

The Incarnation

Years and years ago, when Gary and I were dating, I asked him straight out, “Do you want children?” I was 29 and he was 38 and I was not going to waste my time with someone who did not want children. So I asked him straight out, “Do you want children.” To which he obviously answered yes, or I would not be married to him right now.

I love children. Especially babies. There is nothing quite like staring into the eyes of a baby and seeking all that precious potential and marveling at the miracle of life. Children have the power to open us to the wonders of this amazing mystery that we are a part of.

Children can be quite demanding too and there are even people on this planet that find children annoying. I’ve even heard of people who don’t like children! So when I read of Jesus, the great master and teacher of wisdom, bringing a little child into the midst of his most passionate students, in order to teach them something, I can see how they might have been a little perplexed.

After all, the twelve as they were called, had given up everything to study with Jesus. They left their lives and jobs behind and followed him where ever he went, listening and learning. They attended his public classes where he taught the masses and they also attended his very private classes where Jesus delved deeper and farther teaching them more and more about his program and broadening their vision of a new way of being in the world.

Even when Jesus wasn’t actively instructing the twelve, they were watching and listening to him as they traveled here and there, risking their safety in a world where life for their people was lived under the persecution of their conquerors. So, when they returned home to Capernaum, maybe they were expecting a little R & R, or maybe even a couple of master’s classes in the relative peace and quiet of familiar territory.

The twelve were competing all the time, each one trying to be the teacher’s pet; arguing about who among them was the most important. So, Jesus sits them down for some private tutoring, and warns them that what they think they want, will require them to be something quite different that what they want to be.

“If any of you wants to be first, you must be the last one of all and at the service of all.” And just in case they didn’t get the message, Jesus brought a little child into their midst and putting his arm around the child, Jesus tells them, “Whoever welcomes a child such

as this for my sake welcomes me. And whoever welcomes me welcomes not me, but the One who sent me.”

And while I was thinking about that statement this word kept coming into my head and that word wasn't inclusivity, but it was a theological word, a highfaluting, baggage laden, theological word: incarnation.

Incarnation, a fancy theological word dreamed up to name the idea that God comes into the flesh; that God is embodied in a human being. Incarnation is a word theologians use to describe the mystery of God being present in Jesus.

In Jesus, all that God is, is en-fleshed in a person. Jesus is the incarnation of the Divine. Which is how the gospel storyteller can have Jesus say, “Whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the One who sent me.”

Now it's important to note that people in the first century had a completely different attitude toward children than people in the 21st century.

Back in the first century, children were to be seen and not heard. For an adult male to recognize the presence of a child in a public setting was a very rare thing to do. Infant mortality was outrageous in the first century and people believed that most children didn't have what it takes to develop into an adult and this why so many of them died.

So, when you encountered a child in all likelihood, you were encountering a little being who might never become a person. Children were of little use until they proved that they could survive.

I know it sounds harsh, but it is reasonable to assume that some people probably insulated themselves from the tragedy of infant mortality by simply ignoring the presence of children unless they absolutely had to.

When we read or hear about Jesus bringing a child into the midst of adults and insisting that in welcoming the child, they are welcoming him, the radical nature of the gesture is all but lost on us because in our culture, children are prized, cherished and adored.

But try to imagine living in a culture where children are to be seen and not heard...some of us grew up being told to speak only when we are spoken to, but the first century was even harsher in their treatment of children.

Unlike the later teaching in Mark on becoming “like” children to inherit the Kingdom, there's little question Jesus was attempting to highlight their status. As “non-persons” with little to no rights at all, Jesus places an actual person from within the community

into the very center of their teaching space. The child belongs there, with them – not as property but as community. Jesus connects his own relationship with God – as sent from God – with the receiving and welcome of children. If the disciples intent to be sent by Jesus in the way that God sent Jesus, then they cannot expect to practice leadership that reflects norms of social hierarchy. That’s not what it means to be sent from God. Leadership must not be about prestige and power but by turning towards the more vulnerable, less socially appreciated and lifting up their sacredness. There is a dramatic difference between welcoming those we are socially obligated to welcome and recognizing the divinity within those no one holds us accountable to.

Now try to imagine a bunch of guys who are obsessed with being first, hearing that they must lower themselves to welcome children because in welcoming such lowly creatures as these, they are welcoming Jesus himself. Then to hear Jesus claim that in welcoming him they are welcoming the One who sent him; blasphemy! Jesus is not only claiming to be God, he is pointing to children and saying welcome them and you welcome God. Jesus is saying that God can actually be seen in creatures as lowly as children.

But wait. It is even more outrageous than this. Because if Divinity can be seen in creatures as lowly as children, that that means that Divinity can be seen in each one of us. Incarnation is not simply the en-fleshment of God in Jesus. Incarnation is the enfleshment of Divinity in everyone; in you and even more frighteningly, in me.

How many of us have the courage to look into a mirror and welcome the God in us? Because if Divinity is present in us that changes everything. If God who is beyond the beyond and beyond that as well, can be welcomed by welcoming a child, then surely God, who is the holy of holies can be welcomed in us.

Do people we encounter, meet the divinity that is in us? Do we have the courage to encounter the divinity that is in us?

So often we work so hard at finding the answers, discovering the secrets of the mystery that is God, can it really be as simple as welcoming a child? Maybe even the child in us?

There’s a story I read about a seeker who was very young, but very serious. This seeker happened to be a Buddhist and in his quest for knowledge he approached a Zen Master and asked, “If I work every hard and diligent how long will it take for me to find Zen.”

The master thought about this, then replied, “Ten years.” The Student then said, “But what if I work very, very hard and really apply myself to learn fast – how long then?” Replied the Master, “Well, twenty years.”

But if I really, really work at it. How long then?" asked the student.

"Thirty years," replied the Master.

"But I do not understand" said the disappointed student. At each time that I say I will work harder, you say it will take me longer. Why do you say that?"

Replied the master, when you have one eye on the goal, you only have one eye on the path."

That pillar of cloud often eludes us. If only we could find God. If only there was a place where we could be certain that God would show up. If only we could learn that correct prayers and pray them at the correct time, in the correct way, so that God would hear our prayers and we could know that God is here.

If only we could find the right teacher, or read the right book or study the right program to ensure that we would know God. Our eyes are firmly fixed on the goal as we stumble around on the path. If only we could look around and see the face of God enfleshed in those we met on this amazing path. Each and every day we could welcome God into our midst.

If only we had the courage to look into our own reflection and welcome the one that we are and in welcoming who we are, we will welcome the God who made us.

Incarnation – God en-fleshed in a person. In this person and this person and yes, in the person you meet in the mirror each and every morning.

Now, lest you fear that in meeting God in the mirror we might be deluded into believing that we are actually God, do not be afraid because in meeting the Divine in us, it becomes abundantly clear that divinity is in the service of all and the quality of our welcome deepens as we minister to the Divine in each one.

Let's open ourselves to the one in whom we dwell, the one who dwells in us and all around us. Let us open ourselves to the possibility of Divine encounters as we explore the many expressions of incarnation that happen in and around us all the time. Amen.