

First Congregational Church of Montague Trinitarian

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James 3:13- 4:3, 7,8a, Mark 9:30-37

Welcome!

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight my Lord and Redeemer.

Listen to this story from the elders of the Hopi Nation. It brings us to our roots... the sacredness of the child or child mind or our child "being.". This story was quoted in the book *Welcoming the Child* written by Kathleen A. Guy.

"The whole community sits around a circle called a Medicine Wheel. Around that wheel are representatives of all the different aspects of the community. In the East, there's the fool. In the West, there's the witch. In the South, there's the hunter. In the North, there's the creator. Others positioned around the circle are the shaman, the politician, etc. And in the center of the circle is the

children's fire. Next to the children's fire sit the grandfather and grandmother.

If you want to build a condominium in the community of Spirit Lake, you have to enter the Medicine Wheel in the East, at the position of the fool. The question you ask is, "May I build a condo on Spirit Lake?" The fool takes your question, turns it around backwards and asks, "What would Spirit Lake say about such a condo?" You then have to take the question the fool gives you to everyone around the Medicine Wheel. Each will respond to you according to their position in the community.

The last people you must ask the question to are the grandmother and grandfather who guard the children's fire. If these two decide that the request is not good for the children's fire, then the answer is "no." They are the only ones in the circle who have veto power.

The concept of the ultimate question is simple. Does it hurt or help the children's fire? If it can pass the test of the children's fire, then it can be done."

Interesting concept isn't it? This idea of addressing every question that affects the community from the viewpoint of how it would affect the well being of the child or the children?

How does this method, the Hopi method of decision making, jive with what Jesus is teaching the disciples in this passage from Mark? Is this representative of what Jesus meant when he told the disciples that by welcoming a child they would not only welcome him they would also welcome God?

The disciples were having a frightful time of it along about now... at least this is the way Mark always presents it... those disciples... they are just clueless in Mark's eyes.... a viewpoint that many of us might identify with when we examine our own life of faith.

So many times I feel just clueless when I realize I have just treated someone as if they were unimportant or not welcome. It generally doesn't happen intentionally mind you. It usually is a mindless or thoughtless action ... like not saying hello to someone who is right in front of me because my mind is on something else that I don't want to forget! ... but it happens and it happens too often and frequently to those we love the most too. Perhaps, we need just this kind of a startling comeuppance that Jesus gives the disciples.

They were fighting amongst themselves about who was the greatest. They really did not get it and so Jesus sits down... a sign that this is an important teaching. When Jesus sits he is in teacher mode... rabbi mode.

Of course it is kind of hard for us to really grasp how radical this teaching was as we, in our society, place a high value on children. Although I am not sure we do nearly enough to recognize the children who are homeless and poor.

Statistics for child poverty in Massachusetts show 14.3% or 200,817 children are poor with 6.6% living in extreme poverty (92,332)

The maximum monthly cash assistance for a family of three is \$618. This is in America...this is in Massachusetts! We need to remember this as we ponder who to vote for in our next election and use our voices to fight for those who go to bed hungry every night.

But, back in the days of Jesus, children were not valued at all. They truly were to be seen and not heard. "John Pilch (ucc.org commentary) says,... in the time of Jesus, a child was lowest on the priority list (no "women and children first" here). Even in

medieval times, Pilch writes, Mediterranean cultures put a low value on children: "Thomas Aquinas taught that in a raging fire a husband was obliged to save his father first, then his mother, next his wife, and last of all his young child" (*The Cultural World of Jesus, Sunday by Sunday, Cycle B*).

The children "shared space on the margins with many others in their society who were both powerless and vulnerable. Megan McKenna provides a long list of such people who didn't "count": people "who were old, handicapped, sick, illiterate, cast out as unclean. This group included peasants, farmers, shepherds, widows, slaves, the unemployed, aliens, immigrants, prisoners, homeless" (*On Your Mark: Reading Mark in the Shadow of the Cross*). I always find it amazing that these "ills" that were present over 2000 years ago are still alive and in some cases thriving in our society today.

How many of these same groups of individuals are still marginalized...are still not able to get their basic human needs met... food, housing, medical care... how many are not cared for, or about, in our world?

Jesus' teaching about the child can be expanded to mean each of these who are living on the margins of society. Anytime we feel the need to avert our eyes, to cross the street to avoid, to cushion and protect ourselves and our abundant lives.... Each time this happens it should be a signal to us to do just the opposite of what we are feeling inclined to do.... it should be a signal to go against our protective instincts.

Walk up and talk to the one we want to avoid, give a smile or even a handshake. One of the things that is most hurtful to homeless, more hurtful even than not giving them a handout, is being treated as if they are invisible. Just making eye contact and saying hi can make a difference for them and for us. Giving stretches us. It may help them a little but it helps us a lot to give when we feel tightly limited. Trying it helps to shake loose the ties that bind us!

Barbara Brown Taylor writes about what is good for our souls. She says, "Jesus didn't just tell them but showed them who was greatest: "twenty-six inches tall, limited vocabulary, unemployed, zero net worth, nobody. God's agent." In other words, "there is no one whom we may safely ignore" (*Bread of Angels*). *No one whom we may safely ignore.*

So, let's think back to the Hopi story and the use of the Medicine Wheel. In light of this passage from Mark, when we are seeking something for or from the community, it really makes sense to enter in at the place of the lowly fool.... To enter in the place of not knowing... and with the innocence of a child listen to each member, giving the thoughts of each one we encounter equal weight without judging according to their position in the community or society.

This is what Jesus wants of us when he says to welcome in the child. He wants us to love one another equally... not to play favorites... to give equal value to all.... to welcome each and every one whom we encounter in life as if they are Jesus...or God. To say always, with deep sincerity, that "no matter who you are or where you are on your life's journey... you are most welcome here. What a wonderful world it would be if we could all embody that!

Let us pray to Jesus that it may be so. Amen.

