

“God’s Child”

A couple of weeks ago, before our daughter left for her last year of college, Lee and I made plans for a special family dinner at a restaurant we had never tried in downtown Asheville. The kids met us there and we sat outside on a patio that was separated from the street traffic by a simple iron fence. The food was good, but the whole evening felt a little “off”—and it wasn’t hard to figure out why. A small group of men and women who appeared to be homeless had gathered just on the other side of the fence under the shade of a tree. A gifted street musician was playing nearby, and from time to time the woman shimmied beautifully in rhythm to the music—but some of the conversation had an agitated pace and tempers were short on that warm evening. Intermittent arguing eventually escalated to the point that something was thrown and the police had to be called to sort things out. All the while our family ate dinner a few yards away. We tried to make conversation but ultimately acknowledged that it felt wrong to have people who could afford an expensive dinner on one side of the fence and people who couldn’t on the other.

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The disciples ask Jesus who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. They want to know who is at the center of power in God’s realm. Jesus has just told them, for the second time, that he will die after they arrive in Jerusalem, and it may be that the disciples are asking who is going to be in charge after he’s gone. But at any rate, their question seems to imply that they know that they are “insiders”—they just don’t know who’s the top dog.

The way that Tom Long envisions this scene [*Matthew*, 1997 WJK Press, 204-205], it is as though the disciples have drawn a circle in the sand—a circle that represents God’s reign, God’s family—The disciples are clearly standing inside the circle, but they want to know who ought to stand in the middle.

Jesus responds by reaching outside the circle—or the fence—and inviting a child into the center—a vulnerable, no account child. Suddenly the disciples find themselves on the outside, needing to become like the child in order to find their place in God’s order.

Why a child? Scholars tell us that in the first century probably 30% of children died at birth; another 30% probably were gone before they turned 6 [*Malina and Rohrbaugh, Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, 117]. Those are hard odds. Children were vulnerable and they were

powerless in a culture in which they had no legal standing until they became adults. They were without status, and they were at risk in ways we can only begin to imagine.

But Matthew tells us Jesus *called* that child—and *called* is a freighted verb in Matthew's gospel. Jesus *calls* the disciples. He *calls* the crowd. When Jesus calls, it is for a purpose. He calls the crowd to listen; he calls the disciples to heal and feed and confront evil. What does he call the child to do?

He calls the child to *stand among them—simply to be in their presence*. That's where Jesus' call to his disciples always begins—with “Come and be with me.”

Jesus says to the disciples, in effect, if you really mean to serve God, you have to quit seeking status and security. You have to turn and become humble—but humble may not mean what we think. The word *humble* is related to the word *humus*—the word for soil. To be humble is to be grounded. It is to know where we came from and where we are going. It doesn't mean that we are *less* than others—it means that *we don't have to be preoccupied with ourselves*. We know to whom we belong.

To be humble is to be grounded in right relationship. It means to know both that we are limited and that we are loved. To be humble is to acknowledge in a deep way that each of us is no more *and no less* than a child—a child of God.

On the days we can remember that truth, it becomes much easier to welcome others in the name of Jesus. Jesus says when we welcome *little ones*—when we welcome those whom the world *belittles*, we are at the same time, welcoming him.

Tom Long puts it this way: “*No one stands in the middle of the circle, no one has the status of “great” in the kingdom of heaven who has not felt the sting of being on the outside, who does not realize that being inside the circle is a matter of mercy and not merit. When it comes to the kingdom of heaven, we are all outsiders. We have all stood like orphans in the dark and cold, pressing our noses against the window, only to have the door of the kingdom open and the master's gentle hand beckon us forward into the warmth of the hearth and the bounty of the table.*” [Matthew, 1997 WJK Press, 204-205]

In a world left to its own devices, there's a lot of jockeying for power and prestige—whether the context is the middle school cafeteria, or the workplace, or the family system. Jesus calls us to a different kind of life.

I remember years ago my friend Carol telling me how she first became interested in the man who would become her husband. They were in their first year of college and there was to be a mixer between a men's hall and a women's hall. A few weeks prior to the party, each male student drew a name out of a hat, in order to determine which female student he would invite. One of the female students—I will call her Lisa—was not perceived to be very attractive—she was outside the circle—and the man who drew her name refused to invite her to be his date. Dave immediately offered to switch places with the man.

As soon as she heard the story, Carol knew that Dave was a man worth getting to know. Dave knew his call was to welcome those who are *belittled* or demeaned by the world—Carol thought she could share her life with someone who had that kind of heart.

She has not been disappointed.

Every day we are reminded of our own humanity; every day we have opportunities to welcome others who feel belittled by the world. Jesus says, “It is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones be lost.” If we had read just a few verses further in Matthew's gospel we would have realized that Jesus made that switch in vocabulary. He went from talking about children, to talking about “little ones”—which seems to be a bigger category—it seems to include everyone who is marginalized in the halls of power, in the congregations of the beautiful, at the tables of the rich.

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The night I mentioned earlier—the night we had dinner with our kids in Asheville—Lee and I had an interesting encounter on the way to the restaurant.

We had finally found a place to park a few blocks from the restaurant and had just crossed the street, when we came alongside a man with a bright red shirt and neatly cropped hair. He caught our eye and launched a conversation by asking a harmless riddle. We supplied the obvious punch line. Then, having warmed us up, he quickly followed with a request for enough money to buy a sandwich. Clearly, this was a regular—and an effective—routine for him. But something made this encounter different than it might otherwise have been. I recognized the

man. So I said, “I think I’ve seen you at worship on Wednesdays at Haywood Street.” “Yeah,” he said, grinning, “I volunteer there a lot.”

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Some of you may know about Wednesdays at the Haywood Street congregation. Though I don’t get there often, it’s one of the places that helps me to stay grounded.

A few years ago a young Methodist pastor by the name of Brian Combs found his way to Asheville. He spent nearly two years getting to know the folks who hang out in Pritchard Park and under the bridges. He kept asking them, “If you were going to go to church, what would you want for that church to be like? Here’s what he heard in response. *“People are always telling us to be quiet—and to move along; so we want a place where we it’s okay for us to make noise—to move around and be seen. And we don’t want to just sit there; we want to help lead what happens. We have places to go on Sundays—what we need is something to do in the middle of the week and in the middle of the day, when we’re struggling with our addictions. And we don’t want other people just to feed us. Everyone should work together and everyone should eat together. We don’t just want to be helped, we want to help other people, too.”* And so the Haywood Street congregation was born.

Brian was given the keys to an empty church building that sits at the junction of Haywood and 240. The fellowship hall became a place where 400 people are sometimes fed in two shifts on Wednesdays and the sanctuary became a place that often fills up at 12:30, with folks from every walk of life.

Sermons are conversational and boisterous, the organist is a man who was once homeless, himself. Each portion of the service is led by a different person. The offertory prayer acknowledges that some in the congregation have the desire to give but nothing in their pockets. And the prayers of the people are like nothing I’ve ever heard. Scattered on all the pews are homemade noisemakers: mostly empty plastic bottles with dried beans or plastic beads in them. When someone shares a prayer request, we all shake our bottles as a noisy way of saying *Amen—So be it—God bless you*. We pray for work to do and help facing addiction, we pray for troubled relationships and give thanks for those who have died, we pray for friends who are in prison and for folks we’ve just met. There’s a lot of noise when someone shares that he or she has gotten a job, or housing, or if a family member has reached out after a long silence. Children and dogs

wander around while we pray, and every week there is communion. Anyone who feels led can bring the bread and the cup up to the front. And the hands that offer the body and blood of Christ to you may or may not have been recently washed. We often sing hymns my grandmother used to play on her piano, but we always close with a song you might have heard on the radio in the last decade or two, though the genre is not predictable—it might be country, it might be the Rolling Stones. I hear those songs differently in the context of worship. We all try to sing along—sometimes a little dancing breaks out.

And the place keeps morphing as different gifts are offered. During the week, you can exchange dirty clothes for clean ones. You can get a haircut or sign-up to work on a Habitat house. Some of the best restaurants in Asheville fix lunch on Wednesdays—Trader Joes provides the flowers. There's a garden on the property where fresh food is grown. Recently a respite center opened because neighbors who are homeless often don't have anywhere to go when they get discharged from the hospital after surgery or illness.

There's always more work to be done than you can imagine. Life together is messy and there are plenty of growing pains, but if you keep coming you see changes in your brothers and sisters as their confidence grows and their gifts are received in community. Visitors often say that it looks more like the kingdom of God than anything else they've experienced.

Jesus called a child, whom he put among them, and said, *“Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.”*

What shifted my relationship with the riddler in the red shirt when I encountered him on the street in Asheville, was to know that there was no line, no fence between us. He had stood outside and welcomed me to the Haywood Street congregation—he had offered me communion. It was Jesus' face under that close cropped hair—and I needed to know that the words I spoke in response also had the potential to be Jesus' assurance of welcome to him.

The author and Lutheran pastor, Nadia Bolz Weber, puts it this way:  
*“That’s the problem with the whole concept of grace....It can both sting and comfort.” She goes on, “my own fundamentalist wiring will always lead me to want two sets of labeled containers...Bad...and Good....I might always put people and things in those containers, but the problem comes when I start believing that God uses the same sorting system.*

*[My husband] once said to me, after one of my more finely worded rants about stupid people who have the wrong opinions, ‘Nadia, the thing...is that every time we draw a line between us and others, Jesus is always on the other side of it.’” [Nadia Bolz Weber, *Pastrix*, 57]*

Will you pray with me?

Endlessly merciful God,

We pray for those who are on the other side of whatever lines we draw—in our families, in your Church, in this nation, in the world—as we pray for our own divided hearts. Tear down the walls that separate us, until we see your reflection in all who are strange to us.

For we pray in the name of Jesus, who knew no strangers—