

What does your child look like?

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[Mark 9:30-37](#)

Today's Gospel is one of those passages that people often go to when the question of children in church comes up. The risk in the passage is to simplify and reduce it to a cute statement about children in church. However, children are really not the focus.

The child who is placed in the middle of the room is a symbol. The child is a symbol of those who are on the bottom, the unwelcome, the ones who don't count, those who are other. Remember that a child in those days was not considered a person or at best was a possession. In one of the gospel versions of the feeding of the 5000 it says that Jesus fed 5000 men, not counting women or children. Children didn't count and that is why they make a powerful symbol when paired with the disciples arguing about who is the most important disciple.

Message version 7 "Whoever embraces one of these children as I do embraces me, and far more than me—God who sent me." Notice the word choice of Peterson. Embrace is the word he uses rather than welcome. To me this is far more than just welcoming. What image does that word conjure up in your mind?

Embracing the other pushes us into a space of Grace. In just a few verses is the famous passage about embracing the poor, the hungry, the sick and the statement when you do this for the least of them you do this for me. This is what happens when we welcome the stranger however that stranger is defined.

We all have an idea in our mind of who we consider other, different. Now I want you to take a moment and listen to two minutes of an interview from this past Thursday from the NPR broadcast of Fresh Air. I got this broadcast and yes I consider this a God moment as I got into my car at Norfolk General Hospital after praying with Sue Wells before her surgery on Thursday. I listened as I drove from there to Leigh Hospital to visit Mary Lou Miller. I was thinking as I walked to my car, God how do you want this sermon to go and well the answer was supplied. I will admit to sitting in the parking lot waiting for the end of the broadcast.

Terry the host is interview the Rev. Nadia Bolz-Weber. A rather exceptional Lutheran pastor who founded the Church for All Saints and All Sinners in Denver Colorado. How many of you are familiar with her. I highly recommend Googling her or checking her out on YouTube. She is the picture of what we call the emerging church. Piercings, lots of tattoos, interesting hair not what we would call up as the image of a priest., but she has a grasp or scripture and theology that is first rate. She is definitely a wounded healer having herself overcome addiction and other destructive behaviors. Her ministry is to

the marginalized, LGBTQ, alcohol and drug addicts, sex workers, as she says just the kind of people Jesus surrounded himself with. Yet even Jesus can surprise her.

Here is the link to the program. Play from 7:30 minutes until she says meeting ended. To hear the clip, copy and paste this URL into your browser.
<http://www.npr.org/2015/09/19/441440067/fresh-air-weekend-mary-karr-on-writing-memoirs-a-minister-who-embraces-outsiders>

Now there is a lot to think about in just these two minutes of audio and I highly recommend you listen to the entire 35 minute broadcast.

What would it feel like to be the one who was different, the other. Have you ever been in that situation? Very few of us have, but I can tell you it can be very uncomfortable.

That said the child we embrace can come in many forms. Many of you have heard me preach about Good Samaritan and the guys from the group homes. These are men with intellectual disabilities, many of whom have been abandoned by their families and left to the state to care for. They have been changed and they have changed that community.

The aides would bring all the men in and they sat in the back. One plugged in his imaginary cell phone and would talk on it. One blew bubbles and made gross noises. One man when he first arrived was completely non-verbal and would glare with this angry glare on his face. Several members commented that he scared them. Over the weeks Wendy would go back to them and pray for them. Then she started to offer communion to them and most would take it. Finally the senior warden said the heck with this and one Sunday took a group of parishioners to the back and brought the men forward.

Last Easter all the men were baptized and they were truly excited, whatever their understanding. The congregation just like Godparents answered the questions for them.

The people who care for the men report to Wendy that the way they treat each other at the home has changed. They have fewer fights. On Sunday morning in particular they help each other get ready to come to church. And Andy, the angry non-verbal guy, well he sits there with a smile on his face. At the Peace he stands up and wanders around the church with his arms up saying, "Hug, hug."
This year at community day they were able to attend and participate. Their social skills have improved that much.

Most important the congregation now says "This is not a ministry we do for them. They are us, they are an integral part of our congregation. They no longer represent what we do, they represent who we are."

So coming back to our story, who is the child a metaphor for you individually and us as a parish. Who is it that Jesus wants us to embrace that will change who we are so that we can be the individuals and the church that God calls us to be. That is the question and may be the most important question we can ask God in prayer.