

Scoop up a child: Mark 9:30-37

by [Glenn Mitchell](#) in the [September 8, 2009](#) issue

In Mark's Gospel the antidote for a fixation on power is a little child. In chapter nine, Jesus again shares news of his pending passion with his disciples. They don't understand and are afraid to ask. Instead they argue among themselves about who is the greatest. Jesus takes the teachable moment and turns their notions of greatness upside down by asserting that the first will be last and a servant of all. Then he hugs a child, offering a visual metaphor to go with the words: "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

What does it mean to welcome the child? Children play a prominent place in the Gospels as metaphors for kingdom living. In the very next chapter of Mark, Jesus asserts: "Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it" (10:15). In *The Gospel of Thomas: Wisdom of the Twin*, Logion 21 adds a curious twist to the children texts of Jesus. When asked what his students are like, Jesus says that they are like children who live in a field that doesn't belong to them. The owners appear and demand, "Give us back our field!" but the children have no sense of what ownership means, and nothing to defend. Instead, the children strip themselves and stand before the owners naked, demonstrating that they truly are without possessions.

This text reminds me of a story from the life of St. Francis of Assisi, who angered his father by "borrowing" his father's horse, loading it with expensive fabric, then selling the cloth and the horse and giving all the money to the poor. His father collared Francis, dragged him before the bishop in the public square of Assisi and demanded that Francis give him back all he had taken. In a moment of complete dispossession Francis took off his clothes, folded them neatly and laid them at his father's feet. Then he addressed the crowd: "From now on, I can walk naked before the Lord, no longer saying, 'my father, Pietro Bernardone,' but 'our Father who art in heaven!'"

I wonder if welcoming the child isn't finally about being naked before the Lord. All these stories posit a way of being that leaves nothing between the follower and God. In the image of the child there is a dispossession that opens us to what is most

present, most real in the moment. There is something in the mere presence of a child that conveys the essential more wondrously than all of our adult words, understanding and efforts to give shape and meaning to life. There is something in welcoming the child that loosens our tight grip on things, on power and even on those treasures of life, love and faith we hold dear.

To make the image of welcoming a child operative in our lives, to give ourselves permission to scoop a little one into our arms as Jesus did, requires letting go of whatever we're holding on to at the moment. Welcoming and releasing are sisters; they work together, nourishing and supporting each other. How does this work in our lives? We must endeavor to pray our way into God's presence without possessing thoughts or experiences of God, to give from the depths of our lives without expectation and to serve others without attachment to outcomes. We must try to parent our children with love and wisdom and simultaneously prepare to let go of them, thus receiving the gift of relationship without holding on to what comes as treasure.

My favorite icon of Mary is one in the "Mary of the Signs" tradition, where Mary is "holding" the Christ child while both of her hands are free and raised. There is something in the icon that speaks of the tension in holding that most precious presence while remaining free to work and offer praise. To internalize the welcoming of the child is to carry God's presence with us as we do all that we do.

We all end this life naked in a field. I think that in inviting the disciples to reckon with his approaching passion, Jesus was asking them to trust beyond what they could know and grasp, beyond what they could hold in place with human will and effort. The possibility that he extended to them was to do the stripping now, to do the unclenching now, so God's presence could be lived without being fully revealed and understood. In the midst of the dark, heavy discussion of his pending passion, in the midst of the bickering of the disciples over position and power, Jesus dropped everything to hold a child in his lap.