

September 22, Ordinary 25B (Mark 9:30–37)

Rather than rebuke the disciples, Jesus takes a little child by the hand.

by [Ron Adams](#) in the [September 2024](#) issue

Published on September 16, 2024

Many years ago I attended a conference sponsored by the Pennsylvania Council of Churches. It was an annual event featuring keynote speakers, workshops, and some truly memorable convention food. This particular conference featured Jewish New Testament scholar Amy-Jill Levine as the keynote speaker. She was smart and funny and edgy and everything you want in a conference speaker.

At one point Levine told us about her son. He was a little boy then. He had curly hair, she said. Altogether adorable. Imagine that little boy is sitting in the front row every time you preach, she said. Right there in front of you. Never say anything that will harm that little Jewish boy.

Her challenge has influenced my preaching ever since. I now know my preaching responsibility includes calling out the antisemitic stereotypes generations of us learned from the text and its interpretation. Because I don't want to harm that little Jewish boy.

Reading Mark 9:30–37 brought Levine's talk to mind. That last bit, where Jesus takes a little child and tells the disciples that this is what the reign of God looks like. This is who that reign belongs to. Wise up and welcome them.

In some ways the scene is business as usual for the disciples. Jesus is doing his best to relay the seriousness of what is coming. He does so in the third person, lending a bit of wiggle room for the disciples to hope he isn't talking about himself. But are they really so dense? Yeah, they are. "They did not understand him," Mark tells us.

And to make that lack of understanding clear Mark reveals that, after hearing Jesus' prophetic litany, the disciples argue about who might take his place if things get out of hand in Jerusalem. Perhaps they are merely trying to decide who will get the best

seat in the coming reign. That would be bad enough. But I can imagine them debating who is next in line for the big chair. In any case, it's a clue about their cluelessness. They don't understand.

As I said, business as usual. But, before getting too comfortable on my high horse, let me admit that I am often clueless. I can misunderstand Jesus with the best of them. Or if not misunderstand, maybe understand to the point of wanting to say no. *Jesus, you want me to do what?*

To be clear, I've never gotten into an argument with anyone about which of us is the greater. Or which of us deserves the best seat in the house. Clueless I may sometimes be, but not in a prideful way. I am a Mennonite. We are a humble people. Just ask us.

What truly moves me, though, is the final moment of the story. The disciples stand around Jesus looking sheepish and avoiding eye contact. *Yes, we really did just argue about that.*

But rather than rebuke them for their hubris, Jesus takes a little child by the hand. Maybe the little boy or girl was standing nearby. Maybe playing with a toy. Maybe minding her own business. Maybe paying close attention to the energy in the room.

Jesus takes that little one and puts her center stage. I imagine the room goes silent. The child stands there with all the confidence a little one can muster. Fully at home in herself. Fully in tune with the moment. Waiting to see what happens next. Trusting it will be okay.

Taking the child in his arms, Jesus says to the disciples, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

You see this child? This face? These curls? Keep them in front of you, Jesus says. Let them be your guide to my reign. Don't do anything that will hinder or harm them. Look to them first, before you speak or offer admission or try to describe what I came here to do. This little one is all you need to know about that. Keep her safe. Keep him safe. And know that whenever you welcome one of these little ones, you welcome me and the One who sent me.

And all of the posturing, all of the arguments about position and power, all of the foolish attempts to manage and determine and defend the scope and structure of God's reign—they just fall away. Or I wish it were so.

I wish and pray that whenever two or three of us are gathered together in Jesus' name, we will not only find him there. We will also and always find that little one and see that face, see those curls, and so remember that we are guests in their home.