

The Rev. Kate Byrd
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Too Camp for Cool

The Summer after my freshman year in college I had the privilege of spending three months in the beautiful mountains of North Carolina as a camp counselor, at an Episcopal Retreat Center, called Kanuga. And while living in a cabin in the outdoor splendor of the Appalachian Mountains was idyllic, being a camp counselor meant I had to spend it looking after and caring for other people's children. Having had a bit of babysitting experience, and after spending time assisting in Vacation Bible School I knew I would be fine with the older kids, because (for the most part) they were capable of reasoning with, but I was very hesitant when it came to counseling the younger ones. I could handle the angst and drama of the teen girls, and the silliness and chaos of the pre teens, but I had no idea how to handle the neediness and lack of self actualization of the itty bitties. So as we were asked to give our preferences for cabin assignments I explained to the camp director, Brad, how... "I would be more than happy to take the older kids all day long, but if at all possible," I pleaded with him, "please please please please do not put me with the youngest campers in cabin 1 (ages 6 and 7)." And for four out of our five sessions Brad obliged, and granted my request by assigning me to older cabins. But, as session 5 rolled around, the shortest session of which we had the youngest campers, my luck ran out. As I was finally placed in cabin 1, with the largest group of 6 and barely 7 year olds. And while I can't deny that they tested my patients and tried my goodwill, in the end they actually won my affection and were the most memorable cabin of my summer. Not because they were adorable and cute little angels (which they could be, when they chose), but because in the end I realized they not only needed me for their day to day care and sometimes survival, but I needed them as well.

Our passage from Mark this morning is a classic, framed and hung proudly in church nurseries and featured as murals throughout Sunday School rooms. I know you've seen this image. Jesus sitting in a field, leaning on a tree, or perched on a rock with a little kid on his knee. Surrounded by children on all sides. Attentively and orderly gathered around him with rosy cheeks, sweet smiles, and pristinely clean faces. It's as idyllic as it is unlikely. I mean, really, if you've ever been with children in any capacity you know, to capture that image would be as magnificent a miracle as walking on water or feeding 5,000 people with five loaves and two fish. And while our idealized picture of Jesus with the little children may not be as likely as it is heartwarming, our story is still significant. Because here, Jesus tells us coming to know God, encountering our Creator, being in the presence of the Divine might be easier than we think. As we hear Jesus tell us, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

Now, if you've ever worked with children, or have children, or know a child, you know what it truly means to welcome children. Which is much more involved than the idealized pictures in our nurseries and murals on the Sunday school walls. Welcoming children means welcoming sticky hands, runny noses, constant messes, and utter mayhem. It means welcoming curiosity, imagination, wonder and excitement. It means welcoming vulnerability, loving kindness, and unwarranted trust. It means welcoming temper tantrums, unpredictability and seemingly insatiable desires. It means welcoming cuddles, snuggles, and unwarranted hugs and kisses. It means for lack of a better word welcoming Holy chaos!

Another interesting tidbit about the summer I was a camp counselor at Kanuga is that that was the summer I met my now husband Drew. Now, it would take another four years for us to even begin pursuing a relationship, but it was there that summer that we first encountered one another. And, more so it was because of that encounter, and the man I now call my husband, that I learned what it truly meant to welcome the little children. While I was concerned about meeting those children's every little need (of which there were a plethora), I was missing out on living into the beauty that was, as I noted earlier, their Holy Chaos, which Drew had to point out to me. Touting these little children as the best camp had to offer, simply because of their lack of concern for whether or not their hair was brushed, their socks matched, or their face was clean [Drew's favorite was the constant kool aid mustache they donned]. And more so for their total incomprehension for whether you were rich or poor, with the in crowd or a total nerd. Drew always said the youngest campers were the best because they were too camp for cool, unlike the older kids who were often too cool for camp. And this was simply because all they cared about was enjoying the present moment, alongside you. They didn't care if they were wet, as long as they got to dance in the rain. They didn't care if their hands were dirty, if it meant holding wriggly squiggly worms. They didn't care if they had popsicle juice all down their shirt and all over their face as long as they got to savor it. They didn't even care if all they did that day was lay in the grass if it meant they got to be next to you while they watched the clouds pass by forming shapes and scenes in the sky. And, this was why I needed them, and Drew. To remind me what was most important, living life to the fullest in the present moment. Dirt could be under their fingernails and hair could go undone for days, but as long as memories were being created, friendships were encouraged to blossom, and enjoyment of the sacred space and time of camp was taking place the little things didn't matter.

Which is precisely, I believe, what Jesus is trying to point to today. As he catches his disciples arguing over who is the greatest. Can't you just picture it, the disciples following behind Jesus disputing over who has the longest beard, the cleanest tunic, the most impressive Jesus miracle stories. As the Messiah approaches them head on and says it doesn't matter. That is not what makes a life worth living, or a person worthy of greatness, or more so an image that reflects the Divine. Instead it is how we reach out to those around us, especially those on the fringes, those in need, those who cannot help themselves. "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." So today, I wonder, will we choose to live life like the youngest campers, throwing caution to the wind, and being too camp for cool, taking in all life has to offer, and loving with abandon. Maybe even realizing (or better yet remembering) that if we are too cool for camp we may miss out on what it's all about in the first place.