

Nomalanga's Smile/ Christ's Community
Mark 9:30-37, Ephesians 4:25 – 5:2
August 9, 2009, Kirkland Congregational Church UCC
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Come with me now, to Zimbabwe, where, as many of you know, Tod and I served as ministers for 6 years. It is Sunday morning. I am at the Nkedile Church for services. People are gathering in the schoolyard near the classroom being set up for worship. They cluster into small groups. Over here, Mrs. Morapedi is discussing issues with members of Manyano, our women's fellowship group. Over there, in the shadow of the classroom block, Gertrude Nleya is practicing songs with the youth choir. A group of men are gossiping under a mopane tree. I move from group to group greeting in Ndebele, Kalanga, and Tswana, three of the languages spoken here at Nkedile.

Mr. Leso, one of the church leaders, beckons me to the classroom being prepared for worship. The branches of a large acacia tree, laden with lovely yellow blossoms, drape over the doorway. Near the tree trunk, a wheel barrow stands in the shade. And inside the wheel barrow lies a young girl. She is alone. I guess that someone has brought her to church and left her under the tree while they visit with friends before the service. I approach the wheel barrow, intending to greet the girl. I'd say that she's between 12 and 14 years old. She wears a pretty, blue dress. She has no shoes. She cannot walk so she doesn't need them. Her legs protrude like thin sticks. She has a large hump on her back.

Mr. Leso and I attempt to greet her. It takes us some time to capture her attention. Her eyes seem to clear a bit as she finally understands that we are saying "hello." Her response is slurred. I have a hard time understanding her Tswana, but the light in her eyes says to me that she is happy to have our attention. Before I can ask Mr. Leso more about her, I am beckoned away. Some of the men want to discuss moulding bricks for the proposed church building. Soon we are called to worship, and our discussions end. I forget about the bricks and the child in the wheel barrow.

The service is full of singing, scripture reading, preaching, praying. Now it is time for baptisms. There are twelve today. I work my way down the line baptizing one by one. First I ask the question, "Do you accept Jesus as your Lord and Saviour?" Then I share the familiar words of baptism. Lastly, I introduce the newly baptized to the congregation, and they are welcomed by the congregation. At the end of the line, to my surprise, sits the girl from the wheel barrow. She's been placed on the floor--a heap of tangled, useless limbs.

A church leader whispers in my ear, "We don't know who the father is. Her mother is dead. We are not sure when she was born. She lives with an aunt, but it is one of our youth who brings her to church. Can we baptize her?" I reckon it was a poignant moment for me in my ministry. You do not have to be a rocket scientist to figure out the end of this story, but let us pause here for a moment.

"Can we baptize her?" Who is in, and who is out? This is always an issue for people. In Jesus' time people struggled with the fact that Jesus welcomed tax collectors, harlots, lepers, sinners. Jesus' disciples were amazed by a Samaritan "hero" in a parable. The early church, too, struggled with the question of who is in and who is out. Can you be a disciple if you did not know Jesus personally? Or, aren't the followers of Christ all Jewish? How can Gentiles be followers of Christ? Since they're uncircumcised and unfamiliar with the Law, how can they possibly be in?

Jesus' response is always a surprise--Open your doors a bit wider. Let in the prostitute whom you despise and the leper whom you fear touching. Open your doors a bit wider--let in the promiscuous Samaritan and the unclean Gentile.

Our gospel reading from Mark this morning relates the story of the disciples arguing amongst themselves not just about who is in and who is out, but who is the **greatest** amongst those who are already in. Jesus asks about their conversation and they are shamefully quiet. He then brings a child into the midst of these quarreling grown-ups, takes the child in his arms and declares, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me..." Talk about a surprise. "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me," says Jesus. Open your minds and your doors a bit wider--welcome the child.

What about the church today? With whom do we struggle over the right of entry? Whom do we keep out? For whom do we make church so inhospitable they do not come, or at least do not come back?

Now when it comes to children, to be fair—my experience of the modern western church is that we try pretty hard to be inclusive of our own children—as long as they do not make too much noise! We find creative ways to include our children and affirm their presence in our family of faith.

Someone once said that the job of a pastor is to comfort the afflicted, and to afflict the comfortable. I think God's word can do that to us if we take the Word seriously, so here comes the afflicting part... what about other children, those outside our faith community? When we allow children in our world to go hungry, are we welcoming them into Christ's community? When we leave single parents alone to parent their children, are we opening the church door wide enough? When we participate in wars, or impose sanctions, that kill thousands of children, is our door of welcome open wide enough? Six hundred million children go to bed hungry every night. 18,000 Children will die today of hunger. Do we simply think those children are so far beyond our fold, that we do not feel they are our responsibility?

Every day, Jesus places children, and other marginalized people, in our midst, as he placed that child in the midst of the disciples. He says to us, "Community of Christ, STOP. Stop taking care of just yourselves. Stop worrying about your own salvation and where you will rank in heaven, who amongst you is the greatest, Stop and welcome these unwanted ones, into your midst. God's children are not just your own children, they are children of every race, every nation and every religion."

Whom else do we devalue so much in our society and world that we do not even notice them (or try to push them out of our minds)—like the children in the time of Jesus? To whom in our world does no invitation go because we have forgotten they are there? Whom would we be surprised to see in the arms of Jesus, or sitting at the right hand of Jesus?

We can easily be distracted by our so-called "tests of faith." We can let these tests determine whom we allow into this family of Christ and whom we keep out. We can lay aside Jesus's call to radical hospitality, and use excuses of tradition and security to close our doors a bit. Or we can open ourselves, and open our doors, to welcome Jesus's surprising companions

Back at Nkedile—thought I had forgotten that story, didn't you? The church elder asks me, "Can we baptize her?"

Here is a child who cannot read or walk. She can hardly talk. Can she answer the question, "Do you accept Christ as your Lord and Saviour?" Even if she can answer, does she understand? Can we baptize her? Can we welcome her?

"Of course we can!" I say. "Egameni lika yise, leliNdodana, lelika Moya OyiNgcwele...In the name of the creator, the Christ and the Holy Spirit," I repeat the ancient, familiar words of baptism. I turn to the church leader next to me. "Can we pick her up?" He helps me lift the child. I am startled by how light she is. With joy and excitement I proclaim, "I present to you Nomalanga Moyo, a child of God, a member of Christ's community."

"Hallelujah!" shouts the congregation. "Amen!" they chorus. A huge smile comes to Nomalanga. She beams her delight at the congregation. Her joy is a blessing upon all of us, her new family in Christ.

Life will still be very, very difficult for Nomalanga, but I am encouraged by the care someone had to bring her to the Nkedile church. I have confidence that the church family at Nkedile will help her aunt care for Nomalanga and look after her needs, both physical and spiritual. Yet more importantly is the gift that Nomalanga brings to us, that in her face, God's light and love shines out on all of us as we accept this child into our midst, into our community, and join in taking care of her.

"Whoever accepts one such child in my name accepts me, and not just me but the one who sent me." Able or dis-abled, healthy or infirm, old or young—each of us can fill in other categories of the unwanted, unloved and unseen in our society and world, people Jesus calls on us to welcome.

May we always be reminded by children to set aside our foolishness—who will be first, who will be best, who is in and who is out—and remember that Jesus' love is that radical hospitality that embraces all of God's children. May we always open our doors a bit wider, stretch our community's boundaries a bit farther, and delightfully welcome those whom God has sent into our midst. Amen.