

The German word for these young geniuses is *wunderkind* – kids who are natural wonders. That would have been a curious designation in Jesus' day, when children weren't even really considered to be people until they reached the age of 13 and underwent the rite of passage to adulthood. At that point, having survived their early years in an ancient culture with a high rate of childhood mortality, they were *expected* to function like adults. No child prodigy awards and no scholarships for these kids.

Of course, we could argue that Jesus himself was a child prodigy, given Luke's description of the 12-year-old Jesus dazzling the teachers in the temple (2:41-52). Perhaps that's why Jesus seemed to be so fond of children, seeing in them the capacity to do great things, despite their humble status. It wasn't their IQ, but their openness that Jesus valued.

Jesus' adult disciples, on the other hand, are acting like a bunch of spoiled children with the IQ of a bag of hammers. In today's text, Jesus and the disciples are on the way back to Galilee from the mountain where Jesus was transfigured (vv. 2-13), and where the disciples had an argument with a man whose son was beset with an evil spirit (vv. 14-29). Both incidents are opportunities for Jesus to take the disciples to school, and Mark's narrative follows a similar pattern in each story: There is the incident, there is the public declaration, and then Jesus takes the disciples into a house or a private place to explain to these uncomprehending minds what is actually going on. Now, as they approached Capernaum, the hometown of some of the disciples, they began arguing about which one of them was the greatest!

Now why would they be acting so childish? Children had no status in first-century Jewish culture, but status was all the disciples seemed to strive after. Social rank was very stratified, and it was hard to move from a lower rank to a higher one. The disciples seem to see their association with Jesus as a potential elevator, whereby their own social status shoots to a higher floor. If he was truly the Messiah, Israel's promised king, then those who were closest to him would most certainly rank high in his kingdom and, perhaps, even score a box seat near the throne in Jerusalem. In the next chapter, the brothers James and John will plainly ask for as much, which reveals that they have no idea of the kind of kingdom Jesus is really talking about (10:35-45).

*What were you arguing about on the way?* Jesus asks them, but, like children caught doing something naughty, they kept silent (vv. 33-34). They were arguing about *upward* mobility, and yet Jesus reminds them that following him is completely an act of *downward* mobility. *Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all*, he says to them. The

wunderkinds in Jesus' kingdom aren't the ones with the highest test scores, but the ones who willingly take the place of the lowest class, and volunteer to serve everyone else. It's not about the intelligence test so much as it is about the test of servanthood.

To illustrate the point, Jesus places a child among them. He gathers the child in his arms as if to reveal that this child, one of the many who ran around Capernaum getting underfoot, was the most important person in the world at that moment. This child was probably no Mensa kid; probably no different than any child living in poverty at the lowest rung of the social ladder.

Yet, the poverty child is the prodigy child Jesus lifts up. This child exemplifies the values of Jesus. *Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me*, says Jesus, *and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me* (v. 37). Indeed, Jesus will soon reveal that those who are the most prodigious of his disciples are the ones who become just like a child – humble in heart, open to God's Spirit, willing to learn, and ready to serve (10:13-16).

So, on this Rally Sunday, it might be good for us to ask: what can children teach us? *Children are not our personal avatars*. We're fascinated with wunderkinds, because, like people in the ancient world, we're still concerned about status. We're so anxious for kids to grow up, to act and to produce like adults that we go to great lengths to accelerate the process - largely because we expect our kids to realize our own hopes and dreams.

*Children do not exist to validate us*. The parent who argues with teachers in an attempt to turn an A- into an A+ is seeking perfection in the child and validation for herself. The parent who pushes the child to excel in sports may be trying to work out his own unfulfilled fantasies of scholarships and professional contracts. We value intelligence, physical ability, physical attractiveness and the ability to produce and we lay those expectations on our children, hoping that we will be seen as good parents when they achieve a status better than our own.

*Children remind us that humility, vulnerability and weakness are okay*. The Bible teaches us the importance of humility. Being honest about our vulnerability gives others an opportunity to assist us, and thus to fulfil their ministries. And weaknesses - we all have them - are also cracks through which the light of God can shine (2 Cor. 12:9-10).

*Jesus blessed the children; so should we*. Jesus puts a child front and center, and offers a profound vision: children are people of sacred worth. If you welcome them, particularly the

least of them, you are welcoming Jesus himself, and, if you welcome Jesus, then you are welcoming God. Until we first welcome children for simply being children of God, we'll fail to see that every child is a *wunderkind* - genius or not.

*We should worry less about the future, and be in the moment more often.* The disciples are fretting about their role in the coming kingdom. They should be more like these children, Jesus said. He reminds them, and us, that in God's Kingdom *The last shall be first, and the first shall be last; the greatest persons among us are the servants; and we are to be childlike, but not child-ish!*

So then, as children of God, let us begin this academic year open to Jesus and his teachings, welcoming one another in God's name, humble in the Spirit and ready to serve. As God's children, we are a special kind of prodigy: we are children blessed by God. We are prodigious children of God!

Prayer: Loving God, your Son told his disciples to become like little children. Lead us to work for the welfare and protection of all young people. May we respect their dignity that they may flourish in life, following the example of the same Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

#### Sources:

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## Prodigious Children of God

**Rally Sunday, September 13, 2015**

**The Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN**

### Mark 9:30-37

In 2014, the *Lifetime* channel sponsored an intelligence contest called *Child Genius* that offered a coveted \$100,000 college scholarship along with bragging rights for being the smartest kid of the year. The show followed 20 gifted kids from around the country as they prepared for the competition. They were given 16 rigorous tests on subjects like math and geography. They were tested on memorization. The winner was 13-year-old Vanya Shivashankar of Olathe, Kansas, who was also headed to the Scripps National Spelling Bee for the fourth straight year.

Kids with an IQ approaching that of an Albert Einstein or a Stephen Hawking are often known as "child prodigies." These kids have brains that function on a level equal to or better than most adults. Last year, in fact, Paulius Zobotka, a 14-year-old in the United Kingdom, scored two points *higher* on an IQ test than either Einstein or Hawking - a brain-bending 162 on the scale (Normal IQ = 85-115; Genius IQ = 140) placing him in the top 1% of the world's population. His mother, who clearly has a gift for understatement, said, "Everything he does, he seems to be so good at."

History is replete with child prodigies. Blaise Pascal, the 17<sup>th</sup>-century mathematician, wrote a treatise on vibrating bodies at age 9. Mozart and Beethoven were composing at the tender ages of 5 and 7 respectively. Pablo Picasso painted *Picador* when he was 8 years old. Bobby Fisher won eight straight national chess championships beginning at the age of 13. Of course, some child prodigies are more infamous than famous, like Ted Kaczynski who was accepted into Harvard at the age of 16, but who later became known as the "Unabomber."