

The Wisdom of Children
Northminster Presbyterian Church
September 20, 2015

His eyes are the thing you can't forget. His name is Kinan Masalmeh; Kinan is 13. The world first met him in an interview with Al-Jazeera American outside of Budapest's main train station last week. The thinness of his frame makes you worry if he is getting enough food. The deep circles under his eyes make you certain he is not getting enough restful sleep. At some level, considering he is a Syrian refugee detained as his fractured family seeks a way out of Hungary to safety in Western Europe, that makes sense. He is, perhaps surprisingly, fairly articulate in English. But if you watch his interview more than once, what speaks most eloquently are his eyes. His spoken message is clear..."Help the Syrians...stop the war. If you stop the war we don't want to go to Europe...we don't want to go anywhere."

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But the message of his eyes.....they are not the eyes of a child....they are eyes that have seen too much, lost hope more times than any adult should, let alone a child. But on that particular day, they are the eyes of one who knows he is not welcome. He is not wanted. And you can see a flatness, a shadow, in those eyes...of one who knows rejection...not because of something he has done...but because of who he is. This one, who has been called a criminal for fleeing war, death and destruction. The eyes aren't dead...for they burn with what I fear is an awareness of his "otherness" in the eyes of too many.

The children of the Green Harbor-Red Ribbon School in Linfen, China, have a similar look in their eyes...at least at first. There are only about 40 children in that little boarding school. They range in age from 17 down to little seven-year-old Kun Liu. They all have one thing in common....they were born with HIV...and due to ignorance, stigma and fear, they have been banned from their local schools—and in the case of Kun Liu—expelled from their ancestral village entirely like a leper of old.

In the new documentary project, Children of the Harbor, a Boston University medical student and a Myanmar videographer are seeking to tell the stories of the children of Green Harbor as a way to help raise awareness of the "othering" and societal rejection of these children.

It all seems so otherworldly...so impossible to us...After all...we live in a time and in a culture where the place of children is perhaps greater than it has ever been. Indeed, we practically worship children in this culture...After all, we live in a time of baby wipe warmers and four foot tall paper and plastic doll houses of the ice castle from Frozen...and preschools that cost as much as my college tuition 25 years ago.

In our culture...many children hold a place of honor...even if we have to admit that they are usually the first to suffer when cuts are needed in social safety net spending...powerless because they are politically voiceless...

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Still in Jesus' day, the children were treated with even less respect. In most of the Middle East, only about 50 percent of children lived to adulthood....Some Greek philosophers of the day suggested that infants weren't even human until they had lived five days. If there was a shortage of food, culture demanded that the children be fed last as they did not have to go out and provide for the rest of the family...

In both Greek and Roman communities the practice of abandonment of newborns was common. If an infant was born with a birth defect or out of wedlock, or into a family that could not or would not support another child...one took the child to various public squares usually under cover of night and left them....The rarest few were adopted into families as full members of the family...most, if they were rescued at all, were raised to be slaves within households.

Yes, children in Jesus time were status-less nobodies—oh they might be loved by their parents...but...nothing was designed for them....only time and luck would make them a somebody.

So how strange it must have been to the disciples, who were busy with that favorite sport of humanity...perhaps since the first prizes were handed out for best cave painting...the sport of figuring out who is first and best. Here they are, trying to decide which of them is the best and the brightest...and Jesus plops a little nobody down in front of them and says...this...this is what I mean by "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." You must welcome this child," he says. "Grant place of honor to this one. And if you welcome her...you welcome me."

Jesus continues to instruct the disciples that in the new world he is ushering in, strength is shown in self-offering, something the world might

view as weakness. Serving this little one he cradles in his arms...this nobody...is cradling God....

It's particularly touching that this text comes this week...for this past Tuesday marked the 52th anniversary of the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing...perhaps the ultimate example of our failure to live up to this demand of Christ...when two White Supremacist Groups set off a bomb on a Sunday morning...right where four young girls were in Sunday School... Addie Mae Collins (14), Cynthia Wesley (14), Carole Robertson (14), Denise McNair (11)...they were martyrs to the idea that the followers of Christ in that time refused to be welcoming...of children or any others who weren't like them...they were unimportant...collateral damage in what was supposed to be a spirit-destroying attack on a church and a movement.

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Because once we understand what Jesus is saying...we know that this isn't just about children. Yes, we all bear responsibility for welcoming children...into our society and in our church...we all bear responsibility for the physical and spiritual feeding and nurture of the children in our midst...but there is something more going on here...

For surely Jesus is also saying that we are to welcome the nobodies of our day...the underlings...the ones who everyone thinks of last when it's dinnertime....

Who are today's nobodies? Who are those who have no status...those like the unwanted infants of Jesus' day, who we are quick to abandon when things get risky?

Is it the mentally ill, the prisoner, the mother on assistance? Perhaps it's the inner city teen who has sought identity and respect in gang culture. Maybe it's the refugee...or the ex-con...or the person who worships or votes or speaks in ways we don't understand or fear.

Who, like the surprising child cradled in Jesus' arms, is not on our radar screens at all?

Perhaps this is a call to each of us to ask ourselves...how are we at welcoming the voiceless, the powerless? Jesus uses a living parable to call the disciples out of their self-centeredness...to see the world through the eyes of this child who has no power and no place in society...They are

invited to consider not the wisdom of greatness and rank....but the sad wisdom of children like Kinan...the wisdom of otherness...of being rejected.

There was another teacher who spent much of his time teaching us something very similar—who offered parables about the voiceless and insignificant.

He taught us that people who eat their bread butter side down are no better than those who eat it butter side up...

He taught us that it didn't matter if a Sneech had a green star on her belly or not...but all Sneeches had value...

But perhaps greatest of all, he taught us that a sensitive elephant who stops and takes the time can hear the voices of the wonderful world that lives inside of speck of dust...voices no one else is willing to hear...including the voice of a little boy no one thinks will amount to much....

What is the gospel of Dr. Seuss...and the gospel of Jesus Christ cradling that lovely nobody in his arms?

Together, they at last make themselves heard...

They proved they ARE persons, no matter how small. And their whole world was saved by the Smallest of All!

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For as we all know here after all,

A person's a person no matter how small!"

Horton hears and welcomes...a Who....And I wonder again...who do we need to be hearing?

After all, isn't today's instruction from Jesus our invitation to give up fighting over who is first and instead to be...well, the Elephant in the room...the ones who listen for and hear and welcome and speak up for...and even put ourselves at risk for... the voiceless...those that others will miss because they aren't used to listening...they aren't paying attention to the world that isn't about them. And then to welcome them as fellow children of God...not just into our church, but our lives...

And what if that also means those who are voiceless in our progressive Christian world?

What would it mean if welcoming Jesus also meant welcoming the Muslim Fundamentalist...the anti-abortion rights protester...the angry, aggressive man who hits us up for change outside of the Jewel?...

If we are the Elephant in the room...the ones called to hear the voiceless...the ones called to welcome the least of the least...how might we change what we do...and I don't mean just on Sunday...What if...for just a week...we welcomed all of those people into our thoughts....and our prayers...and our plans...and our lives....And what if one week became one month and then one year....

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We Christians have gotten fairly good at welcoming one child...the child who will be rejected and restored---be last and then first...we welcome the Christ child after a season of preparation....the Advent season that is still three months away. It's joyful and hopeful...and safe.

But what if right now can be our season for preparing to welcome the nobody's, the unremembered, the voiceless children....for if Jesus is telling us the truth today...that season of preparation will lead us to welcome him as well.....not simply at the end of the year, but all through it...not simply in our worship...but in our hearts....making us...and the world a better dwelling place for all.

May God make it so. Amen.