

SCRIPTURE COMMENTARY

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Sometimes adults and children make an uneasy blend. Adults can often feel that their work is more important, and their conversation more meaningful. They see children's matters like children themselves: small and irrelevant. The hopes and heartbreaks of children don't seem particularly important or relevant to many in an adult world.

Grandiose adult visions can inflate until they crowd out any view of the small and the young. Such was the case with Jesus' disciples in the Gospel of Mark and in this pericope. The disciples just don't seem to understand who Jesus is and what he has come to bring about on earth. Instead, they are caught up in their limited dreams and visions of what discipleship means.

For eight chapters in the Gospel of Mark, the writer has been trying to show us who Jesus is. In typically rapid-fire Markan fashion, the narrative has taken us through the proclamation of John the Baptist, the Baptism of Jesus, the Temptation in the Wilderness, countless exorcisms and healings, and several miracles. The Twelve are called. The sick are cured. The possessed are set free. The hungry are fed. When Jesus comes to town, stuff happens. This Jesus is something new altogether.

In the midst of this tumultuous pace, the narrative slows long enough for a pivotal declaration in Chapter 8. Jesus is on the road with his disciples. "Who do people say that I am?" he asks. The disciples give various responses. Then the focus narrows. In response to Jesus' poignant and piercing question, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter responds, "You are the Messiah."

Peter's faith confession forms the hinge for the entire Gospel of Mark. From this point forward, Jesus reveals more and more of his nature as the Messiah. He begins to teach the disciples what it means to be a follower of the Messiah. "If any want to become my followers," Jesus says in Mark 8: 34, "let them deny themselves and take up the cross and follow me."

Jesus' disciples repeatedly fail to understand the nature of the Messiah and the cost of discipleship. In verses 30 through 32 of the lectionary text, Jesus is trying to teach his obtuse followers as they travel through Galilee. He tells them that the "Son of Man" will be betrayed and killed, but that he will rise again. Characteristically, the disciples do not understand their teacher, but they are afraid to ask him what he means. They do not seem to know that Jesus is referring to himself as the "Son of Man."

When the group arrives in Capernaum, they are questioned by Jesus about their argument along the road. They had been arguing about who was the greatest, a point of controversy among social groups in antiquity. No one will answer Jesus' query, but he seems to know already the texture of their dispute. Jesus sits down to teach and says succinctly that those who wish to be first must place themselves last of all, as a servant to all.

Jesus further demonstrates what he means when he talks about being last. He takes a little child (paideon in the Greek) and places the youngster in the midst of all of the assembled adult men. This little child is an example of powerlessness. He gathers the child into his arms and says that to welcome a child in his name is to welcome him. By saying "a child in my name," Jesus is referring to the disciples. Followers of Jesus are as dependent on hospitality and welcome as a little child. Followers of Jesus are without power and status in the world. They form kinship with the little and least for they have become as the little and the least. Any act of hospitality performed towards a child—a disciple—is the same as offering that hospitality to the Messiah, Son of God and Son of Man. Moreover, any act of hospitality offered to Jesus is the same as offering that act towards the one who sent him, whom we Easter people know to be God. The kenotic power of the Triune God stands behind all that Jesus says and does. This same kenotic power fills all that Jesus' disciples do in the world.

PASTORAL REFLECTION

BY REV. MOLLY SHIVERS

There's nothing like the first day of school. When I was a child, I would wake up on the first day of school with a mixture that was about 95% excitement and 5% fear. The fear came from not knowing who my teacher was and not knowing who was going to be in my class. Would my teacher be the same one that my sister had the year before? Would my friends be in my class? Would that same insufferable boy be in my class, too?

The early-morning August air was mild and moist as I walked from my house to Estes Hills Elementary School in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. It seemed like the tang of expectation hovered in the air along with the humidity. As I emerged from the trail onto the playground, I eagerly scanned the grounds for my friends. I crossed the playground towards the school building, already knowing which corridor I needed to travel in order to find my new classroom. I had enrolled at Estes Hills as a second grader, and I attended there through sixth grade (those were the days before 6th – 8th grade Middle School).

How did I know which class to enter? I learned my new classroom when I saw my name by the door. In the younger grades, my name might be written on a picture of a bright red apple or a jaunty yellow box of crayons. In the older grades, my name might simply be on a list posted by the door, but my name was always there.

In second grade, I hadn't yet learned the word hospitality, but I sure knew what hospitality felt like. Hospitality felt like my name posted by the door. Hospitality also felt like the smiling welcome of my new teacher. My teacher waited by the door that first day of school, as eager to meet me as I was to meet him or her. In fact, in some ways, it seemed that my teacher already knew me, and not just because he or she had instructed my older sister the previous year! Somehow the weeks of preparation that my new teacher had put in while preparing for my arrival had established a prevenient hope and a relationship between the two of us.

As an adult, I think often about the teachers of my childhood. I have my own child in school now, and I see from the perspective of one who is no longer an enrolled student, but a parent. I see local school board meetings that rival tabloid television in their rhetoric. I see principals and superintendents statewide fight to attract and retain quality teachers. I see the achievement gap continue to widen in a divided Chapel Hill. I see middle schools and high schools consistently hiring security guards. I see funds for music and arts education shrinking. I see overwhelmed special resources and special education teachers. I see the uneasy panacea of end-of-grade testing rule the day while children continue to get left behind.

If we take Jesus' actions of Mark 9: 30 – 37 seriously, we must consider the littlest and the least in any situation that we encounter as people of faith. Who are the littlest and least in public education? Obviously, the children would qualify as the littlest, and they often get the least. Public education is supposed to benefit children primarily, but it seems the adults get so busy arguing that they lose sight of the children. The children are then left on the fringes, out on the margins of the discussion, waiting for the adults to decide who they think is the greatest and the best.

Next, consider the teachers. According to the National Education Association, "The statistics for turnover among new teachers are startling. Some 20 percent of all new hires leave the classroom within three years. In urban districts, the numbers are worse—close to 50 percent of newcomers flee the profession during their first five years of teaching" (www.greatpublicschools.org). In this current climate, simply showing up for work in the public schools has become an act of faith. How can we draw teachers back into the room, into the center of the discussion and the embrace of supportive communities?

I wonder if we have become like Jesus' disciples who argue along the road about who is greatest. We are adults busy viewing the world in the way that we like; we are so consumed with grandiose dreams and faithless visions that we don't see the children. Oh, the interest of the children makes a great tag line for the latest political scheme. Consider, for example, the great hoax of the "Education Lottery" perpetrated upon the people of North Carolina. This lottery is supposed to benefit the children, but, will it—really? According to the Raleigh Report, published by the North Carolina Council of Churches, "The pattern in other states has been that funding from the state budget drops about as much as lottery revenues provide to a dedicated purpose . . . The result is that, a few years later, education is no better off financially than it was to begin with" (Raleigh Report, March 24, 2005).

People of faith are mandated to care for the littlest and the least. Support of the children educated in our public school systems and the adults who teach them can take many forms. The first step is to become like a child, receiving the hospitality of a loving Savior. For God, every day is like the first day of school. Our names are posted by God's door and God waits just inside to welcome us.

WORSHIP AID – ‘WHOEVER WELCOMES ONE SUCH CHILD’

RESPONSIVE READING

We give you thanks, O God:

For the splendor of your creation and the amazing beauty of our world.

We thank you, Lord.

For the wonder of life; for minds to think and hearts to love and hands to serve.

We thank you, Lord.

For our parents and grandparents, for teachers, for friends, for all who have helped us to grow and learn to love whatever is just and true and good.

We thank you, Lord.

For the gift of all children today in our family and in our community and the blessing and joy of caring for them and bringing them up.

We thank you, Lord.

Direct us, O Lord, in all our doings:

Guide us and help us, O Lord.

In our homes that we may have calm strength and patient wisdom to bring up our children,

Guide us and help us, O Lord.

In our communities of North Carolina as we offer all children the quality and varieties of education and other services they need to participate fully in the creation of a just and peaceful society.

Guide us and help us, O Lord.

In giving our ideas, talents, and support to our public schools, to local and state school boards and legislative bodies which are responsible for educating 90% of the children of North Carolina, so that we may ensure quality education for all,

Guide us and help us, O Lord.

In finding ways to assist teachers and staff and administrators of our public schools so that they may be renewed continually in their chosen vocation to help all your children to develop their gifts fully – physically, intellectually, socially, and spiritually,

Guide us and help us, O Lord.

That our children and young people may be inspired and mentored and grow in their will and the vision to learn.

Guide us and help us, O Lord.

Loving God, we are beginning a new school year. We will learn more about your creation and what we can do to make it a good place for all. We will make new friends and be with old friends. We do not expect it to be easy. Still we know you will be with us every step of the way, to guide us, to give us understanding and strength, to pick us up if we fall, and help us to make new beginnings. We promise we will do all we can to find ways to serve you and all whom you have made and love.

Amen.

(from the NC Council of Churches' Committee on Public Education, Celebrating a Public Education Sabbath)

SUGGESTED HYMNS

- | | |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ His Eye Is On the Sparrow ✓ Come, Teach Us, Spirit of our God ✓ Bless All Those Who Nurture Children ✓ Earth and All Stars | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> UMH 549/TH 581/NCH 396/
MW 785 NCH 287 MW 665 PH 458/TH 412/LW438 |
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w Hymnal Legend w

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| † UMH – United Methodist Hymnal |
| † PH – Presbyterian Hymnal |
| † TH – The Hymnal 1982 (Episcopal) |
| † MW – Moravian Book of Worship |
| † NCH—New Century Hymnal (UCC) |
| † LW—Lutheran Worship |

ADDITIONAL PRAYERS

You Came as a Child

Lord Jesus, we remember you came to us as a baby, and lived among us as a child. You needed the care and attention of your family and community to grow and to learn according to God's plan. You understand what this is like. Today we pray for the children who have the task of growing and learning in our day. They are both blessed with opportunities and challenged by obstacles. We pray that you open our eyes. In what ways are you calling your people to help? How can we work toward assuring that all children get the chance to "increase in wisdom and stature" and to grow into the persons you would have them be? Guide us individually and as a congregation. In your leading, we place our hope. Amen.

(from the NC Council of Churches' Committee on Public Education, Celebrating a Public Education Sabbath)

ALTERNATIVE RESPONSIVE READING

Lord, who kept not the children from coming to you,
who welcomed them into your arms, who told us that we must come to you with the faith of a child,

We pray for the children in our communities who are receiving their education from public schools. As many of us were educated in the public school system, we ask your guidance and wisdom in sustaining the school system, a system that welcomes all children regardless of race, ethnicity, geography, gender, disability, or economic status.

Almighty God, the Benevolent Teacher, we ask special blessings upon the teachers in our public schools who work for a modest income to teach our children to become responsible citizens and seekers of wisdom and knowledge.

Give them energy and vision for their passion, so that our children may be in good hands. We ask that you give us strength to work tirelessly to improve the education system for the betterment of the whole community – to work to ensure that all of our children are afforded an equal opportunity to receive a good education.

Amen.

(by Jason R. Jenkins, with material from the NC Council of Churches website)

ADDITIONAL HELPS

• QUOTES •

The function of education is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically... Intelligence plus character - that is the goal of true education.

Martin Luther King, Jr.

Educating the mind without educating the heart is no education at all.

Aristotle

The highest result of education is tolerance.

Helen Keller

When schools flourish, all flourishes.

Martin Luther

The tax which will be paid for the purpose of education is not more than the thousandth part of what will be paid to kings, priests and nobles who will rise up among us if we leave the people in ignorance.

Thomas Jefferson

WHAT THE COURTS DECIDED IN THE LEANDRO CASE: A BRIEF HISTORY

(prepared for the Covenant with North Carolina's Children by the NC Child Advocacy Institute – NCCAI; accessible at www.ncchild.org/education.htm)

In 1994, a lawsuit was filed against the State of North Carolina by parents, children and school districts in five low-wealth rural counties (Hoke, Halifax, Robeson, Vance and Cumberland). The Plaintiffs (including the Leandro family) argued that, despite higher than average tax rates, schools in these counties ended up with lower than average tax revenues. This meant that these school districts did not have enough money to provide an equal education for their children. For example, they could not compete with wealthier school districts in terms of teacher pay, special services or educational materials.

The heart of the Plaintiff's case was the argument that the quality of a child's education ought not be dependent upon the wealth of the family and community into which that child was born. It costs more to properly educate disadvantaged children, but the State had not done enough to equalize school funding across North Carolina. The Plaintiff's proposed solution was a higher level of stable funding for these low-wealth counties. A number of urban school districts were allowed to intervene in the Leandro lawsuit. They raised a second and equally important issue. They claimed that their schools were burdened with large numbers and heavy concentrations of disadvantaged and more-costly-to-educate students. Therefore, they argued that the State Constitution requires North Carolina to provide schools anywhere in the state with "adequate" resources to fully educate disadvantaged—that is, poor, special education and Limited English Proficiency—students.

The Leandro case made its way to the NC Supreme Court. In 1997, the Supreme Court handed down a landmark decision. A unanimous Court stated that neither school districts nor counties have any constitutional right to equal funding. But the Court went on to rule that children – indeed, all children residing in North Carolina – have a fundamental state constitutional right to the "equal opportunity to receive a sound basic education." Of equal significance, the Supreme Court ruled that the State of North Carolina, not local school districts, has the ultimate constitutional obligation to actively safeguard and successfully deliver every child's Leandro rights. No exceptions. No excuses.

The Court defined a sound basic education as that which provides children and youth with all the opportunities necessary to become an adult possessing:

1. Sufficient ability to read, write and speak the English language and a sufficient knowledge of fundamental mathematics and physical science to enable the student to function in a complex and rapidly changing society;
2. Sufficient fundamental knowledge of geography, history, and basic economic and political systems to enable the student to make informed choices with regard to issues that affect the student personally or affect the student's community, state, and nation;
3. Sufficient academic and vocational skills to enable the student to successfully engage in post-secondary education or vocational training; and
4. Sufficient academic and vocational skills to enable the student to compete on an equal basis with others in further formal education or gainful employment in contemporary society.

Having found that children have a constitutional right to a sound basic education, the Supreme Court handed the Leandro case over to Superior Court Judge Howard Manning. He was directed to conduct a trial to determine whether the State of North Carolina had, in fact, failed to provide all children with the equal opportunity for a sound basic education. If so, then Judge Manning was empowered to rule upon the remedies needed to ensure each child's Leandro rights. Judge Manning held extensive hearings and collected a great deal of evidence in the following years.

Judge Manning issued a series of four detailed decisions, culminating with his Final Ruling in April of 2002. He found that there are many children who are not receiving a sound basic education – and thus, children whose Leandro rights are being violated. He ruled that the State of North Carolina is not meeting its constitutional obligations to all children. Judge Manning concluded that: (1) every child is entitled to have a competent teacher; (2) every school must have a competent principal; and, (3) every school district must have the resources necessary to adequately support these students, teachers and principals.

The State of North Carolina appealed Judge Manning's ruling and the case ended up back in front of the NC Supreme Court for a second time. In July of 2004, the Justices once again unanimously affirmed every child's Leandro right to the "equal opportunity to receive a sound basic education". In fact, they were even more explicit about the fact that all North Carolina children – not just those currently enrolled in public schools – have an equal Leandro right. For example, the Court ruled that the "infant Zoe and the toddler Riley" have the same state constitutional rights as an at-risk high school student.

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The Justices upheld nearly all of Judge Manning’s rulings and handed the case back to him. Judge Manning’s charge now is to ensure that the State implements remedies that bring the State’s education system into compliance with the Constitution. The Court’s decisions in the Leandro case are now the law of the land. As the Court stated, it is now the responsibility of the General Assembly and Governor to come up with the needed remedies.

The focus of the decision-making around Leandro has now shifted from the courts to the General Assembly. In particular, the NC House and the NC Senate have the constitutional responsibility – and the legal authority – to pass legislation.

• CONTACTS AND OTHER RESOURCES •

- W www.nccouncilofchurches.org/areasofwork/issues/public_education/public_education_issue.html - North Carolina Council of Churches, Public Education focus site. Contains a link to the Council’s Policy Statement entitled “Congregations and the Public Schools: A Statement of the Public Education Committee,” as well as a link to the Public Education Committee of the NC Council of Churches. On the Committee’s homepage, the following useful resources may be found: a 23-page packet designed to instruct churches on how to offer a Public Education Sabbath; an instructive resource on Education Vouchers; and a pamphlet on how local congregations can be more involved with public schools.
- W www.ncjustice.org – North Carolina Justice Center, North Carolina’s leading private, nonprofit anti-poverty organization. Its mission is to reduce and eliminate poverty in North Carolina by helping to ensure that every North Carolina household gains access to the resources, services and fair treatment that it needs in order to enjoy economic security. The Justice Center’s focus in Public Education can be found on their homepage, under ‘Areas of Work.’
- W www.ncchild.org—North Carolina Child Advocacy Institute, As a statewide, non-profit, nonpartisan organization, NCCAI promotes well-informed governmental decisions by compiling and widely sharing accurate, up-to-date statistics; analyzing indicators of child well-being; and conducting policy research and development. To advance the best interests of children and youth, NCCAI directly influences the attitudes and actions of citizens across North Carolina. NCCAI currently focuses on four issue areas: Child Health and Safety, Early Care and Education, Child Maltreatment, and Juvenile Justice.
- W www.cisnc.org - Communities in Schools of North Carolina, an independently incorporated not-for-profit directed by a board of directors representing both private and public interests in the state... Communities In Schools is the nation’s largest stay-in-school network, serving just over one million youth in 154 communities across the United States. CIS is providing the link between teachers and the community – by bringing caring adults into the schools and community sites to meet children’s needs.
- W <http://ncforum.org> – Public School Forum of North Carolina, a not-for-profit policy think tank which is a partnership of business leaders, education leaders, and government leaders in North Carolina. In addition to research and work in the public policy arena, the Forum oversees programs in communities across the state. Currently, the organization has created and oversees a network of twenty elementary- and middle-school programs that offer young people the hourly equivalent of eighty additional days of school and another network of high schools that have introduced hands-on technology training into their curriculum.
- W www.nccumc.org/hand—Hand in Hand, a project of the North Carolina Conference of the United Methodist Church that equips churches of all sizes to build a supportive partnership with a local public school in order to reach out to children and youth in the community who are in need of support. The partnership also strives to build a more supportive relationship between the church and the school staff.

KEY FACTS

DID YOU KNOW?

- q More children are enrolled in our public schools than ever before - 1.4 million children attended public schools last year in North Carolina alone. But nearly a third of new teachers nationwide quit within their first three years after facing low pay and overcrowded classrooms. Additionally, schools in North Carolina need \$7.52 billion for repairs and modernization, and only 10 percent of North Carolina students participate in after-school programs.¹

- q Since 2001 North Carolina has not received any federal funding specifically for class size reduction. And the White House's 2005 budget is more than \$5 million short on funding promised for improving teacher quality - funding that could be used to hire more than 175 teachers.²
- q On average, 35% to 40% of North Carolina students do not receive a high school diploma at the end of four years, and the state ranks 41 out of 51 (which includes the District of Columbia) in successfully graduating students from high school. In the North Carolina 2003-04 school year, more than 126,000 students tested in grades 3-8 performed below grade level.³
- q Further contributing to the significant number of students who exit the school system without a high school diploma is an increase in the number of students suspended and/or expelled from public schools. In 2002-03, for the third consecutive year, the number of long-term suspensions in the state increased by 14%. Expulsions also increased from 256 in 2001-02 to 381 in 2002-03. Almost 4,000 students received long-term suspensions from school, meaning they were given suspensions longer than ten days and up to 365 days.⁴
- q The North Carolina suspension rate is 45% higher than the United States average (2003). Additionally, the number of yearly suspensions is growing twelve times faster than the general student population. In all, more than 1-out-of-every-10 students and 6-out-of-every-10 black male students in North Carolina are suspended from school. Black males are also disproportionately represented in juvenile justice and prison systems, as well as among dropouts.⁵
- q For the North Carolina 2004-2005 school year, 84.6% of all students in grades 3 through 8 tested at or above grade level in reading comprehension. Caucasian students performed better (91.2%) than African Americans (74.7%) or Latinos (73.3%). A similar achievement gap was found in mathematics: 87.3% of all students tested at or above grade level—93.0% of Caucasian students, compared to 81.9% of Latinos and 77.5% of African Americans.⁶
- q Almost 40% of North Carolinians live in rural communities, and the state has the second largest total rural population in the nation—nearly 3.2 million people. The U.S. average is 21%. Among North Carolina's rural student population, nearly one-third (31.1%) is minority and nearly two in five (38.6%) are from sufficiently low-income homes that they qualify for subsidized lunches.⁷
- q North Carolina is 43rd among the states in per capita spending on public schools. Governing Magazine's Sourcebook ranks the state slightly better when it comes to actual classroom spending per pupil: North Carolina is 40th in that measurement.⁸
- q Commenting on the adopted North Carolina State Budget for FY 2005-6 which seeks to give North Carolina teachers a modest pay raise, Chris Fitzsimon states, "even with teacher salaries, talking about a pay raise is misleading. Teacher pay is based on a salary schedule that guarantees teachers an annual increase based on having an additional year of experience. This year's budget simply spends the money to pay for that automatic increase and funds an increase in the overall pay schedule of a third of one percent. A teacher with a bachelor's degree beginning his or her fourth year in the classroom expected to earn \$29,230 this year, according to the pay schedule, \$1400 more than last year. The final budget means that a 4th-year teacher will get a salary this year of \$100 more than that, or \$29,330. You could argue that is the actual raise for that teacher, \$100. That is some commitment to raising teacher salaries."⁹

1. North Carolina Fact Sheet, The National Mobilization for Great Public Schools, www.greatpublicschools.org/site/pp.asp?c=eqLJKTNKE&b=137669#Public_Schools.

2. Ibid.

3. North Carolina Justice Center's report, "Common Ground: An Opportunity for a Sound Basic Education," December 2004, Accessible at www.ncjustice.org/cms/index.php?pid=69.

4. Ibid, 10.

5. North Carolina Child Advocacy Institute's study, "One Out of Ten: The Growing Suspension Crisis in North Carolina," pp. 2 & 4; www.ncchild.org/images/stories/Suspension_Report_September_2005.pdf.

6. North Carolina Public Schools website, www.ncpublicschools.org/accountability/.

7. Ibid, 13; citing Elizabeth Beeson and Marty Strange. Why Rural Matters 2003: The Continuing Need for Every State to Take Action on Rural Education. Performance Indicators, Tables 1-7. Rural School and Community Trust, www.ruraledu.org/issues/analysis.htm.

8. "Education Rhetoric and Education Funding Reality," Chris Fitzsimon, www.ncpolicywatch.com/cms.

9. Ibid.