

Story and Meditation: Still the Child

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Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29

Mark 9:38-50

by Eric Anderson

Usually I tell stories from here in the Hawaiian Islands, and indeed most of the stories are set here on Hawai'i Island itself. But for today's story I have to go back to the place of my own birth, my childhood, and indeed most of my adulthood: the east coast of the United States, that part of it called New England.

In New England a lot of people like to feed the birds: robins, jays, cardinals, starlings, thrushes, and whoever decided that "grosbeak" was a complimentary name for a bird? They don't have gross beaks. They're quite nice beaks, maybe bigger than a myna's, but this story isn't about grosbeaks at all so I'll have to abandon this question right here.

This story is about squirrels.

As I said, people in New England frequently like to feed the birds, especially in the winter. A lot of those birds I mentioned, including the grosbeaks I wasn't going to mention again, fly somewhere warmer before winter begins. Like our kolea, which summers in Alaska but winters here, they fly hundreds or thousands of miles to avoid the cold and snow and to live where the plants are growing things for them to eat.

Other birds stay in New England, though, such as the chickadee, which looks like an 'elepaio with a black feathery cap, or the northern cardinal, which looks like the northern cardinals that live here, red with a bright red crest on the top of the head. It's for these birds that people put seed out, often in carefully crafted birdfeeders, and it's to feed these birds that a person in this story ended up in conflict with... the squirrels.

A gray squirrel looks a lot like a mongoose: gray fur and a thin body, though not as long, and with a big bushy tail that a mongoose doesn't have. Squirrels are amazing climbers and, unlike the mongoose, they eat nuts and seeds. In fact, they eat the same nuts and seeds that a lot of the birds do. Birdfeeders draw squirrels as much as birds, not because the squirrels will eat the birds, but because they both eat pretty much the same seeds.

One man was determined to prevent squirrels from getting at his birdfeeder. He came up with lots of schemes: clever places to put the birdfeeder, barriers to stop the squirrels from climbing, even strategically placed nets. Not a single one of them worked. The squirrels climbed, jumped, even twisted in midair in spectacular leaps to arrive at the feeder safe and sound.

It was a neighbor child who found our bird lover and squirrel not-so-lover in the middle of yet another complicated anti-squirrel device construction who asked, "What are you doing?"

He explained that he was trying to keep the squirrels away from the birdseed.

"Oh," said the child, and looked at the wintry landscape, with no leaves on the trees and snow on the ground. "Aren't the squirrels hungry, too?"

Bird lovers across the North American continent listened to the end of that story and gritted their teeth and are no more reconciled to feeding the squirrels than they were at the beginning of the story. I do not claim that the followers of Jesus are, in fact, called to feed squirrels as well as birds. Jesus did get pretty clear, however, about obstacles, obstructions, stumbling blocks placed before "one of these little ones."

Who did he mean? It's worth remembering last week's Gospel lesson, the verses that immediately precede this one: "Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, 'What were you arguing about on the way?' But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. 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 he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, 'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.'"

It's still the child.

With the child still present, John broke in to ask about this rogue exorcist, this caster-out of demons in Jesus' name who, John said, wasn't "one of us." As Debie Thomas writes at JourneyWithJesus.net, "Never mind that the fellow is out there doing good. Never mind that he's alleviating suffering, healing brokenness, restoring people to community, and trusting in the name of Jesus to provide powerful and necessary healing. The problem remains that he's not doing any of these things in the right way."

The right way? What is the right way to deliver someone who has lost their freedom of action to a demon? What is the right way to relieve hardship? What is the right way to relieve pain? What is the right way to end suffering? Call me naïve, but isn't the right way to... end it? As best you can at the time?

Jesus promptly reminded his disciples that at the center of the question there was still the child – the child there among them, the children of God healed by this exorcist, the children of God who might be given a cup of water. Do good things in the name of Jesus, he said, and you will think well of Jesus. More to the point, if you do good things in the name of Jesus, you will encourage those who have been blessed by that name to also think well of Jesus.

Then Jesus got stern. No barriers. No fences. No stumbling blocks. Christian community is about helping one another negotiate a world that is already filled with walls and borders and things to trip over. Christian community is not about adding more of them. As Cheryl Lindsay writes at ucc.org:

“Perhaps the most alarming part of the confession is that John doesn’t seem to be making one. For him, it’s more of a report. This is how I hear this conversation: Hey Jesus, we just want to keep you in the loop that someone was healed of their torment but we had a problem with the source of their deliverance so we tried to stop it. Imagine objecting to someone becoming free because their breakthrough came without your permission.

“Imagine deciding to put a condition of reducing childhood hunger by attaching indiscriminate requirements on parents. Imagine asking for proof of income before distributing a bag of groceries to the food insecure. Imagine limiting leadership positions in your faith community to a small group of people that you determine are acceptable.”

I know that’s a challenge to our thinking. We prefer efficient ministries that distribute limited resources to those in greatest need. We prefer not to “waste” those resources on those who do not “need” them – as if we didn’t allocate greater resources in our homes and in our churches to other things. We prefer leaders who are capable. I know I do. I do sometimes find myself with capable leaders and yearning for leaders with... compassion. Leaders who are aware that there, in the midst of us, is still the child.

Toward the end of the first century, Bishop Clement of Rome lamented, “Why are there strifes, and tumults, and divisions, and schisms, and wars among you? Have we not [all] one God and one Christ? Is there not one Spirit of grace poured out upon us? And have we not one calling in Christ? Why do we divide and tear to pieces the members of Christ, and raise up strife against our own body, and have reached such a height of madness as to forget that ‘we are members one of another?’”

Clement meant the Church. Jesus, unconcerned about a healer who was not “one of us,” meant anyone. He meant, still, the child.

How serious was he about those barriers and fences? What’s better than raising them? Drowning yourself with a millstone is better. Cutting your greedy hand off is better. Cutting your foot itching to kick someone is better. Pulling out your contemptuous eye is better. Oh, yes. Pretty serious. Because there in the midst of them, of us, is still the child.

As Karoline Lewis writes at Working Preacher, “Our penchant for ‘we saw someone’ needs to be replaced by faith’s ‘we see Jesus.’ And in Jesus, we see God. Our God is here.

“And therein lies the irony of the statement, ‘We saw someone’ because the point is, do you see God? Do you see God in the acts you saw? Do you see God in the persons who do deeds in God’s name?”

Do you? Do you see God? Do you see barriers broken, walls tumbled, stumbling blocks carefully removed and carried away? Do you see, there in the midst of us, cared for and comforted, growing and thriving, laughing and embracing, do you see, still, the child?

Amen.