

16th Sunday after Pentecost – 2009

“Embracing the Little Ones of our World”

TEXTS: Proverbs 31:10-31; Psalm 1; Mark 9:30-37

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Barbara Brown Taylor, *Bread of Angels*. Cowley Publications 1997.

Let us pray:

Gracious and loving God,
may it be your word that is spoken here;
may it be your word that is heard;
and may it be your word that is received,
in the name of the One who teaches us that
being first means being *last of all* --
Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

It might interest you to know that while I was researching and preparing to write this sermon, I was doing the weekly task of laundry. “Research about the cultural background and family structures of ancient Israel – fold socks and underwear.” “Review sermons written about today’s gospel – wash and hang Scott’s clergy shirts.” “Learn more about the invisibility of children in the culture in which Jesus lived – put another load of towels into the dryer.” Such is my life as someone who works from home – and it is a mixed blessing. On that day, however, I did *not* work with wool and flax, buy a field, plant a vineyard, hold a spindle, or make linen garments – although I probably washed a few. I did, however, in addition to working on this sermon, prepare meals, washed the dishes, facilitate a grief support group that evening, and – oh yes – did the laundry!

Life in our household is always varied, and very busy. And I’m sure it is the same with yours. I suspect that many preachers chose not to include this reading from Proverbs in their worship services this morning because they did not want to add to the guilt that we already carry – that no matter what we manage to do by the end of the day, it never seems to be enough, and the list of tasks to complete “tomorrow” continues to grow. But I chose to include this reading because I love the intention behind it – this is a text that praises the hard work that women do. We must remember that when this book was written women were invisible – they had no legal, political or social power, and the only authority that was given to women was their authority over their children. So I found it heart-warming to read these passages which are found at the very end of the Book of Proverbs.

This text was written in a patriarchal world, through the lens of a man who probably did not think to critique the commonly held assumptions of his world. And yet he writes a poem celebrating the “capable wife” of his time - a woman who not only takes care of her husband and household and excels in various domestic tasks, but one who is quite active outside the home as well. She is a successful business woman, a viticulturalist (a winemaker) and an entrepreneur. She dresses for success and knows how to sell goods for a profit. She is even compared to a warrior (“strength and dignity are her clothing”). But she does more than simply succeed in business or at domestic duties. She is no uncaring tycoon: instead, she “opens her hand to the poor, and reaches out her hands to the needy.” This woman is also far from silent. She speaks with wisdom and the “teaching of kindness” is on her tongue. Her strength appears to be as much *moral* as it is *physical*.

This description reminds us of what we heard last week, doesn’t it, when we heard about the activities of Woman Wisdom? Is the “finding” of a capable wife and the “finding” of Wisdom connected here at the end of the Book of Proverbs? Like wisdom, this woman is “more precious than jewels.” If the author was speaking not only of a

capable wife but also of Wisdom, than this poem speaks to all of us, as thoughtful people, striving to become more insightful; more wise. The invitation of last week's reading was that we adopt the insights and the demeanor of Wisdom – men as well as women. Perhaps when we look at this passage from Proverbs today, all of us here – men and women – can appreciate the breadth of gifts, of insight, of dedication, that is praised in this passage. There is no doubt that we all work very hard, both in our professional lives, our volunteer commitments, and how we care for our families and friends. So instead of feeling defeated or discouraged when we hear this list of skills attributed to this particularly capable wife, let us hear the words of affirmation, respect, encouragement, and recognition for what we *are* able to do and how we *are* able to care for others – actions that are often invisible – and rarely acknowledged.

Our human need to be *seen* and *acknowledged* for who we are and what we do seems to be at the core of how we interact with our world, doesn't it? I know I struggle with this, and perhaps you do as well. Jesus' disciples certainly were concerned with this, although they tried their best to keep their questions, their insecurities, and their jealousy from him.

In our gospel this morning Jesus catches his disciples playing "Who's the Greatest?" on the road to Capernaum. If you were ever caught passing a note in elementary school, then you know how *they* felt. "What were you arguing about on the way?" he asked them, and no one said a word, because they had been fighting about who was best, the most faithful, the most likely-to-succeed disciple. Peter, James, and John were the favorites--the first three disciples Jesus called--who still got to go places with him that the others did not. Among them, Peter figured he had it all sewn up because he was the first to call Jesus the Messiah, but the others reminded him that he was also the one whom Jesus called Satan, for refusing to accept Jesus' forecast of his death.

That was the heart of the problem, really. They were arguing about who was greatest because they could not accept what Jesus had said about being killed. They did not understand and they were afraid to ask, so they got as far away from it as they could by playing status games instead. Who is first, who is best, who is greatest. You know what that is like. When you are scared of something, don't ask. Act like there is nothing wrong. Change the subject and talk about something else instead, something that makes you feel big and strong. That is what the disciples were doing, which was why Jesus had to sit them down and give them a leadership seminar right then and there. "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all," he told them. Then he showed them what he meant by taking a little child in his arms. They wanted to know who was greatest, so he showed them: twenty-six inches tall, limited vocabulary, unemployed, zero net worth, nobody. God's agent. The *last*, the *least* of all.

It seems that Jesus had a certain understanding about the daily life of children. While other people tended to ignore anyone shorter than their own kneecaps, Jesus saw what was going on down there. He saw the toddlers hanging on to their mother's skirts, and shrinking away from the stray dogs, the wagon wheels, and the donkey dung that no one up top seemed aware of. He saw them trying to keep up with the grown-ups when they walked, -- gamely at first and then quickly defeated, limping along with one arm pulled half out of its socket by tall people with giant strides. He saw how the adults coo-cooed to them when there was nothing else going on but quickly lost interest in them the moment another adult appeared.

Children were fillers, not main events. They were gifts of God who would be useful *someday*--to look after their parents, to hold down responsible jobs, to have children of their own--but meanwhile they were non-entities--fuzzy caterpillars to be fed and sheltered until they could turn into butterflies.

Jesus seemed to like them just the way they were, which was unusual for a man, and especially for a bachelor. Although he had none of his own, Jesus was not afraid of babies. He took them in his arms and blessed them. He knew how to put his hand behind their wobbly heads, how to pass them back to their mothers without dropping

them. *Even* the two-year-olds did not bother him. He never asked their parents to please take them to the nursery. On the contrary, when his disciples scolded people for bringing their children to Jesus, he was indignant. The kingdom *belongs* to such as these, he said. They are full-fledged citizens of God's realm--not later but right now.

Even today, with our psychology and a great awareness of the importance of developing good parenting skills, there are limits to our tolerance of children. Yes, they are innocent, playful, vulnerable, honest, fresh-faced, and loving, especially if you are only around them for about fifteen minutes a day. But if you spend more time with them than that, then you know that children are also noisy, clinging, destructive, self-centered, and can be surprisingly cruel. The best of them will pluck the whiskers right off a cat if you do not keep an eye on them, or knock other children down from trying to play with their toys.

So I do not think Jesus was holding them up as *moral examples* when he took children in his arms and blessed them. He did not say we should *imitate them*, after all. He just said that when we welcome them in his name we welcome him, and that when we welcome him we welcome God. And that's a pretty amazing equation, if you think about it.

Do you *want* to spend some time with God? Then get down on the floor with Na Rim, Ha Min, Yu Min or any other little ones that you have in your lives today. Get finger-paint all over your clothes and laugh at their silly jokes and never mind that you have more important things to do, like finishing the laundry or earning a living. They are not filler. They are the main event. Opening yourself up to them is better for your soul than finishing a project or getting a raise or even reading a whole book of the Bible.

There will be no payback. Oh, they may shout your name next time they sees you and run and hug your knees, but you cannot list them as a job reference or ask them to lend you a couple of hundred dollars to get your car fixed. They are not good for anything like that. They are not in charge of anything, they cannot buy you anything, they will not even remember your birthday or invite you over for supper with some friends. They have no status, no influence, no income, which makes them great in God's eyes. They are just what you need. And you, you are able to work on your own *greatness* by understanding that it is what you do when you think no one is looking, with someone who does not count, for no reward, that ushers you into the presence of God.

Do you see what Jesus is up to here in this gospel story? It is one more of his lessons in the topsy-turvy kingdom of God, where the first shall be last and the last shall be first and everyone who thinks he or she is on the top of the heap is in for a big surprise. He is not just talking about children, either. He is talking about all the *little ones* in this world with no status, no influence, no income. He is daring us to welcome them as bearers of God, to believe that God's hierarchy is the reverse of ours and that greatness is only available to those with no ambition to be great.

As some of you know, my husband is the Rector of the Anglican Church in Cobble Hill, and like all those in church leadership we are thrilled when the "ideal parishioner" joins our family: newly retired, with skills, energy and time on their hands. "We are so fortunate to get them!" Scott and I say to each other, imagining all the important and much needed work that they will be able to do for our church family. That's at one end of the spectrum. But we have another parishioner – his name is Larry. Larry is a 61 year old man with developmental disabilities. He has difficulty speaking and being understood, shows up every Sunday without fail, brings up the basket holding food bank donations during the offering, and is one of two umpires at our annual world series of church baseball game with the neighbouring United Church, which means that the score keeping is oftentimes suspect. Larry has a great memory for names, and a killer sense of humour. But he is not able to sit on parish council or any

committee, or participate as a reader in the service. In the eyes of our world, Larry, because of his disability, is a “nobody.”

But you know what? On a Sunday evening, when Scott and I are reflecting on the past week and everything that has happened, we don't spend a lot of time talking about our newly retired “super volunteers” - we spend a lot of time talking about Larry – marveling at his faithfulness, his humour, his memory, and we thank God that he is a member of our church family.

Now I don't know how you operate a church or a business or a society by turning it over to those with the least to offer, but I do know that God's values are not our values, and *that* knowledge alone may be enough to keep us humble. However we chose to organize our lives, we have little children, and disabled and poverty-stricken adults, to remind us that God organizes things otherwise, and that if we want to welcome God into our lives then there is no one whom we may safely ignore. In the topsy-turvy kingdom of God, the most *unlikely* people are most likely to be agents of God - the ones who live in the world below our knee caps, the ones who are told they should be seen and not heard, the ones who are told that they *will* matter in the *future*, the ones who are stuck at the end of the line, the ones who are sobbing on someone's shoulder because they are always, always, last.

In God's world, things are different. If you want to enter this kingdom, find time to every once in a while let go of your determination to be Super Mom, Super Dad, The World's Greatest Grandma and Grandpa, walk away from the laundry pile, reschedule a meeting, put aside your to-do list, go find a “nobody” – a little one - to put your arms around, and say hello to God.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.