

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

September 19, 2021
The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

Mark 9:30-37
Psalm 54
James 3:13-4:3,7-8a

How many of you built forts when you were young?

I loved to built forts. Forts of all kinds...blanket forts, pillow forts, forts made with branches out in the woods, forts in corners of old barns. You name it, I built it. I always wanted a tree house fort but never was lucky enough to get one so instead I would just climb up sappy branches of an old pine tree and pretend I had a fort.

But, my highest fort building achievement was the cardboard box fort. I would take a couple of large boxes. Tape them together strategically with duct tape, cut out windows and a door with a box cutter. (I was only 7 or 8 at the time and can't imagine why my parents let me play with box cutters but it was the 70's and helicopter parenting wasn't a thing back then). And after it was all put together, I would hang newspaper on every wall for wall paper.

I could spend hours in that little fort. It was a place to dream dreams and create a world that was perfect and good...at least from a child's perspective.

Remembering that fort made me think about the qualities that it represented. What is it that makes a child's fort so special?

I started a list and let's see what we can add to that list this morning. I thought of qualities like safety and warmth. I thought of things like creativity and possibility. And when shared with others, the fort embodied things like hospitality, kindness and friendship. It's so innocent and full of wonder, where a child can believe that anything is possible.

That possibility is what I want us to focus on today.

When Jesus picks up a child in our Gospel reading, the disciples have been fighting amongst themselves about who is the best and the brightest among them, who deserves the most. And Jesus wants to shift the conversation away from the disciples fixation on themselves and wants them to recognize something so much more important. Jesus points to possibility...the possibility that emerges when our hearts and minds aren't self-centered but other-centered.

It's important to know that children in the 1st century were not at the center of attention the way they are often today. They didn't have rights and they had to work hard to survive. Being a child wasn't easy or idyllic. What Jesus wants the disciples to notice is the reality of the helpless, the vulnerable, those at risk, the defenseless. He's trying to teach that all of the posturing and arguing doesn't do anything toward a better world.

This is not a lesson in idealism. It's a lesson in reality. And, it is lesson in how we, as people of God, are to respond and recognize our responsibility towards God's creation.

Jesus wants us to open our hearts and minds to the possibility of caring for others who need to be cared for. To open our hearts and minds to those who have less than we do. To find ways to fulfill the hopes and dreams of a little child and by extension change our attitudes and commitments towards others.

And, when we start talking about things like fairness and wholeness and abundance for all of God's children, it's easy to get side tracked by all kinds of things that seem so urgent in our 21st century lives. Side tracked by making money, keeping up with others, looking a certain way, having the right kind of car or the best house in the best neighborhood. Remember even the disciples argued about who was the best and the brightest, who was better than the others.

And when we do that, Jesus says stop and listen and learn...I want you to welcome this child and all that this child represents. The vulnerability, the innocence, the hope. Work to build the kind of life this child deserves.

Can we imagine what that would look like?

The Rev. Carlos de la Torre, rector of Saint John's Episcopal Church in Pennsylvania, writes this,

"To be a disciple of Jesus is above all a way of being in this world. It is a posture that holds and bears the beauty and complexity of human life, and yet has the strength and space to welcome others as we have been welcomed by Jesus. To be a disciple of Jesus means creating enough space in our hearts and minds to welcome those who seek to see Jesus and are in need of the Good News. At times, it requires that we put ourselves aside, our accomplishments and aspirations, so that we may offer the same hospitality, love, and grace that Jesus offers us. But it also means not being afraid to be child-like, turning to others when we find ourselves in need of the Good News when we find ourselves in need of Jesus and cannot seem to feel his presence in the world."

Notice the qualities he highlights...hospitality, love, grace. That's what life should look like.

In our Epistle from James, we learn even more about this ability to open our hearts and minds to welcome all of God's children...James writes that it comes through a dedication to seeking wisdom. Wisdom that can only come from God. And when we turn to God and live into God's wisdom we begin to live into qualities like purity and peace, a willingness to yield, the offering of mercy and grace with no partiality or hypocrisy.

Folks, I want you to truly consider what our scriptures are trying to teach this week. For me, they bring up the question, are we living into these ideals? I mean, really living into them? Or, are we spending more time like the disciples bickering over who is the greatest?

I can't count the number of conversations I have had with folks over the last few weeks. Folks filled with discouragement and concern for the world we are living in, at what we have become as a society. Discouraged and concerned for the lack of civility, the inability to listen and welcome those who think differently than you do, the fear of difference, the hyper-focused emphasis on self-preservation over community restoration. Some days, it's hard to figure out how we will re-emerge out of this time to a place of wholeness and love for our neighbor.

But...we knew how it should look when we were building our forts as children. We weren't scared to dream big and bold and create a world without hate and greed and jealousy or envy.

And, I think the same goes for every time we bring a child into this world and especially when we baptize them...we do so with the expectation not that the world will be perfect but that it will be good and just. We hold on to the possibility of a better world. We believe in a better world.

Jesus says "whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me." Every time you see that child and embrace hope for their future, embrace those things that will bring it to reality...not just for one child but for every single child who is loved immeasurably by God.

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Thanks be to God. Amen.