

Holding Up Children

a sermon based on Mark 9:33-37 (Scholar's Translation)

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by Rev. Scott Elliott

You just heard a reading from the Gospel of Mark at chapter 9 verses 36 to 37, from the Jesus Seminar's Scholar's Version Translation. I like this translation. It makes it clear that Jesus took a child, placed her in front of the disciples and put his arms around her and said "Whoever accepts a child like this in my name is accepting me."

I not only like this translation, but I love this verse. It is among my favorites.

Jesus honors children by holding a child out in front of a crowd and putting his arm around her. This is remarkable. Even more so when you know that in Jesus' culture children were perceived as non-persons with no right to appear in the midst of male disciples, let alone be embraced by an exalted teacher like Jesus.

But Jesus brilliantly defeats this perception in one fell swoop. As the exalted one he exalts those non-persons not only into personhood, but as the very envoys himself and God. "Whoever accepts a child like this in my name is accepting me. And whoever accepts me is not so much accepting me as the one who sent me."

Jesus declares that receiving a child amounts to receiving him and God personally. Welcome one such child and you welcome not only Jesus, but God.

Jesus' act of holding that child out to a crowd and embracing her was a huge and amazing act of grace in his culture, as was declaring her and all other children as envoys of himself and God.

Almost two years ago I discussed this scripture in relationship to the programs we offer to children. I am revisiting this verse in a similar vein today. Namely to discuss Community Family Players a ministry we will begin offering next Saturday as children and youth audition for a production of *Alice in Wonderland*.

This ministry's intent is to take children and youth and place them in front of a crowd with our welcoming embrace in hopes that others will see and embrace and accept them as well.

Jesus's embrace of a child demonstrates what a difference community can make in providing a place for children to be loved and to feel safe to be connected and respected by others. It shows the difference we can make with one embrace of a child.

While children and youth are not exactly considered non-persons by our culture, they do often get set aside, or ignored or even mistreated. I don't know about you but I have seen youth ignored by clerks in stores and even followed around with suspicion in a very unwelcoming manner. Indeed the news media is far more likely to portray teens as criminals or suspect than as capable of doing good and great things. This is counter to my experience that teens are extraordinary people.

Jesus's example teaches us to see children and youth as those we must embrace, honor, respect and love as his and God's representatives and extraordinary people.

I have worked with children and youth for decades. In 1997 I had the great privilege of beginning a theatre program in Oregon that arose out of the very premise reflected in today's verse. I felt youth were not being embraced or accepted by the culture and I wanted to connect them with respectable adults play, to treat them with respect in the process of putting on the play and in the end hold them out in high quality performances for the community to see and respect and embrace and accept.

I have also been involved with theatre for decades. I have found over the years that working on a play provides a myriad of experiences. Acting requires a great amount of discipline to memorize, rehearse and stick with all of the work that is needed to perform a piece. It makes you search your soul for not only an understanding of the written word that forms the literature of a play, but for an understanding of life, and how to breath that life into your character; using whatever you have within, that you are willing to explore--and then expose.

It truly develops character on many levels, and keeps the imagination exercised and in great shape in a day and age where our imaginations are exercised less and less. You learn in theatre to articulate words and thoughts. You learn about different cultures, different fortunes, great literature and other times and other places and other people.

As an actor you acquire a better understanding of emotions and how to call upon them from others or yourself and control them . . . just a little. You learn how to let go and look at facets of yourself and life that you might otherwise ignore. You create. You act as team with others in very emotional settings.

It takes a lot of discipline and hard work to be in a play. These are not skits, but full scale productions and by the end actors get that they need to be on time,

prepared for the day and ready to work with others as a team, as equals, as someone who matters and is needed.

Theatre also makes actors learn how to summon up confidence and speak before crowds. And theatre is unique among the arts because it actually often includes all the arts: Writing, painting, poetry, sculpture and many times music.

To me the greatest most exciting thing about theatre is that when everything is just right you can move people in such a profound way they remember the act for life.

If you have not already heard, I spent my teenage years in plays, mostly musicals in my hometown in San Jose. I left San Jose to get a B.A. in Drama at a small college called California State University at Stanislaus. And I first moved to Oregon to work on an MFA in acting at the University of Oregon where I had a graduate teaching fellowship in theatre props (in addition to acting I can create or scrounge up just about anything for use on stage).

After about a year I was dissatisfied with the graduate acting program and moved to L.A., where for reasons I still cannot fathom the industry took a liking to some guy named Tom Cruz over me (some say it was Danny DeVito).

Although I did not stay in LA and went on to make a living in other ways I have always kept a connection with theatre. My biggest drama thrill was directing that theatre ministry in Oregon just like the one we are starting here, a ministry full of love and positive activities.

Need for positive activities in this community for our youth is, I think, self evident. There is a great void of places for our younger folks to belong, to have fun, to imagine and create, to dare to do new things, to interact with adults, to learn and grow and to work to give to the community – and to get positive responses from the community.

We have designed Community Family Players to help to begin to fill this void; and this is I hope only the beginning.

Community Family Players will provide wholesome theatre productions in a manner that provides the opportunities for families to work together and for youth to shine on stage while entertaining folks of all ages.

The cast and crew of each production will include a mix of adults and youth from throughout the community-with the youth generally out numbering adult performers three to one. The presence of adult performers is to provide in-cast teachers, friends, connections and positive role models for the youth, as well as to legitimize the production as "real" theatre in the eyes of the audience.

Perhaps more importantly, the presence of youth and adults in the cast and crew is to provide the opportunity for family and community members to work and play together outside the home. This first production will include a separate opening dance number choreographed by Amy Aumick (yes, that Amy Aumick, our office manager!) who among her many gifts, is an accomplished dancer.

The main show, *Alice in Wonderland*, is expected to feature the acting talents of the following adult members of our church: Billy Lane, an ordained minister and a manger at Pier 1 is the Caterpillar. Tony Misco, a retired college administrator and Stephens Minister is the Red King, Amy is the White Queen . . . and Shannon Whitten a professor at University Central Florida is the Red Queen.

Although the adult parts are cast anyone interested in helping out on this great new ministry is encouraged to let us know. There is a sign up sheet in the narthex listing the areas we need help with (costumes, props, sets, tickets, publicity, stage manager, etc.). Adults from this church who have already agreed to work behind the scenes on the play are Phyllis Rhinehart, Dick Rhinehart, Jack Carnes, Cathy Carnes, Paul Lucas, Pat Lucas, Lynn Chako, Joni Isaman and Mardi Sales. I also expect parents of the youth who audition will help as well.

Community Family Players is being operated and sponsored by this Church. While we have no plans to provide scripted doctrinal messages about life, or religion, or spirituality; we do want the youth to receive the over-riding message: that there is a lot of good in the world, that they are a part of that good, and that a whole lot of people care about them and respect them.

It is our intent and hope that our actions will not only provide theatre skills and experiences, but give clear resounding messages of love and compassion, of respect and charity, of hope and joy, and of community commitment to positive growth in all of us.

We plan to do this by providing community family theatre experiences on and off stage, and for the audiences. This may all sound too good to be true and idealistic, but I have been a part of just such a group before and it works, even better than I have described so far.

Let me share with you just two experiences from the past program:

The first summer show we did had a nine year old child in it. She was very sickly at the time, but kept at it and worked hard nonetheless and it paid off. She was great. At the conclusion of the play she wrote these words on a t-shirt the cast presented to me: "Thank you for the best summer of my life." That child returned every summer for six years to be in each production. She is in college now and when I went back for my ordination she and one of the adults put together a skit

about my journey to seminary that not only had everyone in stitches, but in tears as well.

We dealt with a lot of at risk youth; in fact we think that over half the kids were very at risk. One youth who was in number of shows was from a family with some young men who had a rough image in town. One day I was walking along a street by myself and I saw this rough looking fellow on the other side of the road. He looked up, saw me, and crossed over to my side of the street and headed directly for me. I stopped on the side walk and he came right up to me, and as he reached out his hand he said "I want to thank you for putting my brother in your plays. My whole family is so proud of him. Thank you so much. It means a lot to us. He loves being in plays." I don't think I have ever be more gratified to have been involved in a ministry than the day I heard those words by that young man on that street. Our aim is to have the same sort of impact.

In the Gospel of Mark at chapter 9 verses 36 to 37 we are told that Jesus took a child and had her stand in front of the disciples and Jesus put his arms around her and said to the disciples "Whoever accepts a child like this in my name is accepting me."

This offers a perfect image of what Community Family Players is all about. To put children in front of a friendly audience with a warm and supportive embrace.

This is a heavenly project, designed to help those who are representatives of God, our children.

Your support of this project will change lives and not just the youths' lives, but all who are involved.

Thank you for being a church that is willing to create such a ministry; to embrace youth and hold them out to others as worthy; to connect youth with community through the performing arts.

AMEN

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