

## Children as Crucial for the Church

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Our Witness Team distributed all sorts of stuff from our tent at North Canton's *Main Street Festival*, including bracelets for kids of all ages, some of which had those telltale letters *WWJD*, which means, *What Would Jesus Do?* That's quite a popular question nowadays, and has been a popular question down through the ages. It seems simple enough to answer, but is actually harder than you might imagine. For instance, take the seemingly easier question to ask, "What would Anna do?" I've often asked this question; and you'd think that as her father, I might know the answer, or that, with her mother's help, we'd do pretty well together. But the truth is that we don't know her as her friends do. We don't see her as her peers do. We don't see her at work, in the classroom, when she's by herself, or out on a Saturday night after the Buckeyes win. Sure, we have known her since the day she was born, and, for Marilyn, before that. But knowing what Anna would do requires insight that goes well beyond her physical appearance. Quite frankly, knowing what Anna would do requires knowing what time it is, how well she slept, what her mood is, and what's on her calendar for the day. My point isn't to say that she's completely unpredictable; rather, there are all sorts of subjective incidentals and objective requirements that go into knowing who someone is and what they would do. This applies to Jesus, just as much as to Anna, or you, or me. In fact, it applies more to Jesus, since he is separated from us by two thousand years.

Albert Schweitzer, a great Lutheran and a true Renaissance man from the last century – physician, philanthropist, missionary, theologian, and philosopher – wrote a book that was published in 1901 entitled, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*, which surveyed the field of scholars who had something to say about who Jesus was. From Reimarus to Wrede, with references to Strauss and Schleiermacher, including folks who had influenced our founding fathers, who, as Deists, thought of Jesus as a practical man with down-to-earth advice about how to use commonsensical principles to make our world a better place. What Schweitzer found was that Jesus would do what these various authors needed him to do. What Dr. Albert Schweitzer – Ph.D., Th.D., and Doctor of Medicine – discovered was that it was easier to project onto Jesus the needs of our present century than it was to place Jesus in his own century, enter that world, understand it, and Jesus along with it. It was in that context that I began reading the book I introduced in last Sunday's sermon, Gerhard Lofink's *Jesus and Community*. Can we get beyond recreating Jesus in our image to get back to understanding who Jesus was in himself.

For instance, I know that the historic passage in Matthew 16, where Jesus says that *Peter is the Rock upon which he will build the church* is problematical since Jesus didn't otherwise use this particular Greek word for church, *ekklesia*, because it didn't come into common usage as a reference to the church until after his resurrection and ascension.

Mark's account doesn't praise Peter in the way that Matthew's does, and doesn't presume that Peter will be the Rock of the Church. Mark keeps the focus on the confession that *Jesus is the Christ* and the key. There was a camp, however, that followed Peter in wanting to stay close to Jerusalem and build up the church there, with Peter and his close associates identified as the leaders of this camp; and this group got great mileage out of Matthew's version of this encounter with Jesus. Peter and Paul had different views when it came to wondering, "What Would Jesus Do?" Paul won that argument, even though he didn't even know Jesus, and he certainly didn't know Jesus the way that Peter did. So, even way back then, just years removed from the historical Jesus walking this earth, answering the question "What Would Jesus Do?" was a pretty difficult challenge.

Following Schweitzer's footsteps were names like Bultmann, Kasemann, Bornkamm, Norman Perrin, James Robinson, and Gerhard Lofink, scholars who sifted through our modern tools for understanding faith and history, with a commitment for figuring out how to let Jesus speak with projecting our needs onto his reality. What Lofink does is to ground Jesus' expectations about the church in his own experience, not ours. Lofink tries to get us back in Jesus' shoes – or sandals – to describe the world he came from and lived in. While Jesus may not have used the word *ekklesia* to speak about the church, he was a man born into a world that was completely immersed in an understanding that God worked through the community he called and created. Even though Jesus may not have planned to build an organizational structure with the See of Peter authorizing a Vicar of Christ to speak infallibly, there can be no doubt that he saw his group of followers as the beginning of what would become a new community whose very existence would proclaim the salvation of God's gracious love alive among us.

The scriptural record is clear in proclaiming that God acts through the community of His people. God selected a single people out of all the nations of the world – Abraham, and, through Abraham, the twelve tribes of Israel. When this people shines as a light among the nations, the nations of the world learn about our God and come to participate in the salvation God makes manifest through the particularity of this community, chosen and called. In today's Gospel, we learn two things about what Jesus would do because they are consistent with what Jesus taught and the guidance he gave those who gathered around him. Cross and kids are the key to knowing what Jesus would do. Both go a long way in helping us to understand what Jesus wanted from the community that gathered around him in his name. The cross was not so much the key to a religious system showing us the way to understanding how vicarious suffering and propitiatory sacrifice work, and then how it is that we gain control and divvy up the extra credit Jesus earned for being perfect. In its own context, in Jesus' life, the cross was a sign of nonconformity.

Jesus wanted his followers to be in the world but not like the world. His was the way of non-resistance. Jesus lays this path out in Matthew 5:38-42, where he counsels that we not resist the beggar who begs from us, that we not resist the soldier who imposes on us, that we not resist the thief who would rob us, that we not even resist the enemy who

would strike us. Go the second mile, give your cloak to those who would take your shirt, turn the other cheek; these were challenges that folks in the 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine would understand. The cross, which epitomized the way of non-resistance that Jesus lived to the very end, became the iconic expression and defining symbol of Jesus' way in the world. Again, it wasn't so much a religious system as a way of life that Jesus proclaimed and lived. He created a new community, called to be different from the world, both in its not conforming to the way the world was and in its being more inclusive than the world was.

One of his first acts as a teacher and preacher was to gather his disciples and followers into a new family. Mark 3:31-35 captures it early on when Jesus' asks, "Who are my mother and my brother and my sister? Those who do the will of God are my brother and my sister and my mother." Yesterday the Women of Zion hosted the Fall Gathering of the Canton-Massillon Cluster. I offered words of welcome, and lifted up the Good News that next year represents the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the ordination of women in the ELCA, which is a policy that has helped us recapture the defining glory of the revolutionary community that from its inception called women to step forward with God's gifts and lead in the community of servants we call the church. Welcoming women into roles of leadership is one sign of the inclusive character of Jesus' vision for the church.

Welcoming children was another such sign. In our text today that is exactly what Jesus did, and counseled. The challenge to welcome children was central to what was unique about the community that gathered around Jesus. In one sense, the point at issue was a matter of welcoming the excluded – as with women, Gentiles, sinners, and tax collectors. In another sense, there was something more at work. Jesus thought that we were all children, God's children, with God as our heavenly Father. In fact, very early on none were to be called *father* among Jesus' followers because that role was reserved for God alone. Think back to the verse on family that I just cited. "Who are my mother, brother, and sisters? Those who do the will of God are my mother, brother and sister" Where's the reference to fathers? There is none, not because fathers are missing, but because God is our father, and we are his children. Our one father in heaven loves us, and will protect us, provide for us, and preserve us.

Cross and kids: these are two aspects that have come to express what made Jesus' teaching unique. They are two aspects of what made the community of Jesus' followers so miraculously ground-breaking and radically revolutionary. It is not as easy as many might think to know what Jesus would do. These two signs help us to make a connection between what we think Jesus would do, what he taught, how he lived, and how those who followed him lived. The nonconformity of the cross and the inclusive commitment to receive children as God's children are key signs that point the way to what it means to follow in Jesus' steps. Cross and kids, inclusion and nonconformity: if we keep these signs in mind, we will remain close to our Lord in understanding what it means to be embraced by God's love, and more, we will grow in our understanding of what it means to be brothers and sisters in the new family that is ours ... in Jesus' name. Amen