedly ill, or injured, like Ginger was. "Why did God do this to me? I better figure it out."

The world is chaotic and uncertain. Stuff happens, doesn't it? And when it does it can make us lose our confidence that we understand what's going on, what God's plan is. And in fact, the worse things get, the more people seem to need to think that there is some kind of plan at work, that God has a plan that will get us through all this. We can't see it, but we want to believe it's there and it's working—even when something bad, like the 9/11 terrorist attacks, takes place. We believe in the plan because we really need to believe in it.

But somebody wise and witty once said, "If you want to make God laugh, just have a plan." And that's so true, except then we're putting God in the place of always *ruining* our plans instead of helping with them. And we don't want to believe that, either.

But there are a lot of good reasons to question this widespread notion that God has a specific plan for each one of us. Some of these reasons are even in the Bible.

Well, perhaps our mistake is in calling what God is doing a "plan." Certainly, as Christians, we believe that God's purposes are being worked out among us, through the course of history and in our own time. Scripture gives us examples of the unseen hand of God working behind the scenes to improve, or turn aside, or end or bring to fruition human effort.

Remember the story of Joseph, who was sold into slavery by his jealous brothers, but then later was in a position of power in Egypt and was able to help these same brothers? What was it he said? "You meant this for evil, but God meant it for good." That's what we have in mind.

Maybe the most appealing part of this belief is having the conviction that not all of our errors and mess ups and misdeeds are going to be the last word. If God has a plan, then, as Paul says in Romans, "All things work together for good for those who love the Lord."

And yet there are moments, aren't there, when God doesn't just disrupt *our* plans; God seems to disrupt God's *own plans*! If all things are supposed to work out so nicely, why is it that so often, they do not???

Bill Willimon, Presbyterian preacher and writer, suggests that, if we are going to apply the word "plan" to what God does, then we have to somehow leave some room for God to be God. God has freedom, and God has sovereignty. God gives us free will, so we probably ought to allow God the same favor!

After all, the notion that God has laid down an individual plan for each one of us can be scary as well as comforting. If there is a plan, are we following it correctly? May we take even one step forward without examining it to make sure it aligns perfectly with God's intent? What if we make the wrong choice?

But should we let this paralyze us?

Of course not. Even the most pious person makes mistakes, and the world doesn't immediately explode. We don't have to live in terror that somehow, sometime, we're going to personally destroy God's magnificent plan for the universe. God's got a constant ability to redeem us from our misdeeds and failures, thank heaven! God picks up our messes and then weaves them into the larger picture of salvation. God is flexible! God is adaptable! God is good at what God does!

I believe that God created the world and set it into motion without insisting that everything from then on has had to follow a lockstep plan. Where would be room for love in this scenario? Or continuing creativity? Or revelation? I think God gave us, and the world, a lot of wiggle room. Maybe we should admit that God also wiggles sometimes.

For instance, First Timothy says, not that God has a plan to save all of us, but that God has that “desire.” Doesn’t that sound more dynamic? And maybe more realistic, too? God has a great desire for us to have wonderful, fulfilling lives, but doesn’t assign a point-by-point plan for how this is going to happen.

The other side of this coin, of course, the darker side, is that God lets us thwart God’s purposes. We can make things worse, at least for a time. Now, that’s a scary thought. But again, I think it’s true.

\*\*\*

In our reading today, the disciples have heard Jesus mentioning his future betrayal, death, and resurrection. They don’t understand what he’s talking about, so they don’t say a word. Why don’t they ask him to explain? Probably they understood him better than they let on. They just didn’t want to hear it.

There are times when you and I are silent because we don’t want to admit to ourselves, let alone others, that we really do understand what’s going on. We’d rather keep quiet than rattle the cages of the sleeping lions of trouble and effort. If we speak up, if we ask the obvious questions, we risk hearing something we don’t want to hear. We risk having to do something about it.

Later on, the disciples keep silent again when Jesus asks them what they’ve been arguing about. This time, they don’t speak up because they’re ashamed. They’ve been arguing about who’s the greatest! They sound more like 10-year-old boys than adults.

Would we be silent if Jesus asked us what we’ve been talking and fretting about? Ick! Would we be comfortable in speaking truthfully? Probably not. If Jesus asked us to explain just how our words and our actions are falling into line with the kind of life he sets before us, we’d fall silent in shame.

It must’ve been excruciating for the disciples to realize that Jesus saw right through them and their petty ambitions. In the same way, it’s very hard for us to accept that our lives are an open book to God. Jesus reminds his friends, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” And to show them just what he means, he draws a little child over and puts it on his lap and tells them bluntly that, if they want to do anything good for him, then they should do it first for the children, the weak, and the helpless.

If they want to welcome Jesus, then they must first welcome the child.

But did the disciples hear him? In the very next chapter of Mark, we see people trying to bring their children to Jesus for a blessing, and the disciples speak sternly to them and try to turn them away. No wonder Jesus was indignant! He was frustrated with their density and their laziness. He’d made it as clear as he could.

How many of you read my column in the September newsletter? I haven’t heard a word about it, pro or con. Did I make a point? Did I provide any inspiration? Did I aggravate anybody, or at least make them think about what they might suggest as an alternative?

What does it mean to welcome the children? It means, quite literally, to reach out to the little ones who need our Christian efforts the most. From a metaphorical side, it means that we are to actively live in God's Kingdom and work to bring others into this good place of being.

In the ancient Gospel of Thomas, Jesus describes his true disciples by saying that they are like children who live in a field that doesn't belong to them. The landowners appear and demand, "Give us back our field!" but the children don't understand. They have no sense of what ownership means. They have nothing to defend, and nothing to defend it with. So instead, they take off all of their clothes and just stand there in silent witness, demonstrating that they are truly without possessions.

A similar story appears in the life of Saint Francis of Assisi. Francis's father was furious because Francis borrowed a horse and used it to carry away expensive fabrics that he sold to give money to the poor. His father dragged him before the bishop in the public square and demanded that his son give back all that he had taken. Francis simply took off all of his clothes, folded them neatly, and laid them at his father's feet. Then he addressed the crowd: "From now on, I can walk naked before the Lord, no longer saying, 'my father, Pietro Bernadone,' but rather 'our Father, who art in heaven!'"

Perhaps welcoming the child is ultimately about being willing to be naked before God. The story of the children in the field teaches us a lesson about what we really possess and what is never truly ours. It shows us that in any given moment, we actually have nothing at all; but in that moment of grace, in that instant of true reality, there is nothing standing between us and God.

We put up so many barriers. We need children to remind us of that. In a very real sense, the presence of children in our churches conveys what is essential better than all our lofty words, our busy projects, our efforts to give shape and meaning to our lives. There is, Glenn Mitchell says, "something in welcoming the child that loosens our tight grip on things, on power, and even on those treasures of life, love, and faith we hold dear."

God has given us a lot of leeway to choose our own paths. But if we can't let go of whatever plan we're stuck on, how can we scoop up a little one into our arms as Jesus did? We have to let go of whatever we're carrying at the moment. Welcoming and letting go are sisters; they work together. We can't have one in our lives without the other.

There is an icon of the Virgin Mary, called, "Mary of the Signs." In the icon, Mary is holding the Christ Child while both of her hands are free and raised. There is something in that portrait that speaks of the tension between holding the precious presence of Christ while remaining free to work and offer praise. Mitchell adds, "To internalize the welcoming of the child is to carry God's presence with us as we do all we do."

We all end this life naked in a field, don't we? Jesus is asking his disciples to trust beyond what they could know and grasp, beyond what they could hold fast with human will and human hands. He was offering them another path: the opportunity to do the stripping now, to do the unclenching now, so that between this very moment in time and that potentially far-off resurrection, they could live in God's immediate presence even though they could not figure out the plan. In the midst of this dark, heavy discussion about his pending passion, with the disciples bickering about power and glory...

Jesus drops everything to hold a child on his lap.

Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER:

Lord, show us your way. Show us how to sweep away all the things that get between us and you, between us and those who need us. We need to live in the present moment, but also to take a longer view. Let us be resourceful and generous, as you are resourceful and bountiful. Let us be real disciples, doing the real and needful thing always and everywhere. May we, in Jesus' name, welcome the children. Amen.

#### RESOURCES:

Mitchell, Glenn, "*Reflections on the Lectionary: Mark 9:30-37.*" *Christian Century*, September 2009, p. 21.

Ringe, Sharon R. "*Exegetical Perspective: Mark 9:30-37,*" *Feasting on the Word* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2009, David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, editors) pp 93-97.

Willimon, William H., "Does God Have a Plan for Your Life," *Pulpit Resource*, Vol. 37, No. 3 (Logos Productions, 2009), pp. 49-52.