

Reading – Matthew 18:1-5 -

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, 'Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?' He 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.'

Reflection - Claire

Well this is a very human scene. The disciples are arguing about who is the greatest. Never mind 'who puts themselves first will be last' and all that jazz, the disciples want to know who is the *greatest* disciple – so utterly human. And into this argument Jesus calls a child and places him or her into the midst of it all.

Jesus places the child in our midst.

There's debate about whether the child is actual or metaphorical. There's debate about the dire warning that follows and if it is for those who corrupt or hurt any vulnerable person or just children. None of this is important this morning. This morning, we are asking what does it look like for a child to be placed front and centre in our midst, drawing upon all of the ideas we collected already?

We've had a vote this morning on an important aspect of our church's vision and life. You might think it's just an outreach project but what you've done is work through a definition of mission, you've acknowledged in a different way the working relationship between this worship service and the mission portfolio, and you've listened to each other as you engaged in theological reflection. And into this process, we placed the child in the midst because everyone was given the chance to speak and to be heard.

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Children are a difficult beast. They're unpredictable. We're not quite sure what they're going to do or say next, even the quiet ones, the ones who always do as they're told. There's a picture of Princess Anne's daughter as a small child on the balcony of Buckingham Palace at one of the royal weddings. She was a bridesmaid and she's standing in front of the bride in full view of millions of people around the world and what is she doing? She's picking her nose.

Unpredictable. Never quite sure what's going to happen next with children. The old rule of showbusiness was always never work with

children or animals. Adults apparently can be controlled – they’ve obviously never worked with a church organist.

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Last week Tyler read the psalm at the service. Tyler was clapped when he read. Ken read too but Ken wasn’t clapped when he read. What’s going on there? I know Tyler was clapped because people wanted to encourage him and because you know Tyler well and you would have known how long it took him to practice those words. The clapping came from a place of love.

Tyler was leading us in a prayer. He was leading *his* community of faith just as I lead, as Tanya leads, as Jess leads, as any one of us does. I’m not saying it’s wrong to clap him and I don’t want anyone to leave here today thinking they’ve been told off for something. I want you to think about other ways of encouraging young people like Tyler. First of all, ask yourselves why you clapped Tyler and not Elaine who read the same psalm today. But also, ask yourself how can I encourage not only young people but all people to perhaps lead in some way. Challenge yourself, ask yourself that question.

Jesus places the child in our midst.

This last week has been child safety week. These weeks are about raising awareness of issues amongst the community. The safety of all our members, and all those with whom we come into contact, is paramount. The culture of safety in the Uniting Church is about ensuring the safety of all people. But equally we know now the truth of child abuse. We know our own Uniting Church has not been innocent here – we have stories and survivors, and we know that those who come forward and are able to tell their stories at this time, these are only a percentage of those who have been hurt.

Jesus places the child in our midst.

Finally, our video clip which Elaine sent through during the week for me and Lucas to use today. Here are professionals telling us that we don't know the impact detention has on children because the research simply isn't there. That says so much about how we as a nation are treating a group of vulnerable people. I'm not suggesting the solution is easy, but the solution isn't that. On Nauru, we have a cohort of children who will likely to grow up to be developmentally delayed, psychologically damaged.

Jesus places the child in our midst.

Children can be a pain and a nuisance. When we are trying to concentrate, trying to get something done, they make noise, they distract, we have to occupy them. In church, it's a pain when someone is reading or praying and a kid starts to get restless and starts shouting and drowns them out. Or in some churches with huge cavernous roofs, they discover their voices echo – that's fun. It's hard to concentrate, it breaks our focus. It's hard when you're experiencing hearing loss and you get a kid with a high pitched screech sitting right next to you. It's also hard when you have never had children, or you don't have grandchildren and you aren't used to the unpredictability of small people. You're out of practice. It's hard.

But what is a faith community if it isn't everyone gathering together? Older people can be a pain too. I can be a pain. Whistling hearing aids, mobile phones going off. When people come out of services, it annoys me when they say 'I didn't get anything from that' as if worship is to meet their needs. Who is worship for again?!! I don't like every song I've sung at family@10 and I don't like every single song I've sung at Fellowship or the Grove either. Remember I said last week it's not about me? Worship is not about my needs being met. Worship is about everyone taking part in order to worship God. Why are we gathering as a community of faith to worship God if we aren't gathering the whole community, however challenging that is?

Jesus places the child in our midst.

It's easy to idolise children. They represent what we should be – pure, kind, spiritually aware, focusing on what's important in life. But they can be brutal too. Children can be awful to each other. If you've ever had a child bullied by another child, it beggars belief what some will do to others. Children are as diverse as adults.

Jesus places the child in our midst.

Let's turn now to Scripture for some clues. When Moses first enters our faith story, he is a baby in a basket, born into danger and vulnerable. A child who will hear God's call but born into weakness, not glory, requiring another flawed human to care of him and protect him.

Jesus is God incarnate. Emmanuel, God with us. Jesus is the embodiment of God – fully human and fully divine. And he arrived as a baby, a small vulnerable child to a refugee family living in unsafe times. The child placed by God in our midst. A child placed front and centre into our lives.

The child is the 'already but not yet' of our faith. Already, but not yet. Forever vulnerable, forever being formed in discipleship, forever learning and listening and continually moving forward in hope and in love. Forever the clay on the potter's wheel being fashioned and shaped and moulded.

Over the years, I've heard people talk about a mature and a young faith. It's usually someone who believes they have a mature faith judging someone else they consider to have a youthful faith. That's unhelpful. None of us is ever fully formed as a disciple, we never reach that point of metaphorical adulthood in faith, so the child lives on in each person. But the child lives on only if we accept our vulnerability and our weaknesses. And this makes the action of Jesus placing a child into the midst of this theological discussion so important.

The disciples were arguing about who was the greatest in heaven. They were vying for positions, of power status and roles. This is theological. The Trinitarian nature of our faith means that we do not place one

essence of God over and above another – God the parent, son and spirit are all equal parts of essences of the Trinity. One God in three aspects. Through the Trinity, we see that God can only be known and experienced through relationships with others, we are only complete as part of a greater whole. Just as the 3 aspects of the Trinity are in relationship creating, inspiring, redeeming creation, this relationship should be reflected by us because, out basically, we are called to emulate Jesus and the life he led, the relationships he lived.

The disciples are asking the wrong question entirely. If it was today, they'd probably be saying they have a mature faith but they have misunderstood faith if they want to identify who is the greatest in heaven. Jesus tells them, '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.'

Everything is being turned upside down. Last week we talked about how the laws were misunderstood – it wasn't living according to the letter of the law that was important, it was living according to the spirit of the law. The law says don't kill, Jesus says don't get angry in the first place. The child in Jesus' time, though loved and cherished, had no rights, had no status, was marginalised by those in power and leadership. Jesus is turning everything upside down.

If we place the child in the midst of our theological discussion, what difference does it make?

Firstly, we acknowledge our vulnerability and our weaknesses. We acknowledge our need for protection. This is a difficult place to be as usually we build defences and protections to prevent this from happening. But sometimes we are forced to face up to the fact that we need others, we need community, we need God. Sometimes it's when we literally have a child, sometimes it's when we face illness and are overwhelmed, sometimes it's when we face selling up the family home and accepting we need full time care. Quoting the words of a hymn

'brother sister let me serve you, let me be as Christ to you..... let me have the grace to let you be my servant too'.

Help me to have the humility to show my vulnerability and accept help rather than be proudly independent but alone. By expressing our vulnerability, we help others learn and develop and accept their own. Jesus accepted with grace the help of others, and he showed himself truly vulnerable to the extent of dying a humiliating death on a cross.

Secondly, we recognise that we are not fully formed as disciples, that we will *always* be a work in progress. The best leaders are people who acknowledge they are still being formed. It isn't a process with a start and a finish. It's an open-ended process. And we are all capable of leading in some way. Not everyone leads from the front as Tyler did last week, but there is a place for everyone and everyone's gifts and it's the role of the community of faith and its leadership to discern this and enable it to happen.

Thirdly, we are opened up to the idea that we neither over value nor under value anyone within our community. All are to be held with dignity, but none are to be idolised. We value all as made in the image of God, whatever that might mean. In the desert, Aaron made the mistake of creating the calf, an idol of gold because the Hebrews needed a tangible sacred object to worship. Children are not our substitute golden calves. Children do not make God visible in some cute, safe and angelic sort of way. If God is to be made visible, God is going to be way more challenging than that! If he came 2000 years ago into the family of a refugee carpenter and his young betrothed Mary, he isn't going to come as something safe today.

Jesus places the child into the midst of a theological discussion about greatness because he wanted to show how the world is not the way it was intended to be. Those who are marginalised in any way, they are blessed by God. To be disciples, we need to humble ourselves. I'd suggest it's more than this though.

It doesn't matter how many vision statements and strategies you write, it doesn't matter how many ministers with a special focus on young people you call here. Taking this seriously might mean looking at governance differently, at decision making differently, even at religious education and discipleship differently. Specifically placing the child in the midst of that debate on greatness shows there is truly a place for all, including children. Theological discussion, vision and management decisions, spiritual reflection – there is a place for all here, and that very much includes children.

Jesus placed the child in our midst but let's ask ourselves where do **we** place that child?