

It is nice to think of gentle, cherub-checked children coming to Jesus.

We love sweet-and-tender Jesus loving on children.

We, here at the cathedral, like this sentimental image of Jesus-and-children-together so much that we have it *twice* depicted in our stained-glass windows: once over the high altar; from where your sitting, it's the second window on the right.

And the other: is in West cloister, there you'll see the similarly sentimental depiction of our Lord and children. In that window you will find Jesus is holding a sweet, clean, white, blonde-haired little baby, sleeping comfortably in his arms, accompanied by two sweet, clean, white, blond-haired, blue-eyed little girls at his feet, with mouths, of course, shut...

These overly-familiar depictions in our windows, and the broader idea of the artificially-sweet Jesus with artificially-lovely children, these images—and the ideas they communicate—are safe. They make us feel good and don't really challenge us. They even kind of make sense to us.

The same sense of acrid sweetness depicted in our windows is easy for us to hear in gospel lesson: “whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me.”

This sort of partiality towards children does not sound totally strange to us; we are much more tuned into children than first century Palestinians were.

Far from ignoring children, middle-class Americans tend to idealize them, just as we have in the windows. And just as we might be tempted to do when hearing today's Gospel lesson.

We tend to take children today and dress them up in designer clothes, put them into accelerated classes, and sports, and activities, and we set places for them at adult dinner parties.

We see and hear children today... Sort of...

I once remember hearing about a court case in which an attorney brought her five-month old daughter to a deposition and drove the opposing counsel nearly mad. The miffed attorney retaliated by filing a motion to “exclude the gurgling infant” from future depositions stating that the child's presence was distracting and unprofessional. His motion stated, “. . . precisely because the baby behaves normally for a baby.”

He lost, but his objections offer a reflection on how society today still puts limits on tolerating children.

True, children are innocent and playful and vulnerable.
They are honest, fresh-faced and loving,
especially if you are only around them for about fifteen minutes or so.

But if you spend any significant time with them,
you will also discover that the stained-glass image quickly shatters:
they are noisy, destructive, self-centered and can even be remarkably cruel.

The very best of them will pluck the whiskers right off the cat if you don't keep an eye on them. Or they will knock each other down and pitch a fit if another child tries to play with their toy.

The reality of children does not live up to the ideals we've placed in our cathedral windows.

In our gospel lesson today, Jesus wasn't holding children up as moral examples for us to follow when he took them in his arms and blessed them.

He didn't say we should imitate children after all.
He just said that when we welcome children in His name that we welcome Him.

And when we welcome Him, we welcome God.

Think about it. Do you want to spend some time with God? Then get down on the floor with the little ones. Parents and grandparents: Get finger paint everywhere even though you'll only have to clean it up later, laugh out loud at silly jokes you've already heard a million times, and never mind that you have better things to do with your time.

Our little ones are not the future of the Church. They are the now.
Being fully present to a child is being fully present to God.
And communion with God and one another is the whole reason we are here.

Opening yourself up to children is better for your soul than any unfinished laundry or half-written report – or a disturbance to your hearing this or any other sermon.
Children simply being present at Mass, no matter what their mood or behavior, is their age-appropriate worship of God. Their *real presence* among us breaks the images presented in our stained-glass, and we are better for it!

With children, there will be no payback,
at least not as our adult world views worth.
you cannot list any of them as job references
or ask them to lend you a hundred bucks to get your car fixed.
They aren't good for anything like that.
They are not in charge of anything.
They can't buy you anything.
They won't remember your birthday
or invite you out to supper with some friends.
They have no status, no influence and no income—
and that's what makes them great in God's eyes.
No status, no influence, no income: They are just what we need!

And you – are you able to work out your own greatness,
by understanding that it is what you do when you think no one is looking,
with someone who does not count, for no reward,
that ushers you into the presence of God?

Can you understand what Jesus is up to here
when he says to welcome a child is to welcome God?

It's another version of his "last shall be first" sort of twists that usually come as a big
surprise to those who think that they are on the top of the heap.

Jesus is daring us to welcome *those people* as bearers of God—to believe that God's hierarchy
is the reverse of ours and that greatness is only available to those with no ambition to be
great.

This whole lesson about greatness-and-children came about because Jesus caught the
disciples playing the game "Who's the greatest of them all?" on the road to Capernaum—
that is on the way to Jesus's passion. Jesus asked them what they were arguing about
on the way; I can imagine them feeling like they got caught passing notes in class.

No one said a word because they had been arguing, acting like children, about who was the
best—the most faithful, the most likely-to-succeed-disciple.

But why were they arguing? Because they were afraid of the truth.
They were afraid of the truth that Jesus was going to die and rise again.

That was the heart of the problem. They were arguing about who was greatest because they
could not stand what Jesus had said about being killed.

They did not understand and were afraid to ask.

So instead of dealing with reality, the disciples got as far as they could away from the thing that scared them—this thing they couldn't understand— and they played a game instead: The Greatness Game.

Who is first? Who is best? Who is greatest?

A game that made them feel big and powerful, even if only for a moment.

Our society suffers from a debilitating addiction to The Greatness Game.

The game goes like this, when you are scared of something, don't ask.

Act like there is nothing wrong.

Change the subject and talk about something else instead—
something to make you feel big and strong.

That's what the disciples were doing.

That is why Jesus had to sit them down
and give them a come-to-“me” meeting with them.

Jesus address The Greatness Game and said,

“Whoever wants to be first must be the last of all and servant of all.”

Jesus pierces through their avoidance games,
with a dose of humbling reality.

The disciples wanted to know who was greatest, so Jesus showed them—
twenty-six inches tall,
limited vocabulary,
unemployed,
zero net worth,
with a booger hanging out of her nose.
God's agent: the last, the least of all.

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Our society has changed. The place of the Church has changed.
People have walked away. People have died. New people have not come into replace them.
We don't understand why and we're afraid to ask. We think maybe there is a membership
crisis, and instead of looking for truth, we are playing the Greatness Game. It's time to put
the game aside.

The “membership crisis” is really a faith crisis, and it is much bigger than us.

It’s bigger than Trinity Cathedral,
it’s bigger than the Episcopal Church,
it’s bigger than American Christianity,
it’s bigger than anything we can handle.

And that being said, God is still in control. And we keep the faith—or as we prayed in the collect today: “not anxious about earthly things, ... [and rather] to hold fast to those [things] that shall endure.”

As individuals, we must abandon the fears that cause us to cling to what we think is “ours” – our property, our time, our security, our tradition – and accept that it’s not really about us and our personal greatness. We must be willing to let others into our lives who don’t seem to fit; we must radically reimagine who belongs to us—who is our neighbor and who is our family?

When it comes to the Church, our conversations about growth need to move away from our fear of not being what we used to be and our desire for a return-to-“greatness”. Rather, we must model greatness as it really looks in Jesus’s ministry. We can start by expanding our parochial center to include those with no status, no influence, and no income.

Why not start with children!

There’s nothing wrong with imagining the child in our Gospel story today as depicted in our windows...just as long as our image of that little child doesn’t exclude the people who don’t look like us.

Jesus doesn’t just hold the well-behaved child, or the white baby, but also the Black baby, the brown baby, the sick kid, the poor kid, and even the child who isn’t part of your own family but who may be making noise a few pews in front of you right now.

However we chose to organize our lives, we have little children to remind us about how God organizes things, and that if we want to welcome God into our lives then there is no one we may safely ignore or exclude.