

Need a Hug?

Sermon by Jan Wiersma

17th Sunday after Pentecost - September 19, 2021

Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

Texts: James 3:13-19, 4-8; Mark 9:30-37

James 3:13-18, 4:8

The letter of James is not addressed to a particular community as Paul's letters are, but to Jews living outside their homeland, as aliens resident in other lands. The short work is full of words of wisdom about living in peace with God and others, and caring for those who suffer.

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. Draw near to God, and God will draw near to you.

Mark 9:30-37

The past two Sundays, we have seen Jesus interacting with parents of children possessed, as it was thought, but unclean spirits: a "foreign" Syrian mother who challenged Jesus to change his mind about her, and a Jewish father surrounded by others in his community. Soon after, he again predicts his death and uses a child to teach what the disciples don't understand.

Jesus and his disciples went on from the place where he had healed the child and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; for 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." 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 in 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."

So, if you had just told a bunch of your best friends you'd been to the doctor and the doctor told you had a year to live, and then you'd go through an awful, painful death, what would you expect those friends to do? What would you want them to do? Me, I'd probably want a hug. I'd *need* a hug. Preferably a lot of them. No Hallmark cards, no medals for bravery. No words, even. Just some loving arms around me.

Jesus has told his disciples something even worse. Actually, it's the second time he's told them. He's going to be rejected and betrayed, and suffer and be killed. And then rise again, whatever that means. Did he get a hug? No, he did not. The first time Peter tries to argue with him. Peter says, "No way. I'm sure you're wrong about that." The second time, his friends just argue among themselves about which one of them is the greatest. Predictably, their thinking is all wrong; it's upside-down and backward. They should be thinking about the opposite of great.

And then Jesus shows them a parable. And the parable he shows them is a little child. Accompanied, unaccompanied, boy or girl, sick or well, we don't know. We just know the word Mark uses means "little," probably under five years old. Picture it. All these bearded fisher guys, with dusty feet and calloused hands, looking at some little kid, like, "Yeah, so?"

Remember that little children, though loved by their parents just as much then as they are now, didn't count for much in that society. They were the last and the least, they were the opposite of great. Three out of ten kids were going to die before the age of five, and quite a few more before they reached puberty. Investing in a child was a risk.

Jesus has just proved at least twice that he's willing to take that risk, by healing the children those two frantic parents brought him. He's asking the disciples if they're willing to do the same. Because after all, investing in him, in Jesus, and following him - a marked man - is a risk, too.

But this child is a great parable, because all of us should be able to identify with him or her. I mean, we haven't all been orphans or poor or refugees or people of color, or any of the usual categories. But we've all been children. I hope we all still are, in some way. I think this is important, because it's so easy to see ourselves as greater than the people we put in those categories. If you're the underdog, then I'm Alpha dog, right? You're the poor thing, and I'm your generous benefactor. Yuck! That's exactly the trap Jesus is telling the disciples to avoid.

If the disciples thought hanging out with Jesus was going to gain them money, power, and prestige, they had to think again. "Welcome a little child, and you welcome me," Jesus says. That child has no money to reward you with, and no medals to hang around your neck. If you make her part of your life, you're liable to end up investing a lot in her, a lot of time, money, and mental anguish. And for what? Is she worth the investment? I think most parents would say, "Are you kidding? Having my son or my daughter is the best thing I've ever done."

And it's also a mistake to assume children have nothing to give, or that what they give has no value. Anyone can buy a Hallmark card, but a handmade birthday card from a child who's just learned to make his letters is something you keep forever.

And then there are the hugs. A hug from a child who sees that you're sick or sad is like no other hug you'll ever get. I'll take one of those any day.

A friend of mine named Mike told the story this week of how for the very first time his 18-month-old granddaughter came to him and put out her arms to be held. Usually, he said, she turns to one of her parents, or to his wife, her grandma. This time she came straight to him. I know the feeling exactly, when a child comes to me for a hug. "Me? You want *me* to pick you up? Meltdown moment! *Be still my heart!*"

I had to contrast this with a story I heard on the radio this week, about the unaccompanied children crossing our southern border. Apparently they're running out of shelters in the southern states; governors have even shut some down, so the federal government is looking as far away as towns in Michigan. A woman in one town that's welcoming 200 kids reported, "We have been just overwhelmed with joy about the outpouring of support we've received." But citizens of another town have mounted a violent protest against a similar project, fearing it will funnel crime into the area. A Presbyterian pastor who herself supports the project said something I found very wise: "I have brought up how Jesus welcomed those who most of society turned away... [But] having seen some of the yelling and the anger and the hate, it makes me question if this would be welcoming for somebody who's a person of color."¹ Or a child? Personally, I hope they don't send any children there. But I think their hearts and homes will be poorer for refusing.

Notice that Jesus didn't just point to the child who was his parable; he didn't treat the small person like an inanimate object; he actually gathered them into his arms and hugged them; *then* he said, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me." But he went on, "and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

Maybe it was Jesus, who was sad, who really needed the hug, thinking about his death coming up and all. A hug his disciples *didn't* give him. Has it ever occurred to you that the one who sent him might need a hug sometimes, too? I hadn't thought of it that way, but my friend Mike did. As he held his granddaughter tight, he thought how good it felt that she came to him for nurture and comfort. He went on, "I saw that we do the same thing when we turn to God for help. I've heard that God grieves with us when we are in difficulties. Less often spoken of is that we can make God happy. Behaving as we ought is one way, as is gratitude. Another is our heartfelt cries

¹ <https://www.npr.org/2021/09/14/1036867517/immigration-fight-disrupts-michigan-town>

for guidance and comfort. How different our lives might be if we went about aware that we had the opportunity to make God happy, moment to moment and day by day.”²

These days as I drive around town, I see a welcome sight: kids on their way to school. They’re out there skipping along the sidewalk so cheerfully, with their little backpacks full of books and things, and their little masks on. I see the older children, the very serious crossing guards, shepherding the smaller ones safely across the street. I see parents and grandparents walking with the youngest, holding them by the hand. The whole picture is a parable of all the ways we’re investing in those children, every one of them. And it feels like a hug to me. A hug I really needed.

I’ll bet it feels like a hug to God, too. Amen. Thanks be to God.

Prayers

God of all good gifts, you have given us the most precious gift of all in our children, our future, the promise of generations to come. Help us to invest our best resources in them, and in all the things that ensure a hopeful world for them to inhabit: safe schools, inspiring teachers, a protected climate, untouched wilderness, freedom from war and want and illness.

We see so much in our world that is not right: fierce weather patterns, destructive fires, animosity and competition among groups, people fleeing their homes for all these reasons. When we feel we have no control, grant us the serenity to accept the things we cannot change, the courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to know the difference.

When the ongoing threat of covid makes us wary of one another, afraid of touch, remind us to do whatever is in our power to protect the vulnerable, relieve the burden of caregivers, educate the hesitant, and offer virtual hugs where our arms do not reach.

We pray for those close to our hearts, for those who mourn, and for all who face challenges of body, mind, or spirit.

As Jesus taught his friends, so now we pray, “Our Father...”

² For this story, I thank my friend Mike Resman, who blogged it for a Quaker publication called “What Canst Thou Say?”