

Little Pitcher, Big Ears

Hespeler, September 22, 2024 © Scott McAndless – Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Proverbs 31:10-31, Psalm 1, James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a, [Mark 9:30-37](#)

Her name was Leah. She was almost four years old. She lived in Capernaum in the house with her extended family. Hers was a life that, as short as it was, had already been marked by sorrow. She had gone to bed hungry far too many times in her brief span. She had also experienced her share of grief and death, even if she didn't quite understand what it was yet. Many of her young siblings and cousins had not managed to live as long as her. Some had not even survived a few hours after their birth.

But despite the sorrow that surrounded her, Leah was a bright child. Sometimes the adults in the family found it hard to become too attached to the children who came along, knowing that many of them would not survive until adulthood. But Leah had a way about her. When she smiled and placed her little hand in the large palm of an uncle or a cousin, it just made their hearts melt. They couldn't help but love her even though they knew the risk of experiencing loss that came with such love.

Her Parents and Family

Leah was especially close to her parents, of course, particularly to her mother who still nursed her daily. But both of her parents were working today – her father out in the boats and her mother working at the fish drying racks – so she was here with her aunt and her grandmother in the house.

While they worked in the outdoor kitchen, she played happily in a corner with a few of the treasured possessions she had amassed during her life: a stone that was shaped as an almost perfect sphere, a piece of wood that her uncle had crudely carved in the shape of a donkey and a scrap of cloth that had come from her mother's tunic.

She heard the group approaching well before they appeared at the door. There were about a dozen of them, and they often stayed in this house when they were in Capernaum. They were arguing loudly with one another as they approached, which was not unusual. The argument seemed to have been going on for a while but at least they seemed to be arguing good naturedly.

The Argument

As usual, the loudest voice among them was one that was very familiar to her. It was the voice of her uncle Simon. She looked up as her aunt turned away from her work and ran to the door to greet the husband who was often away for long periods of time.

Uncle Simon – the others in his group called him “Rock” for some reason – was very loudly proclaiming that he was absolutely the greatest among them all. “Of course I'm the most important disciple of all,” he proclaimed. “Surely that



is why the teacher started calling me Rock. I am solid, dependable and the kind of person who is foundational to what he is trying to build.”

“Oh really?” laughed another in response. “And what makes you think that he doesn’t call you that because he thinks that you’ve got rocks in your head?”

They all laughed at that, even Uncle Simon. So, it was a merry company that entered the house. They moved quickly towards the inner courtyard, calling out to the cooks and asking if there was any food to share.

The Teacher

One last straggler entered a moment behind the main pack. He was quieter, clearly caught up in some deep thought. But his eyes flashed around the room as he came through the door. He gave a wide smile as he saw Leah looking up at him. She smiled right back because he had always been one of her favourite visitors.

Once the newcomers had greeted everyone, they settled down in the courtyard of the house while Leah’s aunt and grandma served them a bit of bread and oil. Leah wandered in too looking for a snack as well. She sat down at the edge of the group, just a little behind the teacher. She watched his every move with wide eyes. For some reason he just fascinated her.

“Listen guys...” he eventually interrupted the small talk. Leah noted how quickly they all fell silent and turned to him as if they were afraid that they might miss something that he said. “Before we left to come here to Capernaum,” he continued, “I said something to you. I said, **‘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.’**”

An Awkward Question

“But you guys didn’t say anything at the time. You sort of just stared at me like a deer might do if someone were able to shine a bright light on it. But I heard you talking together on the way here, so I assume that you talked through what I said and you maybe have something to share about it now. So, what were you talking about on the road?”

Leah was just a little girl, but even she could pick up just how extremely uncomfortable the entire group became. The others stared awkwardly at the floor or suddenly became completely absorbed with some strange thing they had discovered on their fingernails.

The teacher rolled his eyes. “Right, don’t tell me. You were probably arguing with each other about which one of you is the greatest, weren’t you?” He sighed. “It’s like you don’t listen to a word that I say! You certainly didn’t listen to what I was saying about where this movement is going because, if you had you probably wouldn’t be so keen to be seen as great within it.”

The Lesson

With that, he sat down before them. In that culture, teachers always took a seated position to give their instructions. Even at her age Leah understood that. If an adult sat down in front of her, she would be expected to pay close attention to the lesson they were going to give her. And so, all of the others in the group leaned forward with anticipation.

“Don’t you understand what it meant when I told you that?” he asked them. “It means that **whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.** It means that if you are arguing with one another over who is the greatest, then you do not have the first clue as to what I am trying to do here. How can I make you guys understand?”

He glanced around and his eye fell on Leah, who was looking up at him with rapt attention. “Leah,” he said holding his hand out to her, “come here for a moment girl, will you?”

Leah’s Response

Without a moment’s hesitation, she got right up and went straight to him. When he went to hold her hand she walked straight past his outstretched fingers and climbed up onto his lap. Knowing what she wanted, he wrapped his arms around her tightly.

As she sat on his lap, she looked at the men spread through the courtyard. Then she leaned back her head onto his neck. She breathed in the smell of him – his sweat and the dust of the road. She could even smell a hint of the dried fish he had had for his last meal.

She felt completely safe and comfortable. And I know you might think that it is an easy thing to make a child feel safe and comfortable, but Leah had actually known little of either of those things in her short life. But here, in this moment, everyone could see it in the expression on her face.

“Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me,” declared the teacher. **“And whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”**

“Let the Children Come”

On a few occasions, Jesus had some pretty surprising things to say about children and the kingdom of God. The most famous incident, of course, comes in the very next chapter of this same gospel we read from today when **“people were bringing children to him in order that he might touch them, and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, “Let the children come to me; do not stop them, for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.”** (10:13-14)

Passages like that one and this one that we read from today, certainly convince me that Jesus really did believe that children had a better understanding of this thing that he had come to announce, this kingdom of God, than anybody else. But haven’t you always wondered what we are supposed to do with that? How are we supposed to become like children in order to enter the kingdom? What does it mean to welcome children? I mean, we are adults. How are we supposed to just put aside everything that we have spent our lives building ourselves up to be in order to be part of God’s kingdom?

Putting Ourselves in Their Positions

And I do not think that we can really answer those questions without trying to put ourselves into the position of children, and specifically of the children who would have been there listening to Jesus say such things.

I know that we have all been children at some point in our life. You may sometimes look at some of the people in your life and have a hard time believing that, but we’ve all been there. But it

can be an experience that we have a hard time putting ourselves back into, maybe especially if it was a long time ago.

But it is also true that there were some things different about children in Jesus' time. We do know, for example, that the infant and newborn mortality rate in those times was so high that, if we saw it today, we would be completely outraged and demand government action. So, what does it mean to be a child living in a world where many of your siblings do not make it out of infancy and where people have their doubts about whether you are going to make it to adulthood. That's a very different kind of situation than children have to live with today.

Parents Love Their Children

I have heard some people argue that, because of that infant mortality rate, parents hesitated to invest much love or attachment in their children, based on the idea that, if you're not attached, you're not going to feel grief when you lose them.

But I do not believe that for a moment. Parents have always loved their children and the reality that your child might not survive actually only has the effect of making you more attached and more loving, committed to make the most of whatever time you are given. So, it is definitely not that children were not loved or valued.

Coming to Jesus Like a Child

So, whatever Jesus was saying, he was not saying that you need to come to see yourself as insignificant, unloved or unworthy in order to come into the kingdom of God. It is true that children had very little in the way of status in that society, but they definitely had a place, and they were valued for who they were.

No, what I think Jesus was saying was that he was looking for those who would come to him much like a child like Leah would have come to him. She brought no pretensions. She did not feel the need to pretend to be something that she was not. She was not afraid to open herself up to him, to throw herself into his arms or to climb up on his lap.

That is what we forget how to do as we grow up. We learn suspicion and mistrust. We learn to guard ourselves against loving too much or trusting too much for fear that we will be disappointed yet again. A child knows nothing of that. That's what Jesus recognized in the children that he encountered. And he celebrated it because he saw in that something of the nature of this kingdom that he had come to announce.