

“Jesus the Madonna”  
Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler  
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Presbyterian Church in Leonia

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Psalm 1

**Mark 9:30-37**

I'm not sure why, but whenever I picture the disciples having the argument about which one of them is the greatest, I keep picturing them in the back of a minivan-- maybe like the old blue one Betsy Voreacos used to drive. Perhaps it's because of the years I worked in youth ministry and drove a church van full of kids to retreats, mission trips, and service projects. Or maybe it's because of the years I spent wedged between my brother, who is seven years younger and my sister, who is five years older, on family summer vacations. I *wish* we had had a minivan; instead, for much of my childhood we were carted around in a 3-door, blue, Toyota Starlet hatchback-- which wasn't air-conditioned. Did I mention we lived in Georgia? My sister drew imaginary, and sometimes, if there was masking tape, literal boundaries around her personal space, which my brother and I were not allowed to trespass. My brother and I bounced back and forth into each other's space. The happy parts of the journey, we would all sing together-- the whole car-- to Carole King or James Taylor tapes, or would play the license plate game. But at the points of the journey when we had lost patience with the trip and with each other, elbows knocked, feelings got hurt, and there was the never-ending jockeying for favor from our dad and stepmom, who at that point were tired and had lost patience, too.

Something I learned from parents in the many years I worked in youth ministry is that some of the most powerful conversations they've had with their kids happen while riding in a car. There is something non-threatening about having the road in front of you, a parent who cannot take their hands off the wheel, and the safe containment of the car that makes it possible for teens to probe the risky topics of their lives: a question about sex. An admission about their insecurities, whether social or at school. The truth of their grief about a loved one who has passed. Coming out. And the conversations aren't always centered on the kid. Sometimes, kids in the car make striking observations about their parents-- especially when, as a child starts to scrape into the layers of adulthood, they see the pedestals they have placed their parents upon aren't as solid as they had once, as younger children, imagined.

But Jesus did not drive a minivan. Maybe if he did, the disciples would have asked him the questions they needed to ask, but because they either were not yet aware of that need, or they were just too afraid to ask, they did not ask him. “Why is it that you must die?” “What will we do once you are gone?” “Will we lose our lives too?” Or, “how is it that you will live again as you say?” But instead, they were silent in the space left where Jesus had dropped some profoundly important news about what would happen to him: that he would be betrayed into human hands; that he would be killed; and that after three days, he would rise again.

Maybe it was to cover that awkward silence, that moment of fear and uncertainty, that the disciples started bickering among themselves about who was the greatest. Judith Gundry-Volf, a New Testament scholar at Yale, imagines the conversation went something like this:

*James and John, two of Jesus' closest associates, freshly persuaded of their elite status by a private audience with Jesus on the mount of transfiguration, had asserted their superiority: they would be the ones to sit at Jesus' right and left when he comes in glory. Peter had boasted of a faith great enough to walk on water. Simon the Zealot had touted his revolutionary zeal. Matthew the tax collector had prided himself on his powerful connections. Judas the treasurer had been filled with the self-importance of one who holds the purse strings. And so on.*

This is the point when I imagine Jesus sighs, stops the car, and turns around to talk to the disciples in the backseat. No longer is this a conversation between them and the road. These words required eye contact. Knowing Jesus did not actually have a mini-van, I imagine he found their time to talk when they got situated in their hosts' home, perhaps somewhere between the dusty road they had been traveling, and the glistening waters of the Sea of Galilee. I often wonder about these hosts who housed Jesus and his disciples throughout the gospels. Rarely do we see them named, but they are often there in the background, doing the cooking and feeding, setting up places to sleep, offering water to refresh and cleanse. Knowing that at Jesus' birth, there was no room in any inn for his laboring mother to push the infant Jesus into existence, maybe Jesus never took the gift of the hospitality he received along the way for granted-- even if the scriptures did.

He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." Then, taking a child into his arms, Jesus told the disciples, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me." In scooping up this child, Jesus was doing something to honor all the women who have been working behind the scenes, cleaning and cooking, washing and welcoming so the disciples could have a safe and restorative rest. Children's care was in the realm of women's work; and yet, when Jesus embraces a child in tender care, he-- as a man-- is taking on that role of service which had been so feminized. In doing so, he is providing a model for all genders to show that service does not belong solely in the realm of women; however, to belong in the realm of discipleship, you must be willing to serve.

When I have looked at paintings depicting Jesus with the children, he is looking as if he is imparting wisdom onto them. In some paintings, he is holding his fingers in some kind of arrangement which I suppose symbolizes his Jesus gang as he blesses the children. If I were an artist, I would love to design and paint an icon of Jesus as Madonna: not as imparting knowledge and blessing, but holding a child in a way that would comfort her when she is crying, or positioning him so that when he burps, he doesn't spit up on you. Normally, we see portrayals of Mary as the Madonna, holding the infant Jesus. These range from the indigenous depictions of Mary, such as in the Virgin of Guadalupe, to the Eurocentric faces that have dominated the Christian art scene for centuries, to the more ancient Byzantine mosaics that are from the Eastern tradition, to the colorful Ethiopian madonnas with brown skin and large,

watchful eyes. But what I have not seen is a picture of Jesus in the position of Mary, holding a child in a tender and nurturing way, a child who can be any child but who is also at the same time, as Jesus infers, a stand-in for God. I tried to Google it, but all I could find were pictures of the pop-star Madonna with her ex-boyfriend Jesus Luz.

The truth is, I suspect, that the disciples yearned to be in the place of that child in Jesus' care, and Jesus knew it. To know they are valued and welcome and safe-- even in a world that was very much unsafe-- scraped at that need to feel great the disciples had been arguing about. What Jesus was doing, in holding that child, was taking someone who-- at that point in Roman history, was not valued, was not welcome, and was not safe, and announcing that child's sacred worth as a window into who God is. We can appreciate the paradox of Jesus' statement by looking at history: In ancient Roman times, children were viewed less as human beings, and more as property. Once they could work and provide income, they would grow into their value in society-- that is, if they made it through a treacherous childhood where children had no legal rights, abuse was acceptable and, and it was within the father's rights to sell a child into forced labor, prostitution, or begging for profit-- or even to leave an infant child to die, if she was not born to the socially favored gender identity.

But in Jesus' arms, the child was lifted up to something and someone who bore the imprint of the image of God. In all her vulnerability and need, the child became the model for *whom* we should **welcome** before God, whom we should **become** before God, and *how* we should come to **know** God.

As you can probably see, Presbyterian Church in Leonia is a sanctuary that welcomes children. Not only do we hold a children's sermon each week; we also have children's bulletins, we invite children to take jobs in worship like lighting the candles, playing music, or reading scripture; our communion table is open for all ages to come eat and drink, including children. Sometimes, we have the chaos of a baby babbling or crying, a toddler wandering, or a 4th grader reading during her mother's sermon. By now, most adults in the pews have grown used to the chaos. I have even seen some adults without young kids welcome someone else's children into their pew, so that the child's parent can have some spiritual space to meditate and listen to the sermon.

One of the reasons our church is this way is that as we learn to accommodate these distractions, we realize they are not distractions after all. They are actually practices in the art of creating a welcoming presence for Jesus himself. Not only that; being in the practice of welcome, we learn to notice the vulnerability and need-- in other words, the holiness-- of other marginalized groups. As we become ready to serve them, we become better ready to serve Christ. At the same time, some of us may even find care and healing for the child we once were. As we are shaped these ways in the context of worship, we are prepared when we leave worship to extend our care: whether it is getting vaccinated so that children who cannot be vaccinated can be safer; providing shelter for children of survivors of domestic violence, with their mothers; and even working on a more global peace and justice, as we consider the impact of our local actions and policies on the children and other vulnerable groups of the world.

Welcome to the Presbyterian Church in Leonia on this Gathering Sunday. Some of you have been coming here week after week, and some are new. No matter who you are, or what brought you here today or online to worship, I imagine some piece of you came seeking some sense of welcome before God and the community of Christ. I hope we have done our job of welcoming you. But I invite you, if you want to deepen the meaning of welcome before God, to consider what you might do to welcome someone else. It is in the vulnerability of the invitation, and in the service of welcome, that we might get the chance to embrace God.