

## Welcome, Jesus!

A Sermon by Louise Westfall  
Fairmount Presbyterian Church  
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**Text: Mark 9:30-37**

It was one of those administrative glitches you'd do anything to avoid, and yet over which you have almost no control. Repairs had been completed following last year's disastrous water main break and flood in the children's education area of our building. The delicious smell of new construction—the clean tang of sawn lumber and fresh paint—confirmed our resiliency and vitality. Church school and nursery school leaders alike were filled with anticipation for creative ministry possibilities in this bright learning space. But almost immediately, Eric and others noticed little bubbles beginning to appear in the carpeted hallways. The carpet company was called and made some adjustments. But the bubbling grew worse and soon encompassed all the newly-carpeted areas. The problem was eventually diagnosed as a manufacturer's error, but responsibility for correcting it had become a hot potato no one would own. Meanwhile, the days were ticking on toward September—and a new program year. Very late last week the new carpet was installed. . . .and we all breathed a sigh of relief. Home free.....but no! The waste management company didn't respond to numerous telephone pleas until the eleventh hour, so we came this close to greeting you today with what had to be the ugliest, most beat-up dumpster brimming with garbage bags of carpet remnants right outside the door.

You see, we wanted everything to be perfect....to welcome you—members, friends, and guests---to our church home! We want you to *know* the care with which we do things, the priority we give to children and youth, and the forward momentum we're building. Fact is, appearances matter. Yes they do. We all know that!

Our morning gospel text reminds us of another reality, a deeper and more transforming truth shimmering below the surface. It reveals what actually matters beneath outward appearances—attractive and inviting though they be. It's equally true of individuals and congregations, posing a challenge to all of us seeking growth and greatness. The scripture reading for today takes place in the ascendancy of Jesus' career, when his approval ratings were sky-high. His teaching and healing ministries have captured the hearts and minds of many as evidence that a new day is dawning. His followers can't wait to ride that train to glory! But his very next words seem to throw a wet blanket on their optimism and aspirations. Listen for God's Word—and a reality

check--- in the reading from the gospel according to Mark, in the ninth chapter at the 30<sup>th</sup> verse. [MARK 9:30-37]

Among my files is a sermon I preached on this text in 1980. I had been a preacher all of four months, and started the sermon in what I must have thought was a terribly creative way: I asked the congregation to act like a child—in this case, to turn to the person sitting next to them and say “I love you.” Surely the spontaneity, the innocence and open-heartedness of little children were what Jesus had in mind when he put one in the center of discussion about greatness. I have no recollection of how that congregation reacted, but I can tell you I’d think twice before suggesting it today: it would feel forced, it would be awkward, what if you’re sitting next to a stranger-- I can tick off a hundred objections.

And yet..... truth is a little child. The glory and majesty of God’s Kingdom are revealed in a youngster—in my mind’s eye I see a three-year-old Palestinian boy, whose brown eyes must have flashed with wonderment and even fear at being plucked from play to become the center attention in a room full of grown-ups. There, in Jesus’ arms, exhibit A: *Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and not only me, but the One who sent me.*

I understand how troubling Jesus’ predictions about his death would have been to his followers. Only retrospectively from the resurrection would they come to see the salvation in his suffering. What I find more intriguing here is Jesus’ definition of greatness, equating it with the welcome of one little child. And even more, he shows how that welcome becomes a doorway through which none other than Christ meets us.

The curiosity of this equation makes sense when we recall the place of children in Jesus’ time. They held a similar social status as household servants—regarded as property entirely under the command of their father or master, without inherent rights or privilege. There was nothing to gain from giving them special treatment. But as he did again and again, Jesus took conventional values about worth and importance and turned them upside down - made the first last and the last first—to say that everyone matters, every one counts in the Kingdom of God. In Jesus’ illustration, a little child stood for all the “little people”—the ones most likely to be ignored, even avoided; the ones who were weak or needy or high maintenance. For the disciples who apparently had been arguing about their indispensability to the movement and jockeying for a place in senior management, this must have come as one big ugly dumpster left on their doorstep—not what they imagined, not what they planned.

But wait, there's more: Jesus then drew a direct correlation between welcoming "the least of these," and welcoming God. The social becomes the spiritual. *Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and not only me, but the One who sent me.* It's the litmus test for his followers, the evidence of their faith . . .

.....and of ours. The welcome of a child, their sense of acceptance, well-being and security is still the standard by which Jesus evaluates our identity and our mission. True greatness is calculated, not by the beauty of our building or the size of our endowment or the important people who worship here. Who would have thought the measure of our success might just be the way we deal hospitably with the mother of a fussy baby, a kid with ADHD, a bored teen--- and a demanding outsider, a tiresome busybody?! When Jesus' disciples argued about who was the greatest, he told them to roll up their sleeves for the least and the littlest.

Think about the place of children in our church. You may know that Fairmount actually began as a Sunday school for neighborhood children, taught by a group of women, whose husbands got with the program sometime later and took steps to charter a church and call a pastor. Ministries with children and youth are part of our tradition, and the welcome begins when they are born with the gift of a picture Bible. Baptism is the church's sacramental welcome. Interestingly for parents, probably no moments in church give greater anxiety than those when they present their child for baptism. They almost always express concern that their baby will wail his way through the sacrament or spit up on the minister's robe right there in front of God and everybody. It happens! But friends, baptism has almost nothing to do with the pretty picture of a peaceful infant smiling angelically. That's about appearance. The deeper reality is found in what we---the parents and the church---promise about making sure these children know they are beloved of God so well that none of the cultural messages that bombard them -messages that say they're not enough--- will be able to shatter that rock solid trust.

I don't know any way of making good on that promise without the help of a faith community. Parents can't do it on their own. But if greatness is our aspiration, then let it be by Jesus' definition and find expression in our commitment to welcome the children, the ones we know within these walls, and those others outside. That welcome will come in many forms: teaching Sunday School, leading youth group, mentoring a youth through confirmation, talking to a young person at coffee hour, making a point to call children by name, contributing generously to the mission of this church. There is always a need in the wider community for adults who will tutor and befriend and work for a social order in which children and all people can flourish. And if you

doubt your ability to have an impact, then consider the wisdom of writer James Baldwin who acknowledged that children have never been very good at listening to their elders, but "they have never failed to imitate them."

The commemoration of 9/11 this week brought back for me as I'm sure for you the searing images of terror and death that produced a heightened sense of vulnerability and insecurity still with us to this day. Among my memories was of the following Sunday and the way people flocked to worship to find comfort and strength in God's faithfulness and grace. But what is indelibly etched in my mind of that morning was the way our children led us in the familiar biblical greeting: *This is the day the Lord has made....let us rejoice and be glad in it.* When the world was falling around us, Jesus came to us in the voices of children solemnly intoning words they knew by heart.

The dumpster is gone from our parking lot; the repairs are complete. But truly, the building is never done. Friends, in this new season, may we re-dedicate our lives and our church to the joyful task of welcoming Jesus every day, by ministering to his beloved children. AMEN.