

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

OF RUG RATS, THUMB SUCKING, AND THE KINGDOM OF GOD

Mark 9:30-37

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 20)

Analysis by Steven E. Albertin

30They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; 31for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again." 32But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

33Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" 34But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. 35He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." 36Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, 37Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.

DIAGNOSIS: "Thumb Sucking Rug Rats!"

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : "Confused"

Today we are likely to view children as darling little bundles of joy. But not in Jesus' world! They were helpless, dependent, nonproductive burdens, second class citizens who needed to grow up and be productive members of society and caretakers of their parents. They were far down the social ladder.

So when Jesus singles out a little child and embraces it as a demonstration of the Kingdom of God, the disciples were confused. This is no way to build their movement. This is no way to cut a swath and impress potential customers. This is no way to build a congregation. This is no way to expand your market share. This is no way to succeed in the entrepreneurial religious marketplace of competitive America. Jesus is at best a marketing challenge and at worst a public relations nightmare. What are the disciples to think? They/we are confused. "Jesus, what gives?"

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : "Afraid"

But the disciples are not just confused; they/we are embarrassed and ashamed because like children who have been caught with their fingers in the cookie jar, they/we have a dirty little secret that they/we want to keep hidden. They/we are afraid someone will find out.

The dirty little secret is this: We are no more interested in following Jesus than following the man in the moon. This following Jesus is more about our own ambition and success than some greater cause. We want to follow a winner and not some loser who would go off and do something foolish like get himself killed. Peter had actually spoken for all of us following Jesus' first Marcan passion prediction (last week's Gospel) when he rebuked Jesus for such foolishness. With this second announcement of his impending fate Jesus seems to be fingering all of us and not just Peter.

When Jesus questioned why the disciples were arguing, he seemed to know all about their/our dirty little secret. He knew all about our ambition and our distrust of him. We disciples are afraid that Jesus knows what we are up to. We are afraid of being exposed. We want to keep our dirty little secret hidden. So, we are silent. A conspiracy of silence keeps our true motives hidden. Because of our distrust of this would be Messiah who, it seems, doesn't want to be a Messiah with all this talk of betrayal and death, we "plead the 5th." We will not risk self-incrimination. Repentance is impossible. We are afraid to fess up to having been caught with our fingers in the cookie jar.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : "Exposed"

But silence is no excuse. Jesus knows what we have been hiding. He knows what are up to. So, when he puts that child in our midst, he is conducting a revealing object lesson. He is exposing our shameless ambition for what it is. He is exposing for all to see the dirty little secret we have wanted to keep hidden: that our advantage, greatness and status are all that matter. And they always come at the expense of others.

But in Jesus' kingdom true greatness is welcoming the little ones, those who are so far down the social ladder that they have nothing to offer our shameless ambition. Worse yet, those little ones we thought nothing of stepping on as we sought to "climb the ladder" are not the inferiors we thought they are. They are Jesus incognito. Unbeknownst to us in our reckless pursuit of our own status, we are brutalizing the very King whose Kingdom we wanted to inherit. Such a startling revelation can only remind us of the goats in Matthew 25 who were equally ignorant of the true identity of those they were so casually ignoring. Remember what happened to them? That same deadly fate awaits us.

We got caught with our fingers in the cookie jar! We betrayed

the trust that was put in us. We are exposed for the selfish brats we are. We are no better than the thumb sucking rug rats we once so arrogantly despised. We deserve to be sent to bed without supper or worse yet, receive a “spanking.”

PROGNOSIS: “Welcome to the Playpen!”

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : “Time for a Hug”

When Jesus exposes us for the Rug Rats we were so sure we weren’t, he has us just where he wants us. Ashamed, embarrassed, sucking our thumbs, noses running, wanting to run and hide, Jesus doesn’t send us to bed early. On the contrary, he takes us to the head table, center stage, in front of all his dinner guests and does the unthinkable. He sets us on his lap and gives us thumb sucking rug rats a big hug.

Obviously Jesus is not the kind of Messiah we thought he was. Those two passion predictions were not mistakes but deliberately chosen demonstrations that Jesus and his Kingdom are very different from the Kingdoms of this world. Unlike the Kings and Kingdoms of this world that have no time or place for the losers, outcasts and the bad boys and girls of this world, Jesus welcomes them, even rug rats like us, even though we ought to be sent to bed without dinner.

Jesus, of course, had to die for daring to defy such social and religious convention. But given the fact that his daring defiance came with the highest (divine) authorization, his death is the end of such social and religious convention. Their hold on this world is broken. In his kingdom they no longer define where one stands in the pecking order of social and religious status. Yes, thumb sucking rug rats no longer are at the bottom of the pile. They no longer have to be seen and not heard. They are now the center of attention. They have the place of honor . . . on Jesus lap where they get a big hug.. The empty tomb and the Marcan angelic announcement that the risen Christ has gone

ahead of them to Galilee only further confirm this dramatic change and reorientation of social status that Jesus has wrought in this new world called the Kingdom of God..

Step 5: Advance Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *“Safe and Secure”*

Sitting on Jesus’ lap and wrapped in his arms, there is no longer any reason to be ashamed or afraid. Safe and secure thumb sucking rug rats that we are, we no longer have to hide in our silence or be afraid to speak. We get to come clean about the truth. We can name the dirty little secret. It no longer needs to hold us hostage in a conspiracy of silence.

Yes, as the Jesus of the Gospel of Mark declares, “The Kingdom of God is at hand, repent and believe the good news.” The good news is that Jesus has set us on his lap, taken us in his arms and hugged us . . . unconditionally, no questions asked. Therefore, the silence can end. We can repent. We can finally speak of that which we were too ashamed to admit. We get to come clean about our shameless and selfish ambition. We get to acknowledge our sin and how we have stepped on others as we frantically “climbed the ladder.” We get to face our fears and name them. We get to do all of this because we believe the good news . . . that the Kingdom is at hand, that even losers, even sinners, even thumb sucking rug rats, like us have places of honor and privilege on Jesus lap in the Kingdom of God.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *“Playing Together”*

Life in Jesus’ kingdom, in the Kingdom of God, is life in the playpen. Jesus takes us off his lap and puts us in his playpen where we get to live a life very different from the way kids usually conduct themselves in the playpen. Here no thumb sucking rug rats are scorned but all are honored as kings and queens. Since all are safe and secure, fat and sassy, there is no need to compete. There is no shameless ambition. There is no

scrambling for privilege or advantage.. There is no hoarding or greed. Here there are no rivals. Here there are only partners and friends. We can share and share alike All can play together. Everyone is a winner.

And most of all, here in the playpen we get to return the favor to the One who rescued us from our shameless ambition and embarrassing silence in the first place. As we welcome other thumb sucking rug rats, as we get to make a place for others who have been rejected and stepped on, as we get to wipe each others noses and band aid one another's skinned knees, we get to welcome none other than Jesus . . . and the One who sent him. Can there be any more honored playmates in the playpen than these?