

**“The Welcome Mat” – 9/27/15**

**Scripture:** Mark 9:30-37 (37)

**PRESENTATION OF BIBLES** – after Lord’s prayer, before middle hymn

**NO Unison;** Put the Capuchin Soup Kitchen mission month presentation in that place in the order of worship.

**Hymns:** 1) 459 “Come, O Fount of Every Blessing” 2) #579 “Great God of Earth and Heaven”  
3) 609 “Now Is the Time Approaching”

**CALL TO WORSHIP**

Leader: If it had not been God who was on our side,

People: The troubles of our world would have swallowed us whole.

L: If it had not been God who was on our side,

P: the sorrows of our times would have swept us away.

L: Our help is in our God, who made heaven and earth.

P: We call upon God, creator and rescuer, who is on our side.

**INVOCATION & LORD’S PRAYER**

Eternal God, you create us and you rescue us. Be with us here now. Help us know how much we need you. Teach us how to be the Body of Christ, proclaiming that your righteous realm is near. As you lavish your love upon us, help us to receive it and offer it to the world, in Jesus’ name.  
“Our Father...”

## SERMON

This whole idea that the one who would be the greatest must act as the servant of all, and Jesus saying, Let the little children come to me, and don't get in their way, when you welcome them you welcome me, you welcome God....this is one of the core messages of our faith. We agree to it, but do we always apply it? It's a funny thing about choosing a scripture to preach; over and over I find as I am living with it all week, somehow the Spirit always opens its meaning – and strongly lifts up how to preach it, right there in every day life.

My opening moment this week came the other day as I watched Pope Francis on TV – did you see him? He was clearly driving his secret service protectors crazy. They were leaning waaay in as he went into the crowd, as he spoke with and touched and kissed the people... especially the children.

Then came the moment in Washington on Wednesday when a little girl named Sofia got through the barricades with a hand drawn picture for the Pope, a message she made for him about how important it was to love everyone no matter who they were or what they looked like. A whole crew of Secret service agents began herding her to get back behind the barricade.

Then the pope's car stopped. Francis leaned out...his body language was crystal clear: arms out, hands beckoning: let the little child come to me, and don't get in her way. The agents ended up carrying her to Francis for a blessing. That is how that verse looks in real life. Jesus was about access, not protection, about compassion, not purity, about meeting people where they were, not about a formal plan to greet the leaders. Jesus was about meeting and caring for ALL of God's children, no matter their age or status. About seeing ALL of the people as important and worthy of love, no matter how insignificant they may have seemed. That is what Jesus is saying in this verse, in each of the gospels.

But there's more: this was not the first time Francis has challenged the going plan in order to let the little children come to him. On Maundy Thursday the tradition is that the Pope bathes the feet of a selected group of Catholics, in traditional ritual.

But this past Maundy Thursday, this Pope? His foot washing was not for a group of selected male theology students standing in for the apostles; Francis went to a drug addiction recovery center. He washed the feet of addicts in the program. Did not vet them as Catholics. And what a scandal for the traditionalists...for the first time ever in this ritual....he washed the feet of women!!!!

“Let them come to me, don't stand in the way. Unless you welcome the kingdom in the simplicity of a child, you'll never get in.” and, “if you want to be truly great, you have to be the servant of all.” This is to say, you'll never find the Kingdom of God, unless you stop putting

more value on some people than others, and instead see people as equal, as little children do. Unless you stop making rules upon rules to keep people out, and focus on finding way to allow everyone in. Unless you can stop with the tests of faith and purity and motive and questioning whether someone deserves it, and instead just help them get to Jesus, you won't even realize that the Kingdom of God is here right now, right in front of you, with the recovering addicts having their feet washed, with the little girls sharing a hug and a hand drawn wish for peace.

Jesus practiced radical hospitality. REALLY radical hospitality. Not just what was mandated by Torah law, where the friend was to be welcomed and sheltered. Jesus told his followers, "You have heard it said, love your friends and hate your enemies, but I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." Can you welcome the one you fear? Jesus commands his followers to find that within themselves.

We are faced with that question right here, right now. It comes in the form of Syrian refugees, dying in the Mediterranean Sea or sleeping exposed on the beach in their quest for safety and shelter. We see the pictures and weep. Children half dead in life jackets dragged by parents who just hope to bring them to a better life. Away from the certain death of warfare, as whole villages are being eradicated, as two different armies, both with little respect for the lives of the people of Syria, destroy their homes. As a failing economy in Bangladesh drives parents to risk the dangers of the journey in preference to the certain death from starvation awaiting their children in their homeland.

How are they to be greeted? It's a big crisis in Europe, and one that we in this country are called to respond to as well. Refugees from Syria will be coming to America. Many will arrive speaking only Arabic, no English. All the social service agencies in our area, and many of us in interfaith work, are pretty sure we know where is the logical place to send many of them. Here. Where they can find already established health care and social services offered by people who speak their language, and who may even be from the same country. Where there is a thriving Arabic community. Many of them will be coming here, of that I feel sure. But even though all of us have some kind of ancestral story of immigration, that's a loaded issue right now. People are saying terrible things in their fear of what allowing new immigrants in will mean. I have no easy answer. It's true there may be some with bad intent. It's true that they will challenge our cultural norms and assumptions. It's true that we may have to move over to make room. But what response are we to make as people of faith? How can we model what Jesus taught in a way that will be a far more reliable testimony than any words we could speak?

We are not commanded to guard the faith. To keep it pure. To share it only with the worthy. We are commanded to love one another and to love our enemies. To let the little children come to greet God, and don't get in their way. To welcome them, as we would welcome God...because that is what we are doing.

We support many ministries of welcome and hospitality. We heard about the Capuchin Soup Kitchen from Brother Jerry Smith this morning. But our loving and caring is more than providing money, or sending people on mission work, as important as that can be. Last month, here at North Church, we put out the welcome mat of hospitality, in a way that we've never done before. We invited the clients of South Oakland Shelter, homeless people, to come in and eat and sleep here. We made them welcome. We helped them get to showers and get their laundry done. We helped one person get life-saving medical assistance, and counted the damage of carpet as a small price to pay for a human life.

When they walked in the door the first night, you could see they didn't quite know what to think. Didn't know how they would be treated. Some of them have been treated badly and all of them fear the negative judgment on their homelessness. And we didn't know how it would go either. But we had the church building ready with tablecloths on the tables and a hot meal cooking, and beds made up, and rooms available for relaxation, and as we got to know them -- they were interesting. They had stories. They were not so different from us, after all.

They were, in the most important way, just like us: beloved children of God, not because of what they had or what we did, but because God, our creator, loves us all with the forgiving redeeming love shown in the life and teaching and death and resurrection of Jesus.

I do not have an immediate answer to some of the questions that the events of this week and this passage that came up in the lectionary raise. I just know that as followers of Jesus we are convicted by this truth, and challenged over and over to respond, each of us and all of us, to the need in our world.

We read this story about radical hospitality, welcoming the least among us, the little children, and how by welcoming them we also welcome God, as part of our service of baptism, when we welcome new brothers and sisters in Christ and proclaim ourselves to be one family, always ready to widen the circle, ready with the welcome mat.

To live out those vows is to recognize that this relationship, and this value of ALL people, goes far beyond our own circle, our own church. It is a welcome offered not just at the font but throughout life and everywhere we find ourselves, BECAUSE of the promises we have made in baptism and communion. It is a welcome to be offered by the Body of Christ in all times and places and circumstances, with all the unknowns and differences and the challenges. A welcome worthy of our full engagement, so that we may truly live as followers of Jesus.

**Listen once again to our scripture for today, in the Message translation:**

They came to Capernaum. When he was safe at home, Jesus asked his disciples, "What were you discussing on the road?"

The silence was deafening—they had been arguing with one another over who among them

was greatest.

He sat down and summoned the Twelve. “So you want first place? Then take the last place. Be the servant of all.”

He put a child in the middle of the room. Then, cradling the little one in his arms, he said, “Whoever embraces one of these children as I do embraces me, and far more than me—God who sent me.”

May God bless and guide us as we seek to follow Jesus, today and every day, in all that we are and all that we do. Amen!