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The Rev Barbara Ballenger

When do people learn that it's better to be the best? When do we first learn to be competitive, that it's important to "be the very best that no one ever was" to quote the Pokémon theme song my kids grew up on?

I think we learn it when we're little children— on the playground or in the kindergarten classroom, in pee wee soccer.

My husband tells a story about the reading groups they had in his school when he was little. There were three groups: the Cardinals, the Blue Jays and the Robins. Can you guess which group was for the best readers? The bright red cardinals. And who were the least advanced – the dull brown robins. You didn't even have to ask, you could tell who was the very best just by the popularity of the birds. My husband started out a robin. And now he's a college professor. So there's hope.

But I can remember lots of other examples from when I was a kid. We had spelling bees and coloring contests, talent shows and all sorts of sports competitions. Later there would be honor rolls, and scholarships, and prizes for scoring high on standardized tests.

So it's no surprise that Jesus' followers were arguing about who was the best disciple of all. They probably learned that on the playground when they were little. But I bet they were surprised when they learned that the rules were different in Jesus' classroom.

Now Jesus wasn't a typical teacher in a typical school. There were no walls in his classroom and he didn't sit behind a desk. Instead, he went from place to place and his students – the disciples – followed him. Jesus' students learned by watching him and listening to him and imitating what he did. The tests were hands on. Sometimes his followers didn't even realize the test was happening.

The story in today's Gospel from Mark was one of those times. Jesus' followers were being tested on the upside-down rules of Jesus' ministry, which they had been hearing about for some time. Rules like – if you want to keep your life you must lose it, and if you lose your life you will save it. That was from last week. Today we have: The last shall be first and the first shall be last.

That was not a rule on the playground I grew up on. But Jesus is telling his followers and us that the way of love is a different way. It puts others first. It listens rather than talks. It asks questions rather than explains. It heals rather than hurts. It helps along rather than rushing past. And Jesus' way of love was to die so that others could live into the love and forgiveness that his death on the cross released into the world.

That was a very difficult lesson for his disciples to follow, as we heard in the Gospel today.

So Jesus gave them an example of what he was talking about and said, “If you welcome a child like this in my name, it's the same as welcoming me. And remember, if you welcome me, you welcome the one who sent me.”

Children back in Jesus' day were the very last in line. They had no rights, very little protection, and could get hurt or lost or become orphaned very easily. Welcoming a child would not get you a promotion at work, or a higher status in the Roman Empire – which was built on competition.

So in Jesus' classroom, welcoming a child was good practice for following Jesus and the One who sent him. It required adults to set aside their pride and status and take care of someone who was vulnerable and couldn't pay them back. Elsewhere in the Bible, Jesus said that “whatever you do for the least of my brothers and sisters you do for me.” He's saying that here too.

What does that mean for us today? Well, what if instead of teaching our kids how to be fierce competitors, the best there ever was, we taught them how to welcome people as though they were welcoming Jesus? And what if we taught them how to do this by actually welcoming our children as though they were Christ? Lead by example.

Come 4th Sunday is a great time to practice that kind of welcome because the kids are here in church with us. The other weeks, most of them are downstairs in Godly Play for the first part of the service – with their teacher Laurel Mosteller – telling the stories of the bible with the help of cool stuff like sandboxes and little model people and a miniature altar. They wonder aloud about what the stories mean. Sometimes there's a craft. They do a lot of looking and listening, imitating and wondering. Just like Jesus' disciples did.

But since they are here with us today, we can practice our discipleship on them. So kids, welcome to St Peter's today! I have a few things that I think you should know about why it's so great having you here among us, why we need you to be part of our community.

First, you ask great questions. And they are not easy ones either. You often ask us why the world is the way it is. You ask why everyone isn't treated fairly. You ask what we're going to do about violence and the warming planet and the homeless people that you see. You ask what we know about Jesus and God – that one makes us squirm sometimes. Please keep asking. It helps us to keep looking for better and better answers – ones that Jesus would be happy with.

You also have a lot of creative energy. I can see it from where I sit, because I have a very good view of the soft space. So I see our littlest ones building pillow forts and block towers. I see them coloring and drawing and reading. I see our slightly older ones sharing toys with them and reading to them. Adults, you should come sit where I sit sometime and see the Kingdom of God that is on display on our rug.

Kids, we are happy to have you among us because you help us. Our young acolytes – the ones who sit up here and wear the cool vestments – they help us carry the cross and the candles and assist with setting the table. You're getting good at delivering the gluten free wafers and wine. You help us with the readings on Come 4th Sunday, and help lead the prayers. And when you do this, we listen a little closer. Because we love the sound of your voices. And you help us hear

things that we might miss otherwise, when we think we've heard it all. You keep our attention. We root for you when the words are tough, because we know reading tough words in front of everyone isn't easy. Jesus had a lot to say about listening to his words, even when they were hard. You help us to do that.

Another thing I love about you kids is the way you care for one another. I've especially seen this among our Youth and Teen Group that meets on the second Sunday of the month. But I also see it here at church. Just like the grownups, here you kids have lots of different abilities and lot of different needs. And I love to watch you when you look out for one another, and help one another, and invite one another to participate, and to play and to try. I love how you respond when one of you is having a hard day. I mean, you're not perfect – none of us are. You remind us adults – who have gotten very good at hiding our flaws and weaknesses – that we all have them. You show us how to receive help as well as to give help. Jesus was very good at that as well.

And you're funny and you're fun. The kind of funny that leads to joy. I like how you dance when the Jazz Group plays a really swinging number. I like how you ask me questions at Communion time, and make song requests. And I like that you're willing to do wild things during the Christmas Pageant, like being a sheep that wears sunglasses or an angel that throws paper airplanes. You're up for surprises. You are surprising. Jesus is that way too – his followers never quite knew what he was going to do next.

There's lots more that you do around here, and that you will do, that help us all to be better followers of Jesus – you included. So please come back. We miss you when you're not here. We are a little jealous when you're in Godly Play and we can't come too. But something special has to be reserved for kids. So please tell us what you have learned, what you are wondering about, where you saw Jesus last and what he was doing. Keep asking us the hard questions, and inviting us to love and to look at things we might not notice.

And thanks. Thanks for teaching us about Jesus, by letting us receive you and get to know you and learn from you. And thanks for showing us Jesus, by just being you.

Amen.