

Consider the Children

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The Haudenoshonee, also known as the Iroquois whose native lands include what we now call upstate New York, are thought to have had a principle known as the Seven Generations Principle

It was a belief that all major decisions needed to be weighed against the impact that decision would have up to seven generations from now

I'm not sure if this was actively worked out, mapping the impact generation by generation, or whether it was simply an ethic and value that inspired their thought process when big decisions came their way, but the resulting realization is the same: our decisions impact the lives of others and not just our own

There is a similar idea, albeit expressed somewhat differently, in the first few books of the Bible

When our Bible Study was reading Genesis and Exodus, sometimes we'd read passages that said something to the effect of God's blessings would be passed down to the thousandth generation, and God's punishments to the third and fourth generation (i.e. Exodus 34:6-7)

For our ancient faith ancestors, the divine blessing or punishment was God initiated, but the idea is similar to what the Haudenoshonee believed: when we make decisions about how to act and be in the world, it will impact future generations

And those future generations are, truly, the most vulnerable to the decisions that we make because they have no say in what we do, but they will experience the ramifications

The Haudenoshonee's principle of Seven Generations and God's reminder that blessings and punishments last generations and not just moments, provide us with a way to put our actions and our being into a larger narrative in which there are more characters who are impacted by our actions than just ourselves

This line of thinking de-centers ourselves, and instead re-centers the values God has tried to instill into creation since the beginning of time: peace, harmony, grace, love, relationality, care for the other

In the gospel reading this morning, Jesus's disciples are debating between themselves who is the greatest among them – not just debating, arguing!

It's an argument I'm pretty sure my mother heard in the backseat of our minivan all the time when I was a kid – "I'm the favorite" "No! I'm the favorite!" "No, *I'm* the favorite!"

My mom's response was "you're *all* my favorite" (but we all know my younger brother Philip was the favorite)

Jesus' response is to flip the whole argument on its head: "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."

If the disciples were scratching their heads after such a comment, they were really in for a surprise for what came next:

"[Jesus] 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.'"

"Geez, Jesus, we thought you'd just say 'Peter, Peter's the greatest.' What's the deal with the kid?"

This is classic Jesus finding ways to flip the anticipated and prescribed order of things on its head and jolting us out of the ways of this world and into the ways of God's realm

But the introduction of a child in this morning's story really got my attention this week

Children in Jesus' day weren't much higher in the social rankings than livestock

Bringing a child into the dialog with the disciples, and what's worse, taking it in his arms (!), was like Jesus picking up a piece of trash and having him say "this is my most treasured possession"

The image of Jesus with a sweet, innocent child on his lap is one that evokes joy and delight, warmth and comfort for us today, but for the disciples it would have been unimaginable

But, in the context of what was being discussed, it is precisely the message Jesus wants to convey: you've been arguing about which of you is the greatest, puffing up your own chests and centering yourselves not only in your dialog but in this ministry of mine that you're claiming to be part of, but I tell you – center the centerless, the edges, center the marginalized – unless you are considering those who are most impacted by your actions and your "greatness" then you are not truly my disciples

Courtney Buggs, a homiletics professor, notes that "social behavior that bends toward the Divine begins with how we treat those who may need us the most."¹

And I would add, it begins with how we treat those who are most vulnerable to the decisions we make

Our actions can bless the generations to come to the thousandth generation, or our decisions can punish the generations to come to the third and fourth generation

Our decisions should consider the impact it will have to the seventh generation

The concept has been expressed in a myriad of ways across traditions, but it is very countercultural to the society in which we live today

Professor Buggs writes that "the proclivity toward power and status is particularly pertinent to contemporary readers in a capitalist society. Gentleness and kindness are virtues that sound good, but grit and ruthlessness are often associated with the most powerful and successful."

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-25-2/commentary-on-mark-930-37-9>

It was hard for the disciples to hear 2,000 years ago, and it's hard for us to embody to this day, but "Jesus disrupts their [and our] notion of greatness and significance with an inversion of the social order: 'Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all'"

"Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

whoever centers the marginalized and considers the impact of their decisions for the generations that will follow truly embodies the greatness of discipleship that Jesus desires

Our Season of Creation has the theme: "To hope and act with creation"

And, I can't help but imagine "creation" as that small child that Jesus pulls upon his lap and asks us to consider

"whoever welcomes one such creation in my name welcomes me"

Are we considering creation a vulnerable "other" to center when making the big decisions of our lives

Because the decisions we make could bless God's creation to the thousandth generation, or they could punish God's creation to the third and fourth generation?

We spend a lot of time arguing over who is greater – sometimes literally, sometimes simply by playing into the social norms of social and professional advancement as the declarative symbol of our greatness

Fasten your seatbelts, Christians, Jesus is about to turn your world upside down

Greatness to Jesus is not climbing up any kind of ladder simply for the purpose of being at the top, over and above others.

If we climb at all, let us consider how it prepares a way for those who come after us to also be able to climb

And maybe, it's about staying at the bottom, holding the ladder securely, so others have a chance to get where they need to go

Greatness is about considering the children, creation, those most vulnerable to the decisions and actions we make and if we strive for greatness in that sense of Jesus' calling, creation and the generations to come will be better off for it.

Amen.