

We are, you might say, “on the way”. Last Sunday we started out in Caesarea Philippi with Peter confessing Jesus as the messiah and Jesus privately beginning to teach the disciples that he is a messiah who will go the way of rejection, suffering and death. Mark, who sets the pace also for Matthew and Luke, devotes a full two-and-a-half chapters to the journey to Jerusalem, reminding us all the while that Jesus and the twelve are “on the way.” Three times Jesus foretells his death; three times the disciples fail to understand; and three times Jesus moves in the face of their lack of comprehension to instruct them on the meaning of discipleship. Two stories of Jesus healing blind men bracket the beginning and the end of the series as if to serve as parables about the gradual and still incomplete process of the disciples’ journey from darkness to light.

In each of his three predictions of his coming death, Jesus also speaks of resurrection; but the focus on the journey to Jerusalem and the focus of Mark throughout is upon the looming cross—a reality that so overwhelms the disciples, they cannot begin to comprehend what Jesus is saying. After Jesus foretells his death the second time, our passage for today, the disciples, Mark says, “did not understand” and “were afraid to ask.” As if to illustrate the depths of their lack of understanding, Mark moves both here and after Jesus’ third prediction to depict the disciples’ shocking self-preoccupation. Which of them, they ask, is the greatest? Talk about a disconnect! How could they descend into such petty self-absorption at so serious a moment? Were they nervous and looking for a way to chase away thoughts of what they had just heard? Were they falling back on the very human mechanism of denial, as in “If I don’t think about it, it won’t be true?” Or is Mark seeking to make a point about who the disciples were and their seeming inadequacy for the challenge at hand?

We may become more than a bit self-righteous here. We may censure the disciples as if we would have handled it all then or handle it all now with consuming insight. If we are honest, we, too, struggle for understanding. Jesus’ death and his call to the way of discipleship eludes easy explanation now as it did then. I recall an interpreter some years ago suggesting that Jesus’ death, and particularly Jesus’ death on the cross, was the biggest hurdle early Christians had to surmount. Recognizing the challenge, Mark may have been seeking to answer a twofold question posed by his contemporaries: “If he was who you say he was, how could he have died on the cross, the most ignoble death imaginable?” and “If he was who you say he was, why did we not recognize him?” Mark seems to reply that Jesus’ death on the cross was not an accident; Jesus himself foretold it. And, if you did not recognize or understand who Jesus was, be sure that those of us closest to Jesus did not understand either.

Jesus, recognizing and perhaps despairing the disciples’ lack of understanding does what the Gospels depict him doing frequently in such a situation. He enacts a parable. “Whoever wants to be first,” he informs the disciples, “must be last of all and servant of all.” Taking a child in his arms, he continues: “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

We have waxed long and hard over these many years about the shocking nature of Jesus’ words. In a culture where children, some interpreters inform us, were *nobodies*, Jesus’ choice of a child was scandalous. Making such an assumption about first century Jewish culture, however, conveniently ignores the thoroughgoing significance of children in Jewish scripture where children are a magnificent blessing from God, the source of hope beyond death, and the guarantor of God’s promise to Abraham. Childlessness or worse, *barrenness* was a curse of the worst kind. Their visibility, on the other hand, may have been another matter. In most transactions beyond the family, they, much on the order of a day not too long past, may have been assigned to the sphere of women—or, in the first century, to slaves. Since Jesus and the disciples were having their conversation in a home in Capernaum, perhaps the child Jesus drew into the conversation was even a child slave. A child, much less *this* child was to be Jesus’ stand-in? And yet, there it is in Jesus’ own words: “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me [and] the one who sent me.”

Perhaps the disciples in their seemingly petty deliberations had not been as self-absorbed as we have judged them to be. Perhaps they were taking Jesus’ words about his coming death seriously. In concern for the continuation of his mission, perhaps they were deliberating over who in his absence would be the best spokesperson to bear his message. Certainly, only the best would do, for a messenger, an emissary represents the one in whose name he comes. Jesus as an emissary of God was more than acceptable, but a *child*, much less a child that may have been a slave, surely such a lowly, even needy one bore no resemblance at all.

More than just the humility of one who goes in the name of God, Jesus was speaking of something more. One who is a disciple of Jesus is a person of “welcome”—a word used in the Gospels to signify one who is a host, one who serves his guests. “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me [and] the one who sent me” becomes then, “Whoever serves one such child in my name serves me [and] the one who sent me.” “If you want to know where I am, where God is,” Jesus is saying, “look for the child in need of care; and if you want to serve me, serve the needs of the child.” It sounds familiar, doesn’t it? “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” And conversely, “Just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me” [Mt. 25:40, 45].

Some 32 years ago, as I feverishly prepared my first set of lectures in Christian ethics, I encountered an article in Louisville’s *Courier Journal*, putting alongside our own society’s loudly professed love of children recent changes in the federal budget cutting into the availability of vaccinations and other services for children. Through that article I first became aware of the work of the Children’s Defense Fund to translate our supposed prioritizing of children into the decisions we make as a people. Paying attention to the needs of children has been since a staple in how I gauge both what it means to be a disciple of Jesus and what it means to be a responsible citizen. The “As you go” column in this morning’s bulletin reflects on the *The State of America’s Children 2014* and the somber picture it paints of millions of children beset by preventable poverty, hunger, homelessness, sickness, poor education and violence in the world’s richest economy. Every fifth child in our country (16.1 million) is poor, and every tenth child (7.1 million) is extremely poor. Children are the poorest age group in our country, and the younger they are the poorer they are. Children of color, who in the next 5 years will constitute the majority of U.S. children, are disproportionately poor (nearly 1 in 3).

More than responding with the simplistic formula that “their parents ought to go to work,” we should acknowledge that employment does not guarantee an above-poverty income. More than two-thirds of poor children live in families where one or more family members work. In no state can an individual working full-time at minimum wage afford the going rent for a two-bedroom rental unit and have enough left over for other necessities. A person would have to work, the report judges, more than two-and-a-half full-time minimum-wage jobs to afford a two-bedroom fair market rental. Add to this, disparity in access to a quality child care, education and health care, and it becomes apparent that these numbers have lifelong implications for the children, their families and our entire nation. Seventy-five percent of young people ages 17-24 cannot get into the military because of poor literacy, health or prior incarceration. Following the experience in World War II of having to turn so many young men away from military service due to the affects of malnutrition, our nation instituted the school lunch program. What steps do we need to take today for the sake of common human decency as well as national security?

The report spoke directly to the toll violence takes upon our children. In 2010, 2,694 children and teens were killed by guns and 15,576 were injured by guns. Guns killed more infants, toddlers and preschoolers than law enforcement officers in the line of duty. Since 1963, three times as many children and teens have died from guns on American soil than U.S. soldiers have been killed in action in the Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq wars.

As I read these sobering numbers, I was reminded of the story on CNN a couple of weeks ago concerning the Kentucky Baptist Convention’s announced strategy of “Redneck evangelism,” which included a plan to give guns away in gatherings across the state. The so-called strategy was an insult to its supposed “redneck” target; but like the plan announced by a minister in New York to give to some lucky church member a clone of the gun used to kill children in Newtown, Connecticut, it was also horribly insensitive to parents so tragically robbed of their children and dreams for the future.

Today more than a thousand congregations from more than 50 denominations across the country are observing a National Gun Violence Prevention Sabbath, praying, preaching, and acting in their churches, synagogues, mosques and temples and committing themselves to forge a different kind of future. Focused on our common love for our children and our neighbors’ children and our neighbors’ neighbors’ children, it is an opportunity to come together in respect for one another and our differences for the purpose of identifying practical steps we can take to protect these that we love, these for whom Jesus gave us responsibility.

“The greatest threat to America’s economic, military and national security” does not come from an enemy beyond our borders, CDF Director Marian Wright Edelman insists, “but from our failure, unique among high income nations, to invest adequately and fairly in the health, education and sound development” of our children. And in the words of Pope Francis, “A population that does not take care of the elderly and of children and the young has no future, because it abuses both its memory and its promise.”

Jesus chose the child, the classic image of the powerless, to demonstrate what it would mean to be on the way with him. If we want to look like, talk like, act like his disciples, then let us be sure that we are found just there, caring for his children.