“Invisible” Children And Others – Judy Cox

Proverbs 31:10-31; Psalm 1; James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a; Mark 9:30-37

Have you heard of the organization “Invisible Children”? They’re still around! Committed to the value of ALL human life, they seek to end Central African violence against children by rebel groups and human traffickers. By documenting human rights abuses to bring international awareness and action, along with on-the-ground development, they try to “make visible” the children still being kidnapped, trafficked and forced to become child soldiers by the LRA and others—18 children in this last month of 2018 alone. Although this organization might not claim it, their name, “Invisible Children,” could have come from our text in Mark today!

We’re “on the way” with Jesus and the disciples in this middle section of Mark. The Way is not as clearly marked as we’d like—the disciples are kicking ups clouds of dust that block our view. Jesus is trying for the second time to have a heart-to-heart with them, speaking clearly and straightforwardly about his coming suffering, death and resurrection. They continue not understanding!

Between last week’s text and this one falls the Transfiguration. True to its purpose, to expose the worshipping church to as much of Scripture as possible in three years of Sundays, the lectionary skips over this passage from Transfiguration Sunday in February. In that Transfiguration, as in the opening chapter of this gospel, the voice of God has validated Jesus. The privileged three, taken up the mountain with him, have seen him in glory between Moses (representing the Law) and Elijah (the Prophets); they’ve heard God endorse this Jesus who just redefined Messiah for them, saying, “Listen to him!!!”

Jesus has come back down the mountain, down not only to the conflict of a difficult exorcism, but also, ultimately, to his death. In that exorcism conflict the disciples’ shortcomings have been exposed yet again—regarding both unbelief and prayerlessness. And so we come to today’s passage.

Jesus has gone under the radar to find a safe teaching environment. *He was teaching his disciples, telling them:* *The Son of Man is to be given over into the hands of men, and they will kill him; and when he has been killed, he will rise three days later.* They still do not understand this statement; they continue to miss Jesus’ vocation of self-sacrifice, even to suffering and death, and their own similar calling as his followers.

Last week Elizabeth unpacked for us Jesus’ rebuke of Peter, *Get behind me, Satan!* Are the disciples now afraid to ask, avoiding a rebuke like Peter drew? If so, we might think at least they’ve learned something! Or are Jesus’ more recent comments about their lack of faith and prayer still stinging? On the other hand, they might be “looking at the pyramids, with their socks wet”—knee-deep in denial, as the saying goes … After all, who wants to follow someone heading for death, even if he’s afterward “rising from the dead” (whatever that means!)?

We can wonder about what’s going on inside the fearful disciples, but we don’t really know. If they’ve learned something, it’s not much. That kicking up dust on the Way has been a maneuvering for position; their conversation has focused on which of them is the greatest! When you consider the context, it makes all sorts of sense. Only Peter, James and John accompanied Jesus up the mountain—how do YOU think the topic of “who is the greatest” might have come up??? Was Peter boasting? Were the brothers acting superior? Did they all assume that Jesus had established a disciples’ pecking order, with these three at the top?

You know “pecking order,” right? That phrase comes from farm life, from people observing “dominance behavior” in chickens, how they peck one another, based on who’s the boss in the flock, who’s next most important, down to the least important—who gets pecked, picked on by everyone else! Sociologists call this “a hierarchical system of social organization” and you know, when you think about it, that our human societies are all about hierarchies of who’s most important and “pecking order” too!

So…were they all automatically assuming that Jesus, by inviting just three up the mountain, was setting up a pecking order, an order of importance within the group of disciples? You can imagine the temptation of the nine left behind—who may have felt singled out by the rebuke regarding unbelief and prayerlessness—coming back with, “Yeah, well, you think you’re so great, but we all remember who got called Satan!” It could have gotten pretty ugly.

So when Jesus asks, “*What were you arguing about on the way*?” they fall silent. Apparently they do have the grace to be embarrassed—at least some awareness that this attitude might call down more rebuke.

Jesus sits down—a position of authority—and calls them around him. He continues to unpack for them what the expectations will be for the followers of THIS Messiah. *If* anyone *wishes to be first,* she will be/he *must be last of all, and* one who tends to all, a minister to all, *servant of all.*

So they were right to be silent, to be embarrassed. He’s taking, “I’m the greatest” out of their vocabulary. This could mean two very different things: on the one hand, could the one who desires to be first and most important find herself exposed as having this attitude, in last place? In my Mom’s Southern vocabulary, she’d be “the old horse’s tail!” Or does it mean that to achieve a place of true Kingdom honor in this new world order, he’ll need a change of heart and priorities, a willingness to forego that very desire, and instead humbly take last place? Well… yes!

And being “last” is explained further too—you’ll be the one who tends to all the others, looks out for them, ministers to them. The Kingdom of God is about SERVING order, not pecking order!

Then Jesus takes a child and sets **it** before them. In Greek, as in other languages, a child is an “it,” not a “who.” So too their culture; this was no romantic Victorian sentimentality about the sweet trusting innocence of children, but a complete redefining of a value system that’s about status and power—a “pecking order” of honor (or importance) and shame (what makes you less important). (I’m way oversimplifying the “shame-and-honor” system here, but you get the general idea.)

Children had no honor, no status. They did carry on the family name, growing up to be their parents’ retirement insurance in producing ongoing generations to support them—think reproductive pyramid scheme as retirement strategy! In a society with high infant and childhood mortality, realistically if cruelly speaking, a child was a risky investment, a liability with little immediate return in productivity for the investment of care and food. A child would have the lowest status in the household, in an insecure position—equal to slaves in powerlessness, worth even less than slaves in productivity, with some long-term (although risky) potential for the family perhaps counterbalancing. Like a slave, a child had absolutely no honor; from the point of view of that pecking order, “nothing’s in it for me” for associating with a child, except being thought foolish. Anthropologically speaking, children were insiders left on the outside until they survived to “usefulness.”

Notice that Jesus doesn’t just “take” this child, he embraces it—he doesn’t just identify it, but identifies WITH it. His words make that explicit. *Whoever receives one child like this in my name receives me!*—and not just me, but the One Who sent me, the Father I represent!

These are the ones Jesus commands his followers to welcome. So this is not just about greatness, but about its opposite, vulnerability—the result of insignificance, defenselessness, and unimportance. Not just uncleanness, but vulnerability too, is “contagious” in their culture; with a child, as with others on the margins before, Jesus embraces and accepts that vulnerability. He calls the disciples to do so as well. In welcoming the children, they welcome those the world calls unimportant and mistreats as vulnerable—and become vulnerable themselves; they vest themselves in those “high-risk” investments.

Once again the lectionary brings us to the book of James as a perfect conversation partner for our gospel passage. Listen to the way James exposes the power-hungry, self-centered, “me first” attitudes of the “pecking order”: *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.*

James continues, contrasting the opposing, true, wisdom of God’s Kingdom as *pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.* Verses the lectionary omits highlight this contrast: *Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. …“God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.”*

James commends to us spiritual practices, to help us follow humbly after God’s wisdom, instead of the false “wisdom”: *Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.* *Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.*

And our next question is: “But HOW then do we draw near to God?”

Wait for it, think about it. … Do you see how Jesus has already answered that question in our gospel today? *Whoever welcomes one such child in my name* ***welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me****.* How do we draw near to God? By seeing, welcoming, and thereby embracing God in Christ, in the vulnerable little ones among us!

Jesus calls us along with the disciples. In welcoming the children, WE welcome the vulnerable, and become so ourselves; WE vest ourselves in “high-risk” investments. We are called to see Jesus, vulnerable Messiah, in them, and to stand with them AND him. …

Do we? Do we see the children who went to bed hungry or need healthcare? The children who have abusive parents or no parents, lost in our foster care system (especially in this county, where we don’t have enough foster homes)? We rightly condemn the uneven, unfair funding of schools in our country; in our global village, children in areas like Zambia, and Kurdistan, have no access to schools at all. How do we actively welcome the child? How do we welcome our Lord?

Who else does our world disregard to the point of invisibility? We have a “Black Lives Matter” sign in our yard precisely because we confess and lament how our society tells some that their lives don’t matter. There’s a beautiful timing in these texts on this Sunday; soon we’ll be hearing and commissioning our own to stand with and serve the unseen and vulnerable in their own particular setting, to say in their own particular way, “Yes, you DO matter!”

What of the invisible and vulnerable among us, in our church, the insiders that we leave on the outside, whatever their age? Yes, the invisible and vulnerable also move on the margins of the Body of Christ. Whom do we disregard? The LGBTQ community? The “conservatives”? The “liberals”? Those who struggle with mental health issues? May the Holy Spirit show each of us how we too might be tempted to write off another more as an “it” than a “who”! Christ comes to us in each of them. Do we truly make them welcome in our lives, in our church? Or do we keep them comfortably at the margins of our groups, or the bottom of a “pecking order,” where we don’t really have to “see” them? Jesus makes it very clear that in welcoming them we actively welcome him AND the One Who sent him. We can’t escape it—God really does especially favor the powerless, the invisible, the vulnerable!

Mother Teresa might come to mind at these words; she famously spoke of seeing in the poor “Jesus in his distressing disguise.” She helped them knowing not just that it was the “right thing to do” but that in serving others she actually served Jesus himself.

Brandon Vogt, in his book Saints and Social Justice, discusses her much less famous explanation of what trained her eyes to see Jesus in others—and we of St. Paul’s, coming out of weeks in John 6, are especially prepared to hear this. It was “seeing Christ in the Eucharist,” recognizing, meeting, partaking of him in Communion, that “enabled her to see him on the streets! … Whether in the chapel or the slums, the pew or the hospital, she recognized the Lord everywhere she went because she trained herself each morning at the altar.”

So as we come to the Table of the Lord this morning, we come seeking not only to receive Christ, but also to learn to recognize him. And we will begin, by grace given us at this Table, to recognize him in “invisible”, vulnerable people wherever we go.