Mark 9:37 “Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.”

I highlighted this particular text because it really is the point and heart of what is being said here. But my question for you this morning is: Just what is the point?

I am going to guess that most of you will correctly say that the point is the faith of little children. Jesus is saying that our faith should be like that of little children. In the parallel sections of the Bible where this same instance is recorded the thought is expanded upon just a bit and it is helpful for us to grasp what was said there. Consider the fuller revelation of this lesson as found in Matthew 18:2-6 **“He called a little child and had him stand among them. And he said: ‘I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me. But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.”**

Now there, as we look at the lesson found in Matthew we understand that Jesus is talking about having faith like a little child. And if you would, I do want to point out that Jesus clearly and absolutely says, **“one of these little ones who believe in me.”** Jesus affirms the faith of little children. And just so you know, the Greek word used here is the word the Greeks used to cover from birth to weaning. In other words, this word covers an infant up to a child as old as two or three. Either way, recognize that Jesus affirms that “pa-dion” little children have faith in him. It is an interesting reminder that faith is a gift from God and not what we do or accomplish, for how could a little child “accomplish” faith? Are you ready for my next question? How would you describe the faith of a little child?

I would tell you that a child’s faith is blind, trusting, unencumbered, and absolute. If you have had children you know this to be the truth. If you tell a child all about ghosts and ghouls and goblins…they will believe you! If you tell a child fairy tales and you do not help the child understand that fairy tales are imaginary things, they will believe fairy tales true. So when you tell a child something faith wise and simple, like: “Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so,” that child will absolutely believe what those words say. No doubts, no second thoughts, no elaborate pieces of logic and reason to wrestle through or even to think about…the child just believes! That’s how I would describe the faith of a child.

Parents, pay attention to that. In other words, what you tell a child, what you demonstrate to a child, what you keep before the child that child is going to believe even to old age. So if you, purposely or not, lead a child to believe that the law, any part of it, does not apply to them, that’s what they will believe and that’s how they will conduct their lives. So parents, be alert and aware of what you are leading your children to believe because it will impact their lives. If your child grows up and does not believe in Christ our Savior, you have to ask, “Did I do or live in such a way that they do not believe?” Tough thought isn’t it?

So why does Jesus use the simple and yet solid faith of a little child as the model for his disciples? He does do that. The word translated “welcome” has four distinct meanings. It can mean “to receive, to welcome, to believe or to take hold of.” Put some of those other meanings into the sentence: **“Whoever receives one of these little children in my name receives me…or…whoever believes as one of these little children believes in me…”** See what I mean. Jesus wants us to have the faith of a little child. Why? Well, that where this whole history before us needs to be carefully considered. Our theme will be: **WHAT IS IN YOUR HEART?**

So what you need to know is that Jesus and his disciples are returning from visiting a number of villages around Caesarea Philippi. But what had also taken place was that Jesus had taken Peter, James and John up the mount to be witnesses to his Transfiguration. When they returned from there Jesus healed a boy with an evil spirit and then as our text said, **“They passed through Galilee.”** The intention of Jesus was to get his disciples alone so that he could teach them. You can grasp that what Jesus wanted to teach must have been very important and as we look at our text the context of that teaching is made clear. The text sums it up this way, **“The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise.”**

I think you would agree with me that what is being taught here is of the utmost importance. It is the whole point and reason for Jesus coming. Jesus is telling them of his Passion, how he is going to be betrayed (do you think these words at all struck at Judas?). How “they” will kill him and I have no doubt that Jesus made it clear that it was the religious leaders of the Jewish people who would be responsible for his death. I also have no doubt that Jesus told them how his death would serve the people and bring about the salvation and eternal life that God had been promising the world. And to make sure that they got excited about this, Jesus even tells them that the culmination of all of this is the fact that He is going to rise from the dead!

Now contemplate all of this. If you had been there, don’t you think you would have questions? You are going to be betrayed? How? Who? For what? You are going to die? How? When? Who is going to do this? For what? You are the Son of God, how could this be? Or “Wait, you are going to rise? You mean from death? What does this mean? What should we do?

Instead the Scripture records this rather sad statement: **“But they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it.”** Let that sink in. They did not understand! In a way I can grasp that because who could have ever thought that God’s solution to sin was going to be the atoning sacrifice of his Son for the sins of the world? That is way beyond us, way more than we could fathom or even imagine. So, I understand their being confused or not getting it because truly these were ways and thoughts far beyond the ways and thoughts of man. But it is Jesus teaching them. It is Jesus revealing what will be! The thing that so deeply disturbs is that line: **“they were afraid to ask him about it.”** Really? Afraid?

I have to tell you that I have given this a great deal of thought. Just what were they afraid of? I don’t think it was Jesus because so far in the last number of years they have traveled with and been taught by Jesus I do not recall a single instance where Jesus turned someone into ash or a worm or somehow blew them up because Jesus was upset. If you want my thoughts on this, I will take you back to your childhood, or maybe it is just mine. You see, I remember being in school and the teacher asking a question and being afraid to raise my hand or even afraid the teacher was going to somehow call on me. I was afraid because I didn’t want to be wrong or sound foolish or look bad. In other words, I was concerned with ME, wrapped up in ME, really, I was stuck in ME and it took a long time to get that foolish way of thinking out of me, away from me! I think the disciples were just too wrapped up in themselves, their “me” thoughts rather than even trying to grasp what Jesus had just told them. What fools we humans are and continue to be.

Now if you think I am being a little hard on the disciples, then note what happens next. They get to Capernaum, obviously their destination. It turns out the disciples had been discussing things. More than that, Jesus knew they had been “arguing,” that’s the word used. They were dickering among themselves. When Jesus asked them what they were arguing about, they said nothing! Did you catch why? The text says, **“But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest.”**

They were arguing about who was the greatest among themselves. “Jesus loves me more…I am more important than you…Well, I am at least one of the top three because Jesus took me up the mountain...Well, I am the one who holds the purse, so I must be important!” Jesus has just revealed to them God’s plans for the salvation of mankind and the bringing of the New Covenant to the world and these guys are dickering, yes, arguing about where they rate in the world of Jesus. See what I mean that they were stuck on “Me.” If anything shows the blindness, the foolishness, the childishness of the spiritual lives of these men at this point it is this instance!

Because they acted like little children, Jesus uses the little child to teach them something, something they would later need, and something very important to their lives. Jesus directs them to the simple wonder and awe of faith and what faith is all about.

First, I can tell you that faith is not about you! The disciples were all wrapped up in their own importance and clearly the lesson here is how wrong they were. Faith is not about what you think or what you feel or what you imagine, because faith, even simple faith is something beyond our ability level. No wonder God would later send the Holy Spirit to give the gift of faith through the means of grace because even simple faith is not about us.

Second, faith is centered on, focused on, reliant on and supported by what God says it is. So even if you don’t understand that Jesus the Son of God is going to be betrayed, at least believe what He says. If you don’t understand that Jesus is going to die at least grasp that what He said and revealed is the truth to be contemplated and simply believed! And when Jesus says that He is going to rise from the dead, then you believe that. You don’t know how. You don’t grasp any of it, but you, with child-like faith, that simple, solid, absolute faith that hears and believes, you firmly believe what has been said!

There it is! And notice how Jesus brings this home so we can see the importance of what He has revealed. If you even welcome a little child in Jesus’ name, you welcome Jesus. Receive the child, receive Jesus! Believe as the child, believe in Jesus! And there is more. Jesus says, “Welcome Him, you welcome the Father who sent him.” Don’t welcome Jesus, in other words, reject what Jesus is about or what Jesus says or what Jesus has done and still does, and you have rejected God the Father as well. Jesus, the Father, teaching, and faith are all one package! Your entire salvation rests on the faith you have, that simple faith that says, “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so!”

That’s the lesson. To pay attention to what is in your heart and at the center of your heart. Is it the marvel of Jesus! How Jesus was betrayed and arrested. How Jesus was falsely accused and condemned by His very own people, the religious leaders who should have known better! How Jesus ended up on the cross, bloodied, battered, and taking on the entire agony of the Father’s anger just for us. How Jesus was raised from the dead, actually, physically and truly raised from the dead so that we would know He is our Savior, God’s Son sent to redeem and proclaim forgiveness and eternal life in His name. Focus on Jesus. On his wonder, marvel and total victory on our behalf. And stop being afraid. Seek Him. Ask of Him. Follow Him. Believe in Jesus. Then you will be ready for what will be because heaven is your home in Jesus. He said so. He revealed so. Just believe in Jesus and His marvel! In this way, his promises, his redemption, his salvation becomes yours. Amen.