

Mark 9:33-37

A scientific study from August of 1987 concludes that over time married couples actually do begin to look like each other. A number of factors are put forth in explanation including similar diets, similar experiences, and shared emotions. I'm still waiting for the study that explains why over time people begin to look like their pets.

Speaking of looking alike, and on a more serious note, have you noticed how the church is looking more and more like the world? It did not used to be that way. God made a sharp distinction between His people and the people of the world. It was to be obvious that the church was very much unlike the world.

Yet today many church congregations make it their goal to resemble the world. Even their pastors wear street clothes and not sacred vestments. Worldly songs replace sacred hymns. I suppose a person could come on a Sunday, and after going back home not even realize he was in church that day.

In our text we see Jesus' disciples looking and acting like the world. You know how the world acts. It pushes and shoves its way to the top, stepping on others along the way. Those who are of the world want to be first; first in everything. Greatness is the goal of those who are of the world.

But what about in the church? What is our aim and goal? Would it surprise you to hear that it also is to be first? Actually it is. Jesus does not rebuke His disciples for wanting to be first. The lesson He teaches is that we in the church are to seek to be first, not as the world does by putting ourselves first, but by putting ourselves last.

And that is hard to do. It only happens by repentance. Because by nature; yep, our sinful nature that we got from our parents, we despise being last. We don't even like being second. We want to thrust ourselves forward and be better, more important than everyone else.

When was the last time you were involved in an argument? I can almost guarantee that the argument came about because you and whoever else were not about to take second place. You were both striving to put yourself first...in something. It's not just Jesus' disciples here who act like the world. So do you and I. Rather than seeing Christ in us, those who are watching see way too much of the world in us.

A little child may be able to help. Jesus used one as an object lesson for His disciples. "*Whoever receives one such child in My name,*" He says, "*receives Me...*" How we treat children shows who we really are. Our attitude toward children, even toward just one child, portrays our attitude toward God. The world's attitude toward God can be seen in its attitude toward children, even toward just one child. When a father berates his child, making his child feel small and worthless, he is stepping on his child to put himself first. When a mother aborts her child in the womb, she is not receiving her child in Jesus' name, but handing her child over to the evil one.

What about us? How do we want to treat children? The way Jesus does. He took a child up in His arms, says our text. He did this a lot. He never treated children harshly. He never shunned

them. He was never too busy for them. He who is God Almighty stooped down to cradle in His arms even just one little child. He who is the greatest of all; who is first in everything, put Himself last. Jesus did not hang out with the big, important people of His day. He loved children. He humbly knelt down with children.

To associate with the lowly, one must be lowly. One must be humble and not proud. And to receive a child in Jesus' name, one must love Jesus and those whom Jesus loves.

To bring a child to Baptism is to receive that child in Jesus' name. To teach a child about Jesus' love for them is to receive that child in Jesus' name. To be a Christ-like example to a child is to receive the child in Jesus' name. In other words, to do for a child the very things Jesus would do for them is to receive the child in His name. And truly when you do such things for a child, it is Jesus receiving that child through you.

So Jesus loves children, even just one child. That should make you children feel good. But where does that leave the rest of us? Well, we may determine a child by age, but God determines children by His relationship with them.

He who baptized you delights in declaring you His own child. He who teaches you calls you His dear children. His arms are open today to take you up in them and hold you close to His heart like children. All of you are children loved by Jesus. Not one of you does He shun. Not one of you does He step on to put Himself first. He put Himself last for every one of you. This is what His cross is all about. He let Himself be stepped on by death and the devil. He let you and me step all over Him because He bore the punishment of our sinfulness.

This is why we do not need to put ourselves first. Because Jesus puts you first always. You are precious to Him; each one of you is. And you are forgiven by Him. Everyone of you He declares forgiven of all your sins.

So going back to our study about married couples looking like each other... not only are you Jesus' children; you are also His bride, His spouse. Is this not why, over time, you are looking more and more like Him?

The way you treat children; the way you treat each other; the way you show love for each other; the way you forgive each other...you look more and more like Jesus the more you know Him, the more you are with Him.

You are not of the world. The world is not to be seen in you. You are in Christ. You are His own child. That's why His arms always cradle you. Amen.