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Mark 9:30-37 • James 3:13 – 4:3, 7-8a

In our gospel today, the disciples have a very American debate. They were arguing about “who was the greatest.” (*Mk 9:34*) Our wider culture is all about what is newer, faster, bigger or better. We envy those who get better grades or who run faster. We imagine ourselves to be more efficient employees or better parents than others. Our society makes the pursuit of happiness into a competition. The criteria may vary, but we all want to come in first place in something. We all want to be like someone who “has it all.”

As usual, Jesus flips the disciples – and our – hopes upside down. “Who is the greatest?” is not the question at all. We are not to seek awards of first place. Instead, we are to blend into the crowd. Seek out and welcome one who is being ignored by society – a child. Children were basically considered non-people at the time the gospel was written. They are weak and vulnerable, not strong or smart. They can't do work like adults. They aren't even remarkably moral; they are just as tempted as the rest of us, and some times they give in more.

Jesus tells us that when we welcome these children, we welcome Jesus and ultimately, God. The invisible and unvaluable in society's eyes are seen as the most

valuable in God's eyes. It is these silent ones whom Jesus names as the presence of God in our midst.

This idea or theology is the basis for how many Christians approach children now. We are intentional about welcoming them in worship: through children's sermons, acolyting, music, nursery care, and Holy Communion. We are prayerful about how we encourage them in the Christian faith: through education, youth activities, and choosing godparents and mentors. It is natural to apply James' advice to our relationships with children and teens. We engage them with gentleness born of wisdom. We raise and guide them with mercy, gentleness and peace. Everyone who spends a lot of time with kids knows that it is almost impossible to be this patient at all times. But we keep keeping our eyes set on this goal anyway.

It would be great if we could stop here. Jesus' words are challenging for how we think about children in our lives. But there is more.

Jesus frequently refers to humanity as "children of God." He names our relationship with God as one of a child to a parent. Compared with the Almighty, we are weak and vulnerable. Like kids, we are also growing into the fullness of what we will become. Growing more mature and wise in our faith and life together.

If we are all God's children, then we are to receive all whom we meet as we would welcome Jesus Christ. This idea is rooted in the Old Testament. To welcome strangers was to possibly welcome the Lord into your midst.

According to Jesus, then, we encounter bearers of Christ's Spirit with every person we meet. Everyone becomes a sign of God's presence in our world today. Jesus calls us to James' wise gentleness in all our relationships. "[T]he wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy." (*James 3:18*) Acting with such wisdom is to welcome all folks with humility and patience. To be open to witnessing God's presence in and through others.

Sometimes this may be even harder than relating to a two-year-old in a tantrum. We all know people who appear to be insensitive, unjust or infuriating. It's almost impossible to understand why they act as they do. We are tempted, at times, to be brutally honest. We secretly want them to get what we think they deserve.

Whatever age they are, these people are some of the children whom Jesus tells us to welcome. Imperfect. Broken. Sinners. Just like us. Yes, the people who drive us nuts bear God's imprint to us. How we respond to them, in our stress and frustration, is how we welcome Christ. Wherever there are two people or more, we

have conflicts – in our families, workplaces, and on all levels of our church. How we handle conflict and disagreements is a direct reflection of our faith.

James calls us to struggle with ourselves to live by God’s wisdom. If we do that, we appear as silly as someone who drops everything for invisible children. If we live mercifully and gently, willing to yield our interests to others, we look weak and vulnerable. We appear submissive and wimpy. We bear a striking resemblance to Jesus. This is where our Christian faith brings us – to live more and more like Jesus Christ.