

September 20, 2015

Tim Hughes

Sermon: "The Kids' Table"

New Testament Lesson: James 3:13-18

Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.

The Gospel Lesson: Mark 9:30-37

They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it, for he was teaching the 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." But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

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

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the Church.

Sermon:

On the website, www.catholicsupply.com, there are literally hundreds of religious gifts that you can purchase for your family or friends. As best I can tell, it's kind of the Oriental Trading Company of religious items, many of which are some combination of cheap, precious, tacky, sentimental, and baffling.

This is your go-to spot for life-size plastic Nativity figures, for example.

And where else will you find a collectable plush Pope Francis doll? Or the "Count Your Blessings" wine glass? It's either a treasure trove or a Shop of Horrors, depending on your taste and capacity for irony.

The item I particularly want to highlight, however, is a Best Seller called "Soccer Jesus Sports Statue."

The website description reads: *"To remind children that Jesus is with them always. A contemporary statue for today's youth. Jesus is with us in everything we do, watching over us and involved in all of our acts and activities." As seen on the Conan O'Brien show. \$21.95.*

The statue itself rests upon a small wooden base that is topped with a circular patch of AstroTurf. Three plastic figures are running across the field, each jockeying for a soccer ball that is rolling across the foreground. A little boy and girl approach from the right. They are wearing regulation cleats and blue and pink jerseys, respectively, in case you are unclear about their gender. Jesus cuts in from the left. He is wearing flip-flops and a classic white robe, in case you are unclear about his Jesus-ness.

If you look closely, you can also see that Jesus' elbow is cocked out at a somewhat sharp angle, spelling trouble for the boy in particular.

Now look – it's easy enough to make fun of the Soccer Jesus Sports Statue. I'm afraid I just did it. And I have to admit that it seems unlikely that Conan O'Brien featured it on his show in order to remind the children of the world that Jesus is with us in everything we do.

It's easy to mock Soccer Jesus, but I can guarantee that it is not intended to be a joke. I know this because my best childhood friend had a picture of Soccer Jesus on the wall in his bedroom, and as children it never struck us as funny at all. Nor were we troubled by theological questions such as "Which team does Jesus does play for?" and "Why does the other team even bother?" or "Why doesn't he play for an adult league?" or "Why doesn't the coach put him in the goal since everyone knows that Jesus saves?"

As children we were smart enough not to get tangled up in that kind of fundamentalism. The point was simple. Jesus wanted to spend time with us. Not just in Sunday School, where we struggled to sit still and not fidget with our clip-on neckties, but in our infinitely more exciting *actual* lives. We didn't have to sit on a special Bible Story Mat and listen to Jesus drone on about Do's and Don'ts. Jesus wanted to *play* with us.

This is all fairly radical stuff if you let it bleed beyond the kid's table – if you take it seriously. Most adults – even many Christians - scoff at the notion that Jesus accompanies them through their everyday life. It requires a much higher level of integration between the secular and sacred than most of us practice. Many of us are also understandably uncomfortable with the notion that Jesus is "involved in *all* of our acts and activities." Enough said about that!

Another reason the statue strikes people as ridiculous is that it seems like a poor use of Jesus' time. Look at Pope Francis, for example. He will kick off his trip to United States this week with a Mass for upwards of a million people on the steps of the Philadelphia Art Museum before heading to address the United Nations and a joint session of Congress. Surely Jesus maintains a similar schedule? How many people will die on the operating table, one wonders, while Jesus is playing soccer with children?

Perhaps more insidiously, some of us simply struggle to believe that we are worthy of Jesus' time and attention. Sure, maybe in the Children's Soccer league, where everyone gets a trophy – even that one kid. It makes sense that Jesus would lavish his attention there – because children are innocent, right?



Well, I'm going to go ahead and say what I know many of you are already thinking. Children are not innocent. Some of them are actually downright awful.

There was a ten year-old girl I once knew in South Boston. Let's call her Janice. She and her little brother were campers in a summer program that I directed, and the other staff members and I started calling her "Hurricane Janice." She blew through the front doors of the church like a hurricane, leaving a wake of devastation in her path. She cursed like it was an art form and strung profanities together in new and strange combinations. She bullied other children. I learned that there was a series of YouTube videos in which she beat up other kids from the neighborhood on camera. To say that Janice was a challenge was an understatement. Three weeks in a row she was not allowed on our Friday field trip. I left message after message for her mother, detailing her terrible behavior. I told her that she was *this close* to being expelled. I secretly hoped she would get the hint and stay home. I was concerned that I was enabling her bullying and endangering other children by allowing her to come back every day.

And yet, as sure as the sun would rise, Hurricane Janice would show up right on time the next day, dragging her brother up the street with one hand and jabbing the other at anyone in her path.

"Ooooooh, Jesus would not play soccer with you," I wanted so badly to say to her. "Jesus would weep if he saw your behavior."

I felt this acute tension as I struggled with the decision to expel Janice from camp. We were having this program, ostensibly, to remind her that she and the others were loved by God – unconditionally. But day after day I found myself saying things like, "If you continue to act like that – you will no longer be welcome here. You have to be better," I would tell her.



See, somewhere along the line, we adults transition from the world of children, where everyone gets a trophy, to the world of adults, where some people make the cut and other don't, where your behavior, looks, ability, intelligence, money, and class rank are vital predictors of your success. Somewhere along the line we come to understand that world is neither fair nor safe.

We take great care, see, instilling in our children the ideal that they are *so* loved, just as they are, that Jesus is with them always and they do not need to be afraid. It happens to be true and it is our responsibility as parents and indeed as the church to create that understanding.

But I think that often our actions betray another, unspoken belief that the process of becoming adult involves gradually qualifying those ideas and assuming the more sober understanding that the world is not impressed with you and owes you nothing. That it depends on you to rise to the top if you want to live a successful life.

So parents find themselves in the tricky situation of trying to teach both lessons to children that they love. Some parents teach this lesson by locking their children *outside* until they fight the neighborhood bully. Some parents teach this lesson by locking their children *inside* until they've written the perfect college essay. Relative privilege aside, the message is the same – you need to learn to climb to the top or else risk being buried by others who do.



All of this, of course, is context, a roundabout explanation for the disciples' embarrassing behavior in Mark 9. The Gospel of Mark has a number of distinct patterns that recur again and again throughout the book. One of them is a pattern where Jesus gives fairly straightforward predictions of his own death and resurrection, and the disciples fail to understand what he's talking about. In this case, they are too afraid even to reveal that they don't understand, which any teacher can tell you is not a great indicator of future improvement.

The disciples are in over their heads at this point, but they are trying for all they're worth to keep poker faces, to make it seem like they are on top of their game.

I think we can assume it was that bubbling sense of anxiety, that itch of insecurity, that egged them into conflict on the long walk home.

Once Jesus and his entourage reach the privacy of their house in Capernaum, he asks them what they were arguing about on the road. Once again, they are silent, for they are ashamed to admit that they were arguing about who is the greatest among them. They say nothing.

"Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all," he said, revealing, once again, that he knew what was in their hearts.



"Whoever wants to be first must be last."

It's a concise and clear rebuke, not just of the disciple's posturing but also the logic of the world. To illustrate his teaching, Jesus picks up a little child. "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me."

That's pretty straight-forward, but like the disciples we have a hard time understanding.

For example, the image of Jesus holding the child is quickly sentimentalized. CatholicSupply.com offers a "Jesus and Child" tapestry for \$44.95 that depicts Jesus sitting with a child in the crook of a tree branch. The light is soft and flowers are everywhere. I almost have to use my Insulin pump to look at it, it's so sweet. And I'm not singling out Catholics, by the way. Google "Jesus and Child" and nearly every image looks like the cover of a Hallmark card. Hurricane Janice is not pictured there, I guarantee you.

The fact is, Jesus and his contemporaries would have been far less sentimental about children than we are. For starters, consider the devastating fact that 3 out of 10 Jewish children died before reaching

adulthood due to disease, hardship, and poverty.¹ The kids who did survive, along with the elderly and people with disabilities, were often considered to be economic burdens unless they could provide for the family. It was not unheard of for them to be abandoned by the side of the road, no longer part of the operating budget. So while it is lovely to see Jesus hold a child in his arms, it is more than a sentimental moment. Jesus isn't just caring for children because it's a sweet thing to do. He's aligning himself with the most powerless people in the community. He doesn't just love the child – through the miracle of the Incarnation, he somehow also *is* the child.

Surely this childlike vulnerability was on Jesus' mind as they walked down the road that day, as he declared that he was going to be betrayed, and arrested, and killed. The matter-of-fact nature of his teaching reminds us that Jesus is choosing the way of vulnerability but he still thinks like an adult. He understands full well how the world works, how the levers of power will turn against him and the machine of empire will snuff him out. He doesn't operate under the illusion that the world is safe or fair.

He understands these things, and chooses to stand with the child anyway. He chooses vulnerability and solidarity over the arms race. He chooses love.



About a week and a half before the end of the summer, Janice and her brother stopped attending camp. After four and a half weeks of nearly perfect and calamitous attendance, they vanished. I can't tell you that I wasn't a little bit relieved, but I still did my due diligence. I placed several calls to her mother asking if she would be finishing the summer with us, and when none of those calls were returned, I tried the emergency contact number – an aunt on the other side of the city.

A woman answered the phone. She was embarrassed to explain this, she said, but the children had been taken by Child Protective Services. A neighbor had called and reported them after realizing at some point that

¹ Diane Severance, "Jesus Loved Children." www.christianity.com

Janice and her brother had been living alone in their house for some time – possibly weeks. When the agents went in to interview and retrieve them, they reported that they found little to no food in the house. Their mother – an addict – had simply hit the road for reasons that remained unclear. It seems that they were surviving on the breakfast and lunch they were receiving at our camp.



I have to tell you, I shed tears over that phone call. The terrible behavior, the fighting, the cursing – none of it spoke louder to me than the thought of 10 year-old Janice and her 6 year-old brother forgoing dinner. The thought of her setting an alarm clock and rising early to wake her brother, dress him, and walk the city blocks to the only place she knew they would find food, a church that seemed to believe that God loves everyone. It occurred to me that Janice knew some things about love that I did not.

Of course, Jesus would love her. Of course he would take her in his arms and say: *this one matters to me. When you show love to this one, you show love to me.*

See, Jesus didn't choose the child because it was innocent, or cute, or the right thing to do. We are partial to those interpretations because we are so invested in the idea that we can be good enough all by ourselves. Jesus chose the child because we are all children. Jesus chose the child because we need to know. He chose the child because not one of us is too insignificant, not one of us is alone, even in our suffering, perhaps *especially* in our suffering.

What would it look like to bring that understanding to our way of being in the world?

To our public policy? Our standards for public education?

It would look, I submit, fairly different from how it looks now, when there are more photo ops with children than people who are serious about justice for children.

When I find myself irritated by Soccer Jesus and all the other cutesy representation of Jesus and the children, when it doesn't seem to represent the muck of the world as I have seen it, as Janice and so many others have *experienced* it, I remember that the most common statue featured in churches around the world is Christ on the cross. Jesus who was an adult and understood the consequences of his actions. Jesus who forsook power as the world understands it and embraced weakness of a child, only to unleash a deep and enduring love. I only can imagine the website description for such a statue. It might read:

"To remind children that Jesus is with them always. A contemporary statue for today's youth. Jesus is with us in everything we do."