

Children are great teachers. An anonymous author has made a list of some things you don't know until you have kids. For example, without kids you wouldn't know:

- How to change a diaper in the dark, in a parked car, on a standing child, and all of the above simultaneously...
- You wouldn't know which lines of "The Cat in the Hat" and "If I Ran the Circus" can be skipped over without a child noticing.
- Or the locations of public restrooms all across town.
- Or how little sleep a human body truly needs to function.
- You wouldn't know almost every Disney lyric ever penned. Bippety Boppety, bippety boppety boo!
- Or why they call them HAPPY MEALS.
- Or the blessedness of naps. And finally, without children, you wouldn't know how much you can love one human being. (adapted from DYNAMIC PREACHING, July-September 2018, p. 77)

I don't want to shock you but first, I'd like to do some background on the gospel text. This passage is part of a major section of Mark (8:22-10:52), in which we find Jesus predicting His passion, death and resurrection three times. Each time the disciples don't understand. And each time Jesus teaches about the significance of His messiahship. The term He uses – 'Son of Man' is from the Book of Daniel (7:13) and that term was associated with a mighty figure full of power. But Jesus uses it in a very different way than they expect – in terms of failure, a victim of evil people. He connects this figure with suffering and death – and resurrection. And twice in this section Jesus criticizes His disciples for their lack of understanding (7:18; 8:16-21), even calling Peter a Satan in last week's gospel. "You are not thinking God's thoughts but human thoughts." Peter's misunderstanding of Jesus is downright satanic. This is an important thing for us to remember in this day of bloggers and theology found on the internet. Some of it is very good. A lot of it is extremely poor. A lot of people who don't know much theology try to come off as experts, but they are often confused, and they tend to lead others astray. It's not the first time that Jesus' followers act in a satanic way – Peter was the first! One of the reasons why we come to church and pray together and struggle to sit through boring three point homilies is that we want to know our faith and just how rich and beautiful it is. We want to get the facts straight about the Christian faith. The reality is that is a lot of confusion in the world about Christianity. We can understand how the world – people who don't go to church and have never heard a sermon – might be confused about the faith.

By the time we get to verse 34, we see that the disciples have given up trying to understand Jesus and have begun to argue with one another about rank and status. We sense the irony of Jesus talking about His own suffering while His disciples bicker over their status. How quickly the disciples move from pondering, "Who are you, Jesus?" to "What's in it for me?" We can see that we haven't come very far as a church all these years later.....(adapted from Willimon, PULPIT RESOURCE, p 39-40, July-Sept 2018)

Second, so where does this leave us? We need to remember that Mark told us up front at the beginning of this Gospel that He was presenting us Jesus Christ, the Messiah, God's Son. And we, like the disciples, thought we knew what that meant. We often think that Jesus came to fix what's wrong with our world, that He is the answer to all of our problems. Jesus is supposed to be the fulfillment of our hearts' desires. Not so fast. He is the one who is betrayed, suffers, and dies. And we are to follow in His footsteps. If

we are ever at all serious about being a disciple of Christ -- it's not the cruise many think they signed up for. We need to simply check our stewardship -- our gifts of time, talent and treasure -- to quickly reveal how seriously -- or not -- we take our following of Christ. The fact that over half of the parish gives zero on weekends indicates that there is a lot of dead weight; people who do not take their baptism seriously. Good luck with picking up the cross and following Christ's footsteps.

Even though we trace the sign of the cross on the forehead of every person who is ever baptized, we still don't get it very well. We make the cross when we dip our fingers in the holy water font as a reminder of this. We begin and end the mass with the sign of the cross. The life of a disciple is marked by the cross -- but we'd rather argue about theology than deal with this challenge about how we are actually going to LIVE OUT this life of discipleship. We've so often made our faith about getting the words right. But it's about getting the ACTIONS right. The words don't count for much if they are not backed up by action. It was the point the letter of James made last week: "Faith without works is dead." If we are not becoming more loving, forgiving, compassionate, understanding, kind, generous, then we have no clue about why we are followers of Christ.

Third, the key to this passage is there in Jesus' embrace of the child. We shouldn't get too sentimental thinking about this. In Jesus' time, children were of no value. It was common in the Roman and Greek cultures to abandon unwanted children along the side of the road, where they were left to die. They were the most vulnerable members of society and had no protection. And Jesus drove the point home: "Whoever receives one child such as this in my name, receives me; and whoever receives me, receives not me but the One who sent me." It is the same message He will give in Matthew 25: "As long as you did it for one of these least ones, you did it FOR ME." But we'd rather argue about immigration laws than do as Christ commanded. It's a lot easier -- and we feel like it leaves us off the hook. But Christ's words are the standard for us, not laws that protect our state of privilege and ignore the needs of our poor brothers and sisters.

So we circle back once again to the fact that our faith must be lived out. Forget about arguing about the words -- leave that to the professionals -- and I don't mean me! I'm an amateur in trying to figure this stuff out. But we can all get the fact that Christianity is about love. Following Jesus is about love. Being a disciple is about love. I just happen to be working through a book by Mark Nepo. And of course, this weekend's readings were in the back of my mind when I came upon these words he had penned, which serve as a fitting summary of this gospel and what I am trying to say. He writes: "Everyone alive embodies both being and doing. The wind we create by running is the energy of becoming, and the wind that comes to us by stilling ourselves is the energy of being. Being human, there are endless times we need to be still and as many times that we need to move. But much of our confusion as modern citizens comes from trying to have the one we are more comfortable with substitute for the other.

Those of us who struggle with being still often can't find the native wind, while those of us uncomfortable with living in the world can retreat into a stillness that is open but often void of the energy of living.

Yet these concerns are more seamless than how we tend to discuss them. My godson Eli captured the oneness of being and becoming when going for a walk the autumn he was six. He and his father were standing in an open field bordered with maples and willows when a wind lifted through. It so excited Eli that he began to twirl and spin and run with his arms wide through the brightened trees. Out of breath and stunned, he tugged at his father's sleeve, exclaiming, "Daddy! Daddy! If you run too fast, you can't tell what's real!"

I love that – if we run TOO fast, we can't tell what's real. If we don't engage – if we don't run at all – we're dead. We need both prayer and action. We just can't come to mass and say that we are a good Catholic. Because sitting in church on Sundays doesn't make us Catholic anymore than sitting in a garage makes us a car! Amazingly, there is great insight in children. And great innocence. They carry a wisdom they often live but seldom know. Ironically, we spend our lives trying to regain that treasured state, where being and doing are inseparably one." (adapted from THE BOOK OF AWAKENING, p. 329-330)

Whoever welcomes one child – one illegal immigrant, poor person, beggar, sinner, lost soul, Republican, Democrat, conservative, liberal, pick your category – whoever welcomes them in my name, receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me, but the ONE who sent me. Let the Church say AMEN.