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 “All Are Welcome”  
 Focal Scripture: Matthew 18:1-4

“All Are Welcome” – so we sang in our opening hymn for this worship service. The hymn is among the most popular contemporary hymns, at least in English-speaking congregations in the United States. And its message is repeated not only in song but also in worship bulletins and church signs that enthusiastically proclaim, sometimes with accompanying visuals such as a rainbow flag, “All Are Welcome.” The message is a posture of radical inclusion, and far be it from me to question the deepest truth of the claim. But like other sweeping claims – “All lives matter” -- this one too demands probing.

Our Gospel reading for today [Matthew 18:1-4], encourages such probing because it puts pressure on claims of radical inclusion. If one wanted to put Jesus’s saying in this passage in a nutshell, it might be rendered thus: “Some are more welcome than others.” Or, more pointed still: “Unless you turn around, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.” Jesus even uses a solemn “Amen”-pronouncement here, for emphasis. In a way, he is saying, “Unless you turn around, you will not be welcome in the reign of God.”

This is a stark claim; and one that would not sing well as an opening in a worship service. But Matthew is actually kind to the disciples in the way in which he depicts them in the opening of chapter 18 of his Gospel. The Gospel of Mark, which also includes this story, introduces it by depicting the disciples as arguing among themselves about who is the greatest (Mark 9:34). They fall into an embarrassed silence when Jesus asks what they were arguing about. Matthew, on the other hand, simply has the disciples muse -- somewhat innocently? -- “hmmm, we wonder who might be the greatest in God’s reign?” In both Gospels, however, Jesus’s response strikes the same note: if you want to be great, turn to smallness. And for visual emphasis, Jesus places a child in the midst of the disciples.

Much ink has been spilled on the meaning of the term “paidion” -- “child” – here (and elsewhere in the Gospels). Never mind that interpreters over almost two millennia have gone for a “nice” or “ideal” child; even with that, interpretations have ranged broadly indeed: from the child as a symbol of prepubescent purity and sweet innocence, to infantile humility and trust, to happy and worry-free dependence. In recent decades, with growing emphasis on the social location of New Testament texts, the focus has shifted to the low social status of children in the ancient world: namely, children were insignificant, and without legal standing. It is no coincidence that the word/s for child can also be used to mean “slave.”

But whatever the precise meaning of “child” here is, the conversation between the disciples and Jesus in this Gospel passage clearly turns around notions of hierarchy and difference, with Jesus turning upside down established notions of status. The lowly will be the highest. The first will be last. The last will be first.

What to make of this Gospel, for us today? Let me suggest one possible lens. I think this Gospel text confronts us with rivaling ways of self-identifying and ways of naming ourselves – our chosen markers of difference, if you will. Jesus is presented with one particular marker of difference (that also sits on top of a social hierarchy): “the greatest.” He challenges his disciples to claim a different marker, in the opposite direction of the “greatest,” namely the smallest, a child.

For the disciples, this must have been a familiar note in many ways. They had already encountered Jesus as one who proclaims and embodies a reign of God that topples the mighty from their thrones and lifts up the lowly; where the rich are sent empty away and the hungry are fed; where the poor in spirit enter God’s reign; where the way to life opens in dying.

Did this memory of Jesus’s proclamation put an end to the disciples arranging themselves by markers of difference and status? No. The second reading in our worship service today, Galatians 3:27f, makes clear that issues of naming differences continued to trouble the early Christian communities. The apostle Paul, in his letter to the Galatians, had to remind a divided community, over and against specific markers of difference, that they were all baptized into Christ. And therefore, Paul claims, there is “neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” Paul names differences here according to some basic binaries of his time and culture: Jew vs. Greek, slave vs. free, man and woman. He leaves other important binaries invisible, however, such as young and old, and rich and poor. Furthermore, he occludes in his list markers of difference that would soften the stated binaries, for example eunuchs and persons with intersex conditions. All this really goes to say is that naming – never mind honoring, or subverting -- differences is a complicated task indeed. The differences we choose to name, after all, are never innocent; they always both highlight and occlude.

Here are a couple of example from my own experience. When I first came to the United States many years ago, I was confronted with ways of naming differences and marking one’s identity that were utterly foreign to me. There was one particular moment that crystallized this feeling for me. I had to fill in a form that wanted to know my “race.” Coming from Germany, this seemed an exceedingly dangerous category to fit human beings into. Even worse was the fact that I could find nothing on the list of possible categories that resembled anything I knew about myself. When a friend informed me that I should check “Caucasian,” I protested loudly: what on

earth did I have to do with a mountain range in the then Soviet Union? Soon, however, I started to teach in this context, and acknowledging one's social location was a fashionable way to begin. In my case, the race-class-gender narrative went something like this: I am white, and originally from Europe; I am a woman; I was raised in an upper middle-class context and educated in European universities. Now fast-forward to today: none of these markers of difference have really changed, but how to name them has morphed, and other ways of self-identifying have emerged. For example, the "woman" I am might be described as cisgender. Just as important to me now is to acknowledge the fact that I reside in the traditional homelands of the indigenous Quinnipiac peoples. And, taking to heart the recent book *Watershed Discipleship*, I should note that I live in the Quinnipiac River watershed of Southern Connecticut. In short, naming my markers of difference is an ever-changing task.

What does all this have to do with our Gospel text for today, and with Christian faith and worship in our time? I cannot help but wonder whether the complexity of adequately naming differences is one of the reasons for the popularity of Marty Haugen's hymn "All Are Welcome." The inclusivity and elasticity of the "All" allows some communities to envision a rainbow flag while singing, and others to welcome an undocumented immigrant asking for sanctuary. On the other side of the spectrum might be welcome for a pregnant woman carrying a severely disabled child in her womb who is determined to carry her unborn child to term because "all are welcome" – the born and the unborn. Who would deny her a claim on this radical inclusivity?

The latter example already gestures toward the differences we all inscribe, in one way or another, into the "All." Think of the song "For Everyone Born, a Place at the Table" (I simply note that there doesn't seem to be a place for the "unborn"). In one of the verses, there is the following line: "For just and unjust, a place at the table, abuser, abused, with need to forgive..." I am not so sure about that (radical? or simply facile?) inclusion of "abuser and abused" in one breath. But one thing I am sure about: the struggle over differences is not easily settled, in worship as in the rest of life.

Maybe a final look back to the Gospel for today can help. In contradistinction once again to the Gospel of Mark, Matthew begins his Gospel not with Jesus's entry into public ministry but rather with Jesus' genealogy, birth, and earliest days. In other words: Matthew begins his Gospel with Jesus as child. This child Jesus is four things for Matthew: the human face of God in our midst; exceedingly vulnerable (a newborn, a refugee); threatened with death – and not just the high infant mortality of his time but violent death by a ruling elite (Herod); and finally, this child only lives because others commit to sheltering his life. Those committed to sheltering his life included his mother, his adoptive father Joseph, and some wise visitors. This is the child that opens Matthew's Gospel.

When Jesus puts a child in the midst of the disciples and tells them to become children in order to enter God's reign, he might just be inviting them to model their life on his: to enter the world, not by their own power but God's, to become small signs of God's presence on the margins of power, safeguarded by God's promise and the courage of friends.

When we take upon ourselves to sing "All Are Welcome," we do well to remember this: just like none of us can actually succeed in making ourselves small as a child, so "welcoming all" exceeds even the highest of our human abilities. Certainly, welcoming all demands more than a purely human capacity to be "nice," and even more than our own struggle to welcome a diversity of voices – rather than merely those diversities we ourselves favor, or our own particular community already presents us with. The power behind the invitation "all are welcome" has to be God's. So yes: all are welcome. All are welcome to turn, to live the Gospel, and to seek to enter God's reign. Ultimately, we dare to sing, because this is **God's** invitation, not one of our own making.