
Children, It Is Not A Contest!

A sermon by the Very Rev. Sam Candler
The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 20, Year B

Jesus said, "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." Mark 9:35–37

I love preaching and presiding in this great church. Thank you for letting me serve in this great place!

However, as some of you who sit in the back know, when I am not scheduled to be here, and when I am supposed to be away, I sometimes show up anyway. When I do, I like to sit in the back. I urge people to sit towards the front! But I admit that I like to sit in the back. I like to lead and love this parish from among the congregation – not from up front, where most of us think the action is. But from out in the congregation, where the people of God are. That is where the action is. You are where the action is!

The secret of good liturgy, good congregational worship, I have been telling our priests for some time, is not simply around the altar, nor in the pulpit, but everywhere in this room. Out there! Out in the people. In the hearts and souls of people.

So, I love, absolutely love, coming to church here and being in the pew. During the 8:45 service, a few Sundays ago, I sat in the last pew.

Do you know what I saw? I saw children. Many of them had adults with them! I loved again how this place is energized by children.

I can delightfully report that I saw no one being unkind, or intolerant, or impatient, with the children. I am truly puzzled when I hear adults get impatient with children in church. These are the same adults who pray solemnly that they are "children of God." They like that phrase devotionally. But when they are around actual children, they get impatient and intolerant. They even flee. But I did not see any of that.

No, if we are children of God, then we have to worship and enjoy actual children, too!

Jesus found out one day that his disciples, his closest followers, had been arguing about something most faithful people would consider childish and immature. They were arguing about who was the greatest. Now, it's one thing to be in a sports bar and arguing that the Atlanta Braves are the greatest – because, of course, they are! (Except for this year). But it's another thing entirely to be claiming that for oneself. When people talk about how great they themselves are, they easily become boorish and obnoxious to most other people.

And, of course, such braggadocio and narcissism is completely against what Jesus would say. Those of us who come to church have heard this plenty of times by now: Jesus said that "the one who wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." Great? The greatest among you is the one who serves!

So, when Jesus heard about his disciples arguing about who was the greatest, he performed one of the greatest "object lessons" in the Bible. He took a child and placed the child in the middle of the disciples' gathering. Now, that action indicates several lessons for us. For one, it indicates that there was at least one child hanging around the crowd! Where did that child come from? Well, children were among those hanging around Jesus.

Another lesson might be this: Maybe Jesus considered that all this braggadocio about who was the greatest was pretty childish behavior. The bragging meant that the disciples were acting like children. Jesus might have been showing the disciples that they were acting like children, by placing a child in the midst of them.

But, then again, maybe that's not exactly it.

It may be that children really are the greatest. It may be that every child, every child, is the greatest!

I don't mind it when new parents say that their newborn child is the cutest baby ever. I don't mind it when a mother says her son is the greatest child. I don't mind it when a father says his daughter is the greatest child. I don't mind it when grandparents say their grandchildren are the greatest.

Because they are.

Children become the greatest when we pay attention to them. When we pay attention to them, children become great! When we love them! And it's the same with people. People become great when we pay attention to them. When we love them. When we treat them as if no one else, and nothing else, is demanding our attention.

It is not a *contest*!

That's what Jesus was trying to tell his disciples. Life itself is not a contest. Life is not a competition to see who is the greatest. We do our children a disservice if we treat them, and if we treat life, that way. It's not a *contest*.

You, individually, you, really are wonderful right where you are, and right who you are. You matter. God pays attention to us one at a time, and that attention is powerful.

But, of course, here's the thing. God says the same thing to everyone else! It's not just us, individually, who matter. But so does the person sitting next to us. And you, and you, and you.

You are the greatest, too! Not just me, but you, too.

Hey, you! You in the so-called back of the church! You are the greatest! And so are you, up here in the other back of the church.

It does no good to argue about who is the greatest, unless we agree, with Jesus, that everyone is the greatest.

Children teach us that. Children teach us that every day. When the disciples were arguing about who was the greatest, Jesus took a little child and placed it among them. Welcome children, welcome Jesus. Thank you, children. You can be among us any day!

AMEN.

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip