

Running the Race and Saving the Vulnerable: Purpose and Hospitality¹

September 23, 2018

I

Seems there was a man who once stood before God. Seems his heart was just breaking from the pain ... the suffering in the world. "Dear God ... he cried out, "look at all this suffering, this anguish, this pain all around. Why don't you send some help?" God replied, "I did send some help. I sent you."

Well, let's look at today's Gospel scene. Why do you think Jesus plants a little child right in the middle of His disciples' circle? See usually when He wants to make a point, He tells a story, tells a parable ... holds up a prop like a coin, or points to the birds of the air or the lilies and such.

But in today's scene, He takes a child and lifts her up in His arms. Why? Why a child?

Well of course one possibility is that this child ... this guileless, innocent one ... was quite a contrast to these go-getters hangin' around Him. I mean, He's just announced His coming death, says, "The Son of Man is gonna be betrayed and killed" ... He's just said that His own life was going to end in suffering, rejection, isolation and humiliation ... and here's His disciples, His followers, sauntering down the road to Capernaum, trying to figure out who was the most valuable player! So while Jesus marches to the guillotine, they jockey for status. Here's Jesus, dropping off the deep end of evil. And they're arguing over reserved parking spots and who gets to ride in first class!

So maybe the disciples are so grotesquely out of line here that they need to be shaken up a bit. Maybe they do need to be shocked a bit back into the real picture – the real truth of the matter. 'Cause as someone once said, the trouble with the competitive rat race is ... that even if you win, you're still a rat!

So maybe Jesus here, by taking this little tike up, is saying, "Here's a child incapable of all your finagling and posturing and puffery. Try on her innocence for size."

But now the problem with this take is that I don't think Jesus actually gives this child as an example of anything. Maybe in the Gospel of Matthew Jesus does say something like, "Whoever becomes humble like this little one is the greatest in heaven." But He doesn't say this in Mark.

No. In Mark, I think the point is not the child's attitude, but in the attitude of others toward him ... or her ... as the case may be. Whoever welcomes one such as this. ... So if the child in Mark's story here is not a naive, guileless innocent for Jesus' friends to model, maybe what Jesus is doing here is teaching kindness to the vulnerable. I mean, after all, Jesus tells the disciples that the true path to greatness is being a

servant. And what better way to act like a servant than to care for little ones, to care for those who cannot repay your kindness. Maybe that's His point?

Well ... uh ... maybe this does move you and me a bit closer to what's going on here in this story. Because greatness in God's kingdom is not defined by status or power. Greatness in the kingdom is defined by service.

OK. So maybe why Jesus puts a little child smack in the middle of his disciples' circle was to teach them to serve those who aren't strong enough ... or rich enough to repay them.

But still ... I think even this insight doesn't quite plumb the depth of Jesus' action here. So ... what's the point of the child? What's the real point that Jesus is making here in this scene?

II

Well ... first let's talk about chickens! John Lewis, a member of Congress from Georgia and a civil rights worker in the '60s, was known then as the marcher most often beaten by hostile crowds. Well once in an interview, Lewis was asked how he developed such a great compassion for the poor and the outcast. And he remembered an experience from his childhood.

Apparently, like many others in the rural South, Lewis was raised in poverty on a farm with no plumbing or electricity, in a shack with a dirt yard. And his parents put him in charge of the family's ... chickens. Well it wasn't long before John began advocating for those chickens, trying to persuade his parents not to kill 'em for food. He said, "The chickens ... to me ... seemed so defenseless. ... And I thought there was a certain dignity ... a kind of grace in the way they moved about ... at least in my eyes.

"But no one else saw 'em that way. To my parents, to my brothers and sisters, those chickens were just about the lowest form of life on the farm ... stupid, smelly, awkward, comical birds ... good for nothin' but laying eggs and winding up as meat for our table." And then Lewis mused, "Maybe it was that outcast status, the fact that those chickens were so forsaken by everyone else ... just like we were back then ... outcasts ... that drew me to them as well. And I also felt as if I had been trusted to care for God's chosen creatures ... I swear to God that's how I felt!"

So. Chickens ... and ... children. Well back to Jesus' point here. See, children in Jesus' day were not just needy, they were low on the social totem pole. Children in Jesus' day were not Gerber babies, cute and cuddly. In fact, a minor child was on par with a slave. And it seems that infant abandonment was common practice – especially if another mouth couldn't be fed – a sort-of "postnatal form of birth control!" And apparently, the very term "child" could also be hurled as a serious insult.

See, a child at that time was a nobody. A nobody, with no rights. Kids were often left to die, 'cause in fact they weren't considered fully human. Classified with the deaf, with the dumb, with the weak-minded ... they had no standing! They were just nobodies.

But in this scene, Jesus says "here's an icon." Here's an image you can glimpse a kingdom truth through. 'Cause this little child here is a kind of person who needs ... is real needy. Needs to be washed, needs to be held, needs to be clothed ... fed. Vulnerable. Impotent.

So when Jesus takes the child and sets her down in the midst of the disciples, He's placed there "just about the lowest form of life on the whole darn farm."

But now think about this! Jesus not only places the child in the middle of the circle, He takes her up ... runny nose, scuffed sandals and all, takes her up into His arms. Why? Why?

Well apparently ancient custom at this time involves a ritual of picking up to claim. A father would pick up his own child after birth as a sign of willingness to raise. If he didn't pick up, that child was abandoned. And so here, Jesus probably followed this Roman custom ... a symbol of adoption, of true embrace. So maybe what Jesus is telling with this action parable is not just kindness, but lifting up and embracing one who's never known the kindness of this world. Tenderly holding one who's probably never felt loving arms around her. See, that's not just hospitality. That's a wide welcome to one who might have had all other doors slammed shut in her face.

OK. Moving to our contemporary scene, let me drive home Jesus' point with a scene from a novel I read a few years back, a story that has stayed with me through the years. The title of that book was Plainsong. And spoiler alert – the plot line is woven around a pregnant, unmarried, homeless teenager, taken in by a couple of old bachelor ranchers ... awkward brothers, not used to being around women much. But willing to help if they can ... and coming to deeply love in the process. It's a poignant story of a kind of family born out of the hospitality and generosity of these two old guys, opening their home and their hearts to this young, helpless girl.

In one wonderful scene, these two old men think of a way to cheer up this girl with no family and no friends by taking her shopping and buying stuff for the coming baby. And so they all go into a department store to look at cribs, finally picking out the Cadillac top-of-the-line model.

But after a while, the girl grows quiet and hesitant and finally says to them, "It's too much. You shouldn't be doing all of this." So Harold – one of the brothers – says, "What's the matter? We're havin' us some fun here. We thought you was too."

She says, “but it’s too expensive. Why ... why are you doing this?” To which Harold responds, “It’s all right.” And he starts to put his arm around her, but stops himself. He looks down into her face. “It’s all right,” he says again. “It is. You’ll just have to believe that.” And the girl’s eyes well up with tears. ‘Cause for the first time in her life someone is giving her something, no strings attached.

And they did. They also gave her their concern, their time, their strength, their home ... and their hearts. They gave this homeless child, who’d never known a thing but slammed doors in her face, they gave her ... God’s love.

III

OK. Back to the Gospel scene. ‘Cause I think there’s one more point at the very base of Jesus’ action here. See, when Jesus’ followers stop wrangling about their status long enough to follow their servant master – when followers of Jesus pick up their own crosses and show welcoming kindness to the unlovely and the outcasts of this world – they discover that they’ve not only received a stranger ... maybe in the form of a pregnant, teenage girl ... but they’ve received Christ Himself. ‘Cause He says, “Here is the Kingdom and here is God’s truth. And here you see me ... the Truth of God in a child.” And He says this child is the icon of the One born in a stable, this child is the icon of One with no place to lay His head. This child is a symbol of Me ... suffering, vulnerable ... God’s presence in this child standing before you.

So finally. Out of this scripture scene this morning I think Jesus swings His gaze to every one of us ... to you ... to me ... and asks, “What are you arguing about? What are you running the race for? Who’re you lifting up and hugging?” He says, “Stop and look around you at the little ones ... to your right and to your left ... the nobodies and the everybodies, with no status and great need. And I will be there ... behind their eyes. I will be there behind their hungry stares ... I ... am there ... and I ... am here. Welcome me.”

Amen.

¹Plainsong by Kent Haruf (Alfred A. Knopf, New York: 1999); *Mark* by Lamar Williamson, Jr. (Interpretation: a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, John Knox Press, 1983); *Synthesis* for September 23, 2018.