



**SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE**  
**in the City of New York**  
*The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector*  
**[www.SaintThomasChurch.org](http://www.SaintThomasChurch.org)**

**Sunday, September 19, 2021**  
*The Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost*

*Festal Eucharist*  
*11 am*

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A Sermon by  
The Rev. Matthew Moretz, *Vicar and Chief Operating Officer*  
*on*  
Mark 9:30-37  
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### **Sermon for the Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost, 2021**

*And Jesus sat down, and called the twelve, and saith unto them, If any one desire to be first, the same shall be last of all, and servant of all. And he took a child, and set him in the midst of them.*

I have two boys, one little and one very little. Now they may be small, but they take up a lot of space, space in our swelling hearts, space in our plans and dreams, and space in the apartment, most of which is set up for the primary purpose of raising these two and keeping them safe. You will be hard pressed to find anything that shatters or is particularly sharp. You *will* find a good deal of padding and a baby gate for every portal. And, now, unlike before so many things are low to the ground, an entire realm is bustling no more than two or feet above the floor, a realm of imagination, stuffed animal friends, forgotten toys, and, quite literally, stumbling blocks. Now Megan and I are indeed manufactured this setting for our children, but despite being the creator of this world within the world of our home, there is no better time than when I remember to stop whatever I am so busy about, and get down on my knees, or all fours, and get right down at their level. Now one might not think that a few feet elevation would make such a difference, but it actually transfigures everything. The room takes on an odd but familiar perspective, one I knew long ago, the furniture looms, everything is substantially more daunting because everything looks bigger, including the face of Sam or Gabriel.

I join them in their world, at their level, face to face. And if I get low enough, sometimes it is as if they are towering over me, a striking place to be as a father. In that descent of just a few feet, there are all kinds of new ways to play together, to be with one another.

Now you don't have to have a child in your home to experience this, life two feet above the earth. You may need a soft pad or somesuch to get down to that level, part of you might crack or pop, but I think it is worth the effort. We know about mountaintop experiences, how they are often worth the hike. But so is this. This simple change of position, this descent, opens a window to the world as it was when you were first awakening to the world around you.

I think about our Lord in the Gospel reading today, how he sat among his disciples, descending to the level of a child, and how he took one of the children in his arms, with the child's face, likely, right beside his, and from that orientation began to teach them. And the disciples sorely needed teaching at this moment, a moment of crisis for them.

It is just before this reading that Jesus had healed a child, likely triggering a mass enthusiasm. Remember, most children died before puberty back then, childhood was a tenuous time, mostly a source of heartbreak, and here was one who had the capacity to make all that grief go away. And the disciples, I expect, were looking forward to being the ones to manage those crowds and establish a new society around this healing power.

But, it was after that particular healing that Jesus started to teach that this was not his ultimate mission, one of itinerant healings and all sorts of other miracles. Instead, he said, quite plainly, that he was to be handed over to his enemies, suffer death, and rise on the third day. Yet, despite being clear as he could, this just didn't compute for the disciples. Despite this massively different vision that Christ taught, the disciples just moved on to fighting over who would be the greatest in the type of kingdom they expected. On their walk to Capernaum, where Peter lived, they began fighting over who was the best, who was the greatest, as if the sort of kingdom Jesus would be establishing would be that of brute force and strength, with an almost military hierarchy, dreaming and contending over who will be the viceroy in a grand court. So when they get to Capernaum, Jesus stops everything, descends to the ground, takes up a child, and in a way tries to say with both his words and his symbolic actions that the kingdom of the living God is essentially comprised of children, the child was placed in their midst, so that they might emulate him or her, not scrambling over each other in a race for the best position. It is the child-like who rule in the Kingdom of God, and that the goal was to make them into children, somehow, so that God may be revealed to them and in them.

We Christians are not much better than the disciples, much of the time. Even with the benefit of time to internalize the wisdom of Jesus and all that hindsight, we keep forgetting that the center of the universe, the force that moves heaven and earth, is not at all like a stately figure on a throne. Our folk wisdom keeps snapping back to that understanding, for it is the best image we can think of complete governance under one mind, one rule, a true sovereign God must look like one of our Sovereigns, with certain tools of strength at his disposal like armies and navies and spies and dungeons. At the very least, God should be the one doing the executing, not the one being executed. And yet, we know Christ rules as King not from a throne on Mount Olympus but from a Cross on Golgotha, the place of the Skull that became the place of supreme love shining out of death's citadel.

And, we Christians know that God rules the true world not just as one Crucified, but also as a child in our midst. If God is like anyone, he must be like the oldest among us, right? Well, this couldn't be further from the truth. Every deep midwinter we meditate on the child that came to rule us, not from a king's palanquin, but from a manger, the makeshift crib of a family tossed about by the whims of their rulers. What untold number of hearts has that image prepared for the joys of heaven?

That is just the beginning of the revelation of Christ as a child. That revelation continues on a trajectory right to the throne of heaven itself. In the Shrine of our Lady of Fifth Avenue, we can see what has been revealed to us, the mystical image of the Holy Child, blessing us, ruling us in tenderness and love, with his queen mother as his throne, her lap is the true seat of power in the true Kingdom of the Child Emperor.

These are far from saccharine images, this is not the Disney-fication of Christ. Whether it is Christ in the manger, or Christ ruling over us, we know what happens to this child, one Friday. And certain elements his Passion, and the art that surround it, are ready to remind us with Mary's presence, with his mother watching, that this is not just a suffering man, but someone's child.

God came as a child, died as his mother's child, and continues to reign as a child, with a simplicity of purpose and meaning and effort and end, namely that we should be as he is, think the same thoughts, possess the same blessedness, so that, as our exemplar, we too might become as children, the deepest heart of humanity.

Because of the Boys of the Saint Thomas Choir, we know what it is to have children in the midst of our fellowship. Even more than that, because of their ministry and dedication, it is children who guide us in

worship, who teach us about our great heritage of sacred music, who sing prayers in such a way that no adult ever could, and who clear away a space of such mystical beauty in our spirits that, we pray and trust, God is evermore likely to spring forth within us thanks to their artistry. One way to put it is that, no matter our accomplishments, in the Kingdom of God, the Boys of the Choir tower above all the rest of us adults, and in this place, a veritable embassy of that Kingdom, they become our leaders, a living sign of the Kingdom that is coming.

Just this morning, we began a sung mass for Sundays at 9am. And it was so striking when Father Turner sat on these steps and gathered the children around him for his homily. This used to happen in the church where I grew up, and not only was it a fine homily, it was a powerful living sign of children in our midst who draw near, and listen, and even laugh, and in their centrality, in the sight of all of us, they become visible exemplars for us adults in learning and in growth in our faith. We should be like them, so bold, so open, so ready to learn and grow. Actually, our only hope is if we learn to be like them.

George MacDonald, the nineteenth century fantasist and preacher, was truly devoted to keeping us grounded in our childhood, for the sake of our faith. He wrote that “The boy should enclose and keep, as his life, the old child at the heart of him, and never let it go. He must still, to be a right man, be his mother's darling, and more, his father's pride, and more. The child is not meant to die, but to be forever fresh born.”

“But in the face of the Lord Himself, the childhood will be triumphant! All God's wisdom, all His truth upholding that radiant serenity of faith in His Father. Verily, O Lord, this childhood is life! Verily, O Lord, when Thy tenderness shall have made the world great, then, children like Thee, will all people smile in the face of the great God!”