

Childish Pleasures, by Daniel H. Kuhn, Jr. 16090920
James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a and Mark 9:30-37
Elon Community Church, United Church of Christ, 20 September, 2009

You could have heard a pin drop! Jesus and the disciples were gathered in the house in Capernaum. “What were you arguing about on the way?” he had asked them.

You can see them hanging their heads, shuffling their feet. One of them cleared his throat. No one said anything. They were too embarrassed. They had been rather childish, and he knew it and they knew it. Jesus said, “You were arguing about who was the greatest, weren't you?”

Busted! They knew they were wrong in arguing about such a thing. Jesus had taught them differently. Although the disciples should not have argued about who was greatest, it was especially painful that they argued about it right after he said that he was going to be betrayed and killed.

We can't sit here today and attack the disciples' flawed notions of discipleship. In what ways do we strive to be the greatest? It's in our blood. It's taught in school, in business, on the screen, and on the ball field. It's lived in our corporate board rooms, in legislative chambers, and on market trading floors.

The shame of it is that the struggle to be the greatest is in the church itself, and was in the church from almost its very beginning. We rate our membership against those of other congregations to evaluate how well we are doing. We compare ministers to one another. Way back in the year 325, the Council of Nicea assigned an order of precedence to the bishops of the early church. No longer were the leaders of the church equal to each other. This council sowed the seeds of the great split between the Roman or western church and the Orthodox or eastern church. All of the splits among churches and denominations occur because of arguments about who is the greatest. Christians have disregarded what Jesus was trying to teach!

Tom Ehrich wrote, “Jesus gave the twelve disciples important counsel when he urged them to be servants, not alpha-dogs. If only they had listened. Imagine how the world would be different if those early Christians had worried less about who was in charge, who was allowed in, whose words held sway, whose rituals were preferred. Imagine a circle of friends, as opposed to the hierarchy of power that developed. Imagine a cadre listening to the world, as opposed to telling others what to believe and how to live. Imagine the giving not just of care, but of applause, power, self-worth and confidence.”¹

In that quiet house in Capernaum, away from the crowds, Jesus took a little child into his arms. Now, this is not the cute cuddly scene you might think it is. We love to cuddle little kids in our arms. Few things give me greater pleasure than to have my two year old granddaughter give me a hug. When we hear that Jesus took a child in his arms, we are taken back to our childhoods when our needs were met by people who had larger hands and soft loving hugs.

Jesus was not being soft and cuddly. He was teaching an important point. This story comes from an era when children were worth nothing. They were last in the human kingdom. Children remained last until about one hundred fifty years ago in western culture. They still are last in many cultures. In the Middle Ages, “Thomas Aquinas [1225-1274] 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.”² Jesus was talking about welcoming the least and the lowliest.

¹Tom Ehrich, “On a Journey,” onajourney.org September 15, 2009

²The Cultural World of Jesus: Sunday by Sunday, Cycle B by John J. Pilch, c 1996, page

Jesus does not ask us to imitate children. We know what they can be like: noisy, clinging, destructive, self-centered, and surprisingly cruel. We can learn some things from children. Here is a list of things a mother in Austin, Texas learned from hers: If you hook a dog leash over a ceiling fan, the motor is not strong enough to rotate a 42-pound boy wearing Batman underwear and a Superman cape. It is strong enough, however, if tied to a paint can, to spread paint on all four walls of a 20x20 ft. room. You should not throw baseballs up when the ceiling fan is on. When using a ceiling fan as a bat, you have to throw the ball up a few times before you get a hit. A ceiling fan can hit a baseball a long way. The glass in windows (even double-pane) doesn't stop a baseball hit by a ceiling fan. When you hear the toilet flush and the words "uh oh," it's already too late. No matter how much Jell-O you put in a swimming pool you still can't walk on water. Pool filters do not like Jell-O. Always look in the oven before you turn it on--plastic toys do not like ovens. The spin cycle on the washing machine does not make earthworms dizzy. It will, however, make cats dizzy. Cats throw up twice their body weight when dizzy.

Jesus was not asking us to imitate children. If he were, we would shout down those who disagree with us about political issues. We would call the President of the United States a liar. But we know better.

Jesus taught us something different. As Barbara Brown Taylor wrote, "When the disciples wanted to know who was the greatest, Jesus showed them: twenty-six inches tall, limited vocabulary, unemployed, zero net worth, nobody."³ Jesus was demonstrating that "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."⁴ Jesus was constantly turning the world upside down. He was teaching and demonstrating what the Kingdom of God was all about, and that that kingdom is here, and now.

When we are in the shadow of Jesus, we would hang our heads also, just like those disciples did. We know that we are not living up to his standards. And don't give me that, "Oh, but we're forgiven" stuff. We need to at least try! The follower of Jesus Christ will not fight to be number one. The follower of Christ will patiently wait until they are sure that all have enough to eat. The follower of Christ will be polite to others, will listen to others, will open the door for others, and will work for the good of the whole, not just himself.

Let us pray the prayer attributed to St. Francis of Assisi:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light; and where there is sadness, joy.
O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;
to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen

³Kate Huey, "Weekly Seeds," 9/11/2009, iucc.org

⁴Mark 9:36