

## WELCOMING GOD

Mark 9:30-37

A survey conducted by the Pew Research Center raises the question of motivation for attending worship at least once a month. The greatest percentage---81%---of respondents declared their hope in participating in praise and thanksgiving, in singing and praying, in listening and responding is to “become closer to God”. Though church teaching would affirm that God is within and among, always present to us though we may attempt to be absent from God.

This is a narrowly drawn survey related only to presence in church or synagogue or temple. It does not include those who do not participate in institutional religious life at all nor those who find their ways into the building only during the High Holy Days of Christmas and Easter, Rosh Hashanah, or the ending of Ramadan. Despite the growing number of absent ones, religious life remains meaningful to many who attend regularly.

Recognizing that church is not the only place and people that offers the opportunity to “come closer to God”, we can wonder what other reasons might be raised for making the effort to be present in a community of faith. Many expect that religion services will help “to make me a better person” while a few more---69%---hope that being regularly a part of church will make it possible for “children [to] have a moral foundation.” The survey reveals that significantly fewer show up because of tradition, obligation, the need to greet and meet, or to simply please another. [Why Church?, *Christian Century* August 29, 2018, p. 9]

Our need to increase our God-centered faith appears to be closely related to concern for children. Many lament the smaller number of children in congregations and the lament itself speaks of the importance of children to the community of faith. What we do together in worship is affected by the presence of children. On behalf of children, prayers need to be simpler and repeated, guidance provided, mostly verbally, and explanations offered. Any preaching must be simplified, for which adults are frequently grateful, both ideas and proclamation a part of a message designed for young minds and souls. Having children in worship requires that we become forgiving of noises and movement even as we seek to provide activities better suited to the young.

And then we release them to Sunday School, a relatively recent invention in the life of the church. Formerly, and at least once a month here, children were expected to join their parents and others for the entire service, and to be quiet and attentive while doing so. Young people learned how to be adult worshippers by watching adults worship, traditions being passed from one generation to the next.

As American society moved from pioneer to settled communities, it was decided that children would be better served to have songs, prayers, and activities more closely representing their abilities to understand. Beginning with Phoebe Palmer in the 1880's, children were separated out, often to the relief of those disturbed by the aforementioned noise and undisciplined activity. Curriculum was created to supplement the more adult-oriented scripture with the understanding that attention spans of children were of less duration than their parents. For Methodists, this was an outgrowth of John Wesley's interest in and insistence upon educating people, particularly the poor children of the community. This child-interested activity caused the Methodist Publishing House to develop materials to serve every age level, including the very youngest. It continues to serve in this way, extending its offerings to congregations of other denominations and now to anyone with an interest, a credit card, and Amazon account.

The place of children in American society has changed in the last decades. In conversation held with a couple seeking to be married in this church, the question is raised: "How many children do you have in your family?" Sometimes the response is partially completed as one notices a child or two as part of the conversation. It may be that there is even some discrepancy in the total number between the hopes of the husband and the soon-to-be mother. Often, each expects to duplicate the number of children who shared the childhood home of the bride or groom. The next question asked catches the couple: "Why do you want to have children?" We can be reminded that in much, though not all, of the world, children are not needed to work the farm. Additionally, with the advent of Social Security and other supportive systems, children are not expected to care for parents in their older age. Even the question raised early on in a marriage---"When are you going to have a baby?" seems inappropriate for a variety of reasons. Globally, we do need more human population, although there are countries experiencing a decline which concerns an aging population. Even the United States, without immigration, is projected to both age and diminish in people. At least one of the couple knows of adults who do not enjoy parenting or others who distressingly discover themselves ill-equipped and highly frustrated in attempting to take on this important role. We do hear, however, that there is a trend toward having larger families; the Zero Population Growth appears to be irrelevant to couples who sometimes count their brood of 3 or 4 or 5 to be a signal of their wealth. Economically, culture counts children to be important consumers, knowing that the voiced desires and complaints of the young promote the purchase of advertised toys and games. The matter of the cost of children occasionally calls into question the ability of a couple to provide sufficiently. It now costs more than \$200,000.00 to raise a child to age 18, the year when American cultures often count children to be independent though not entirely free.

In the time of Jesus, when such outdated concerns were still much on the minds of Israelites, children were considered variously. Recognizing that child mortality rates were fairly high, little was expected of any child who did not reach the age of, say, 12 years old. It was at this age that a son would be inducted into the Jewish covenant through a bar mitzvah. At such an age, although often earlier for girls who did not enjoy bar mitzvah, children were of sufficient strength, intelligence and cleverness to be counted as assets to the family. The dominating Roman imperial culture similarly did not count children to be worthwhile until they, too, could contribute. This led to infants being abandoned by Roman men whereas Jewish father considered every child to be a blessing from God to be cared for and, particularly if male, to be cherished.

Perhaps all of this was held in the mind of Jesus as he continues to prepare those around him for the discipleship of denying self, taking up a cross, and following in his way. In this instance, Christ creates the context of trust based upon God's activity in death and resurrection. Not surprisingly, at least some of the twelve begin to discuss who will take over leadership of the movement, who will be greatest among them all. Consistent with his understanding of the foundation of discipleship, Jesus announces that the resolution of their argument, as the word is today translated, is to be realized in become last rather than first and servant of all.

This central tenet of the practice of faith is reinforced by Christ's discussion of welcoming God. Obviously, children are dependent, that is, they require the service of others to first survive and then to thrive. In like manner, we count on the gracious and loving activity of God to bring the peace we seek. We cannot save ourselves; God saves us. We cannot provide the food needed to nourish the soul; God makes it available to us. We cannot move away from the grief of death; only God resurrects. We cannot completely construct a family, a community, a nation, or a world that benefits all; it is God who builds a kingdom of mercy and compassion, righteousness and justice---often through us. John Wesley proclaimed clearly that we are dependent upon God's grace, even before we know our need of it. We welcome God as we open ourselves to God in the same manner as a child must look to another to sustain life. God does not need us but we need God.

In his age, welcoming a child was an opportunity to receive Jesus as Christ. Not only do we need to recognize our weakness and God's strength, we are called to trust that God's hope for each and all is for life joyful, abundant, and eternal. We welcome God by trusting in God who is, for Christians, mostly fully revealed in the child of Bethlehem, the prophet of Galilee, the martyr of Jerusalem. Much of welcoming God is bound up in learning from Jesus what it will mean to be faithful. There was a time not too recently past when the church looked to nature

to announce the presence of a creating God and there are some for whom the physical world best represents God's will. During such decades, even the curriculum provided to children seemed to be focused upon the first chapters of the Book of Genesis along with a few psalms. Along with the recovering of other practices of faith that mainline Protestants abandoned as being too popish, too Catholic, Methodist returned its discipling focus to the person of Jesus, reminding itself and others that one of the names for this Christ is "emmanuel", that is, God with us.

Jesus adds another link to the chain, the connection between humanity and God by proclaiming that all who welcome him, welcome God. It is in Jesus the anointed one that we best perceive the nature and purposes of God, though we need to be careful not to limit this God to our own perceptions and traditions. Welcoming God will mean that we trust that the way of Christ can be our way to come into the presence of God with all that such a holy presence promises. Most would wish to live in the loving embrace of God, if we might express it in a childlike fashion. Paul expresses it to the Romans: If God is for us, who is against us? Who can separate us from the love of God revealed in Christ Jesus? The apostle's answer is, and ours can be, nothing. "Neither life nor death, nor angels, nor rulers, not things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:37-39)

This is good news for all those who take up religious traditions with the expectation, with the hope that they will grow in their knowledge and love of God and thus draw closer to this source of life. We can welcome God by welcoming children, including them in singing, praying, listening to the word, and, importantly, becoming servants willing to be last of all. They will need good models for children are watching and imitating that which they see and hear. We are changed by the presence, the joy, the needs of these children who may remind us of a carpenter's son. Filling out our portrait of Jesus as Christ will provide understanding and trust, another way by which we welcome God. Children will also need to hear and see the truth of God, a truth revealed to us not only in the Word of God but also through the creating work of God's Spirit. All this so that we and others may know and be known as faithful witnesses, as disciples of Jesus, as children of God. Thanks be to God. Amen.