

Sixteenth Sunday After Pentecost  
Text: Mark 9:30-37  
Preacher: Vicar Stephanie Kershner

St. Peter's – Lafayette Hill, PA  
September 20, 2009

### “Welcoming the Children”

The gospel reading from Mark is quite appropriate for my official installation as vicar today. When I first started the candidacy process for ordination in the Lutheran church several years ago I was constantly sharing my call story. Today, I would like to share some of that story with you.

I grew up going to Lutheran summer camp. At the end of every school year I would be filled with much excitement as I waited until that one week where I would get to make new friends, play games, eat s'mores, sing songs, and experience God's creation and word in the middle of the woods at Camp Frederick. I loved it. But, as I grew older, high school activities and obligations began to consume my summer months and I was no longer able to attend my beloved Camp Frederick.

In March of 2002 I longed to experience summer church camp again, as a counselor. I applied to Lutheran Outdoor Ministries of Ohio and selected Camp Frederick as my first choice of employment. One month later I received a call from the director of Lutheran Outdoor Ministries of Ohio. He told me that a camp in Upstate New York was going to be training counselors to work with children that were affected by the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center on September 11<sup>th</sup>. He asked if I would be interested in going to New York. Without hesitation I said yes. The Director forwarded my application to Camp Koinonia in Highland Lake, New York. In May, the associate director of Koinonia called me, interviewed me over the phone, and hired me. This was one week before I needed to be in New York for staff orientation. One week. I didn't have anything I needed (Koinonia is a wilderness camp – no flush toilets, no ceilings in the shower houses, no lights in the cabins, and there were black bears – an animal I had never seen in the wild before). I didn't even know how I was going to get there. Lisa put me in touch with a couple other college students who lived in Ohio to see if I could make the trip with them. Six days after I was hired, I met Erika, who lived in Cleveland and we drove the 9 ½ hours across Pennsylvania and most of New York and arrived at Camp Koinonia.

Staff orientation was incredibly intense. There were fifteen of us. The largest group of counselors Camp Koinonia had employed in several years. We endured hours of wilderness training. We camped out as a group across the lake, far away from our cabins, we canoed twenty-six miles of the Delaware River, we cooked most of our food over a fire. And then, after we had become a tight knit group, a community, we went into New York City. For a week we peered at the rubble of the towers through the chain link fence, we saw the faces of those who were killed at makeshift memorials on the city streets, we heard the heart wrenching stories of police officers and fire fighters who were there on that awful morning. We were emotional, we were exhausted, and we were scared. But, we knew that so many children needed a safe place: a place where they could go and play, and hear bible stories, and sing songs, and just be a kid again. We were as ready as

we could be. So we welcomed the children. All children. White, Hispanic, African-American, upper class, lower class, Christian, Jewish, Muslim. We welcomed the children. Into Lutheran churches in Manhattan, Brooklyn, Staten Island, Queens, and the Bronx. We welcomed the children into our hearts.

During that first summer working as a camp counselor I learned so much. I learned from Brian, that he and his friend John watched from the boys' bathroom at his school as the second plane flew into the South Tower. Brian and John, both nine years old, were the ones to first tell their teacher and the other students in their classroom what had happened. I learned from eleven year old Chelsea that she was very sad about the people who died that day but that her father, a construction worker who had been unemployed for almost a year, had a job again. I learned from Sarah, a five year old, that playing a silly relay game can make you feel happy and alive again. And I learned from thirteen year old Thomas that no one really has a good answer to that hard question: why did God let this happen? I learned that just listening means a lot.

I went back and worked at Camp Koinonia every summer until I graduated from college. In May 2004 I moved to the camp and became a member of its year round staff. I hosted retreat groups and taught outdoor education classes in the woods. And I spent six months in New York City teaching at an afterschool program at a church in Chinatown and working in the development office at Lutheran Social Services of New York.

It was my plan to take a year off after graduation, work at Camp Koinonia, and then go back to school somewhere and get my Master's in Music. However, this was not God's plan. Working with children, playing with children, acting like a child myself, transformed me. It brought out gifts in me that I didn't even know I had.

My boss and mentor at Camp Koinonia, and now my friend, Pastor Ann Tiemeyer, saw these gifts in me as I worked with the kids. Gifts for ministry. For months she encouraged me to start the candidacy process, to apply to seminary but I just brushed it off. I had never imagined myself as a pastor. One day, Pastor Ann said: "Stephanie, you can always apply to seminary that doesn't mean you have to go." So, I followed her advice. And I do believe I have been called to the ministry of word and sacrament. A call that I have heard and followed.

I imagine a lot of us would say that the old saying "Children are to be seen and not heard." isn't really followed anymore. Maybe some of you wish it was. I believe that this definitely should not be followed in church. All children should be welcomed in church. The sounds of a baby crying in the back of the sanctuary, or a toddler quickly flipping through the pages of a hymnal is the sound of a healthy church, the future of a church. This is one of the wonderful aspects of St. Peter's. During my three months here I have had several parents tell me that the reason their family joined St. Peter's is because when they walked through those doors there were children sitting in the pews.

This gospel lesson seems so loving and tender. But, in the time of Jesus, a child was lowest on the priority list. Children were pushed to the margins of society. They were

not welcomed. Even in medieval times children were not valued. Thomas Aquinas, one of the Catholic church's greatest theologians and philosophers, actually taught that in a raging fire a husband was obliged to save his father first, then his mother, next his wife, and last of all his young child. This pretty, sweet picture of Jesus taking a child and holding her on his lap was rather perplexing to the disciples. They want to know how to get to the top, to claim greatness, and Jesus tells them to lay claim to the last and lowest place, the place of a child. This makes no sense to the disciples. Why would they welcome someone who doesn't have the power to welcome them in return? But Jesus certainly welcomed those who did not have any power: children, women, the blind, the deaf, lepers, the poor...

We know children are not powerless. Children transform lives. Anyone who has a daughter or a son knows this. As someone who has no children, I know this. But, to be transformed we must interact with them. We must welcome them into our hearts. We must turn off the tv's, the video games, the computers, put down the cell phones and allow ourselves to be transformed by a conversation, a walk in the park, reading a book, a meal together, playing a silly game together, praying together. Children are all around us, wanting to be welcomed. Most are just waiting for the invitation. Amen.