

“Afraid to ask”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Mark 9:30-37

by Rev. Patrick D. Heery

Emerson has a onesie that says, “Daddy and I agree: Mom’s the boss.” I’ll let you guess who bought this onesie. Of course, Jenna and I know this shirt is a lie. Mommy is not the boss. Neither is daddy. Emerson is the boss. In our household, the chain of command goes something like this: Emerson’s at the top, then Jenna, then... Darby the dog, then Charlie the dog, and finally me. I’m not unlike another dad who shared on Facebook that he knew he was in trouble when his daughter turned to him and said, “OK, Dad, Mom’s gone. Can I have that cookie now?”

I suspect that Jenna and I are not the only parents with a bossy child. Which makes you wonder why exactly Jesus chose a child to illustrate his point about having the humility to be the last of all. Jesus clearly had never tried to get a class of kindergarteners to form a lunch line.

And yet this is a passage that we’ve heard many times, a passage we probably think we’ve got all figured out: it’s about humility and servant love. We probably don’t even need a sermon, right? Well, you’re just not that lucky.

To understand what’s going on, we’ve got to look at those first few verses that come before Jesus’ lesson about children and humility. Jesus has just finished telling the disciples that the Son of Man will be betrayed and killed, and three days later, he will rise again. He has just taught them the most important truth of the gospel. He has proclaimed Easter day to them! He has spoken the words later recorded by poet Dylan Thomas: “And death shall have no dominion... though they sink through the sea they shall rise again.”

And the disciples, well, they have no clue what he’s talking about. You might be able to relate some Sunday mornings. They don’t understand all this talk about death and resurrection. But their lack of understanding is not the problem. No, it’s what happens next that leads them astray. It would have been easy enough to ask Jesus for an explanation. But the text says that they were too afraid to ask. Too afraid to ask Jesus about the most important thing he could ever teach them. Instead, they turn to something they *can* understand: internal politics. They start squabbling over who among them is the greatest.

Maybe they were trying to compensate for their feelings of inadequacy, or maybe they just needed a distraction from the question that really mattered to them.

I think we are these disciples. Each of us has a question—maybe many questions—we are too afraid to ask.

Maybe it's a spiritual question, like admitting that we really don't have any idea how the Trinity works. Maybe *we* don't understand Jesus' incarnation, death, and resurrection. Or maybe it's something simpler, like: Is God really there?

Or perhaps it's something more personal: Am I happy? Is this really the job, the life, the church, that I want? Am I the person, the parent, the spouse, the friend, the Christian I set out to be? Could someone actually love me? Why doesn't God save me?

Or maybe it's a question about the world: Can there be hope after so much hate, after so much loss and destruction? Am I really called to love *all* people, even that guy? Am I really expected to prophesy a better world, a dominion of God and justice and love, when all I feel is tired and alone and scared?

We each have a question, and we fear it because it's so big, and because it means admitting we need help, and because it's scary to think of what the answer might ask *from us*. And so we turn, like the disciples, to issues that don't really matter. We focus on petty drama and conflict: he said, she said. We hear about the great church schism over the carpet color. We race for awards, and power, and job titles. We bury our heads in work and entertainment.

But we can't fool Jesus; he knows the question we are avoiding, just as he knew that the disciples' debate over power dynamics wasn't really about that at all. And in knowing this, Jesus shows them—and us—a little child. Yes, as an example of humility. Yes, as servant love. But also as a lesson about asking questions.

Most children are (unfortunately for us adults!) full of questions and are unafraid to ask them. Lily, I am still trying to figure out what the Easter Bunny has to do with Jesus dying on the cross. And Ella, I have lost sleep over your questions. And I believe it was in Jenna's old church in Louisville where the pastor mentioned the virgin Mary, and a little boy turned to his mother, and said loudly, for the whole congregation to hear, "Mommy, what's a virgin?"

Children don't just say the "darndest" things; they ask them too.

Therefore, when Jesus tells the disciples to welcome this child, and when he tells them elsewhere that only one such as this child can enter the kingdom of God, perhaps he is telling them to welcome questions. To ask is to knock, and one must knock if the door to the kingdom is to open. Jesus looks at these disciples, and through them, he looks at us, and he says, stop worrying about this insignificant stuff and start asking your real questions. Starting knocking. Knock until the door comes off its hinges. God is waiting on the other side.

To ask such a question we have to be humble. To ask is to admit that we're not first in the class and we don't understand everything; we need help.

To ask such a question we have to be brave. We have to take this huge, scary question mark that seems so confusing, so risky, so vulnerable and raw, and hurl it at the universe, turning it over to God.

To ask such a question we have to be attentive. We have to be willing to shut up long enough to listen to the answer—an answer that might completely challenge what we see and how we live.

To ask such a question we have to be trusting. We have to trust that the answer we receive will be honest and good.

Each of us was once such a child: humble and brave, attentive and trusting. That child is still within us. And if we would but welcome that child again, but ask our question, we would see that it is not so scary after all. We will laugh when we hear the answer, and wonder why we waited so long. Waited so long for joy, for truth and purpose and God. So long to really see each other, and ourselves. So long to live at last.

Life begins with a question. And not just any question. But the question. The question you've been holding onto for years, afraid to ask. The question, unasked, that holds you back. The question that in all forms amounts to this: Will Christ rise even for me?

Nike says, "Just do it." Jesus says, "Just ask." **Amen.**