

The Subversive Jesus

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

In our culture we have a healthy respect and love for children. And rightly so because we know that Jesus holds a special place for all God's children, especially the little ones. This makes it all the more difficult for us to understand that even here in the United States children are abused in many ways.

We hear stories about infants abandoned by their parents – left on the door step of a church, or found on a side street somewhere, a public bathroom, or even in a garbage dumpster. A most heinous form of abandonment was uncovered in Streamwood a few years ago, an incident that still seems to defy human understanding and compassion. Do you remember the young couple that apparently chose to starve their infant child to death while they and an older child ate Whoppers from Burger King?

When we hear sad stories like this one we have to ask, "Who could do such a terrible thing?" Child abandonment is against the law in our country. If the parent or parents are found they are usually prosecuted. Even in a modern society that abhors child cruelty and punishes its perpetrators, it still goes on.

It's a part of the human condition; some people just seem to have a void in their being, an empty place in their hearts. Thank God that it's only a small part of society that would choose to abandon a child. What part of the human psyche is it that could compel some one to be so self-centered, so cruel, so inhumane as to cast off the gift of a child – a gift from God.

Now consider the antithesis, or the opposite, of abandonment. That would be adoption. Hopefully, for most of those little ones who survive abandonment there are adoptive parents! This is the other side, the wonderful side, of the human condition. One parent's burden becomes another parent's blessing in an act of compassion and kindness. With adoption comes the opportunity for new life.

This is not unlike what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. When we abandoned ourselves to sin, separating ourselves from God, Jesus offers us salvation, adopting us and giving us new life. Please pray with me:

And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you, Christ Jesus, the one who saves us from abandonment and offers us new life in the resurrection. Open our hearts and minds to the scripture read and your word proclaimed. Give to us new insight into the reign of God and our call to adopt the marginalized – those who have been abandoned by society. Amen.

Jesus is teaching the disciples as they make their way home to Capernaum. For the second time Jesus tells them that he "is to be betrayed into human hands, and that they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again." His second prediction is just

as unclear to the disciples as his first prediction. The disciples are still confused and don't understand why Jesus says he must die. In the silence of their confusion they travel on, still wondering what Jesus means by this talk of suffering and death.

But soon the silence is broken and an argument takes place. Thinking Jesus will not hear them the disciples debate over which one of them is the most important to Jesus' mission, which one is – or will be – the greatest among them.

When they arrive home Jesus asks them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" The disciples realize that Jesus knows the answer to his own question. They stand there again in silent shame knowing that the dispute over their greatness was not appropriate.

So Jesus resumes his teaching. He calls the disciples and sits among them. And he says, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." If you want to be first, well then, you must put yourself last. If you want to be the greatest you must be a servant to all.

These would be subversive statements in first century Mediterranean culture, ideas that are intended by Jesus to turn the kingdom upside down. For the greatest to be a servant requires a complete reversal of status and values in the kingdom. Even today in our society many people are perplexed by this idea. To say that the greatest must be a servant to all is subversive of our culture and to our understanding of social order. It's not easy to put our selves last.

And so the disciples are equally confused by this subversive teaching. So he makes his point in a very powerful

way – a way that needs some explanation for us twenty-first century folks.

Jesus takes a small child – probably a household slave of Simon Peter's – and he stands the child in the midst of the disciples. Jesus takes the child in his arms, embraces it, and says to the disciples, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me." Whoever welcomes this child is actually welcoming God! This is an astonishing act and pronouncement by Jesus. Coming on the heels of the argument over who might be greatest among them, the disciples are shocked and amazed, and perhaps even offended. This an audacious act by Jesus.

Why would this act of radical hospitality be subversive? Consider for a moment the definition of "subversive." A subversive person is one who seeks to overthrow or undermine a legally constituted government and its principles and policies.

Some clarification is in order so that we avoid labeling Jesus as something he is not. In the 1960's and 1970's there was a subversive element that was dedicated to the violent overthrow of the United States government, if not the American way of life. These groups went by many names. They blew up buildings and power lines. They were criminals.

Jesus, in Mark's gospel is not trying to overthrow the Roman Empire. He's not planting bombs or blowing up temples. But he is trying to subvert the existing culture that was constituted under a combination of Roman and Hebrew laws.

By using this child as an object lesson, Jesus is subverting a culture that puts men first and women and children, particularly female children, last. He is subverting a culture that doesn't understand the ideology that the greatest must be servant to all. Jesus was calling for a subculture or countercultural movement. That movement ultimately came to be known as Christianity. It subverted the dominant culture of the day.

Here's the hard part for us to understand today. The act of offering hospitality to a small child was shocking to the disciples because the dominant culture held children to be non-persons. Children were socially invisible. In Jesus' object lesson, this child shouldn't have even been in the room, hanging with the disciples and the men of the house.

My lead-in to this morning's message illustrated the problem of child abuse and abandonment for a reason. In the ancient world abandonment of infants was a normal practice. It was a "post-natal" form of birth control and there was no particular stigma associated with it. Can you imagine that?

Once abandoned, children might be picked up or rescued. Sometimes the rescuers were couples who desired to have children but couldn't. This would be what we know today as adoption. But other rescuers were people who needed an extra pair of hands to help with the work of the household – slavery by our standards even today.

History doesn't document a formal procedure for adopting abandoned children. There was, however, a Roman custom where a father would lift up his own child immediately after it was born to signify

that the child was his and that he pledged to raise it. If a father refused to lift up the newborn child for any reason, it would be abandoned.

It's possible, if not likely, that this Roman ritual of lifting up a newborn infant underlies Jesus' action when he places this child in the midst of the disciples. His example conveys the message that all people – including abandoned children – are children of God, every bit as much as any adult. As Jesus embraces this little child, his action mirrors this Roman ritual.

Jesus' actions are symbolic of adoption in the ancient world and in our world today. Children, even abandoned children, are to be brought into church and raised by Christian parents! They are people of worth and value and are not to be cast aside to become invisible to society. This is subversive ideology indeed and it challenges the disciples – and us – to believe what it means to say that to be the greatest means to be a servant to all – even to the invisible children of Jesus' time.

But this morning's gospel lesson is not just about children. The symbolic and subversive action of Jesus in offering adoption to children extends to the invisible people of society – those who have been abandoned one way or another by society. All are to be welcomed into the church and raised up by Christians. They must not be exploited for their labor potential or the pleasure of others. God is always concerned for the poor, the homeless, the weak, the oppressed and the abandoned. In fact, God has a preferential option for such as these.

By the time the gospel of Mark was being written the early church had already begun to understand this lesson. The early Christians were known

throughout the ancient world for their charity, including their treatment of abandoned children.

But Jesus has gone well beyond providing a model of charity for the early church and for us today as Christians. He has linked acceptance of “a child such as this” to the acceptance of himself. That child crying in the garbage dumpster is an image of Christ. The way we respond to that child is a measure of how we respond to Christ. Christ is mysteriously revealed in the abandoned child or in the homeless family living out of their car. The abandoned child is an image of Christ that rings true in chapter thirteen of Hebrews: “Don’t forget to show hospitality to strangers, for some who have done this have entertained angels without even realizing it!” Let’s pray:

Thank you Jesus for turning the kingdom upside down. We pray that you will continue to help us see you in the abandoned child, the poor and the homeless, the sick and the weak, and the oppressed. Give us the strength to respond to such as these just as we would respond to you. Amen. Let’s continue to be in an attitude of prayer and reflection.