

Proper 20, Year B

- Loren and I - huge Disney World fans
- First vacation we took together, got engaged there, went on our honeymoon there, celebrated our first anniversary there - and you would probably not go broke betting that our next big family vacation will be taking the boys on their first trip to Disney
- Now that we have kids, that's a lot more normal, but people used to look at me askance before we had children and I would talk about how much I loved Disney
- But there are several good reasons for it; the food is incredible, the design of the place is ingenious in just about every imaginable way... but more than anything, there really is something magical about that place that they call "most magical place on earth"
- And it begins the moment you walk into the park - it really does feel like you're transported to a whole new world - I always talk about how easy it is to forget about your worries and your strife
- And a big part of it is summed up in a rather famous Disney song from Beauty and the Beast: "Be our guest"
- That's what everyone who comes to the park is called. "Guests." Not simply taken for granted, not called customers, not even visitors, but guests.
- And everything about the park is designed to make you feel this in your bones - **everyone** seems happy to see you, everyone makes you feel like they really and truly want you to be there
- Those of you who've been there know what I mean, and those of you who haven't, just trust me when I say that it's really quite something - very different from what we tend to encounter in the rest of our daily life
- It's one of the few places I've been that truly seems to understand the word "welcome"
- Ever since I read the Gospel for this Sunday, I've been thinking about this Disney ethos
- "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me," Jesus says
- Hard to overstate how big a deal this is, how much an affront this is to the disciples - they're the ones who've been following him around, they're the ones who've put in all the work, they're the ones who've dedicated their lives to his teaching
- And here he is, saying, welcome these children into your midst - these tiny human beings that society so often sees as nothing more than potential adults - beings that will one day grow into what the world considers people

- And not just have them around and humor them, but in them, **see me, recognize me**
- It's similar to another famous passage, right, from Matthew's Gospel?
- I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me... just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."
- So while I don't wish for a second to undermine the power of Christ's words: he **is**, absolutely, saying to welcome children into our midst - but by that he doesn't mean only children - he means everyone we tend to overlook, to forget about, to take for granted
- Jesus might as well be telling us, "Be willing to look for me, to seek me everywhere, in everyone you meet... and be willing to welcome them."
- To welcome them
- But what does that word mean?
- If Christ is telling the disciples, you should welcome these children just as you'd welcome me, he's saying something a bit stronger than "tolerate" or "allow the presence of"
- He's saying, receive them as you would me - accept them just like you'd accept me
- And if you can't, if you're unwilling to do that, Jesus seems to be saying, then you haven't really understood my message, haven't really comprehended what I've been teaching you this whole time
- Now, if you took a survey and asked Episcopal churches to all describe themselves, I'd be willing to bet that there's one word that virtually every single church would choose to use.
- I think you know the one I mean. We all want to come from a welcoming church - are all invested in thinking of our community as welcoming
- But, I think, if this is the standard that Christ lays out, we all tend to fall a little short, right? Even here at Grace, where I've felt more welcomed than any other parish I've been... None of us have quite gotten it perfect...
- If we're being honest, few churches have even reached the standard of welcome that Disney World sets, much less the one Jesus Christ does
- There are some people we can be that welcoming of, to be sure, on our best days - but it's hard for us to see Christ in those the world has taught us to discount, to view as somehow less than
- But the work of Christ wasn't accomplished through success as the world sees it
- Jesus was not among the powerful and highly-regarded of his time

- So there is a certainly sense in him asking us, “if you can’t welcome the most helpless, the most in need of care, then how can you honestly expect to welcome me?”
- What might it mean, then, as we try to live out Jesus’ vision of welcoming, if we took a few hints from Disney World - they have a clear vision of what they want to do, how they want to treat everyone who walks through their gates - as guests
- Imagine if all of our churches had such a clear idea of how to treat everyone who walked through our doors
- Imagine if all of our churches were so clear about how much we value one another and everyone we encounter, how happy we are to see them and how deeply we want to see them pleased and fulfilled and joyful
- Imagine if in our daily lives, all of us as followers of Christ were willing to forget about our own power, our own successes, and receive the most vulnerable, just as we would our Lord and savior
- I don’t know about you, but that’s one Kingdom I’d love to visit