

TEXT: Psalm 1, Mark 9:30-37

TOPIC: God gives humans two ways to live: one by streams so fruit can grow or the way of destruction.

SUBJECT: The measure of success and fruitfulness; it is abiding in a childlike relationship with God.

TITLE: For All the Anita's

A lot happened when I was 7-years-old. I was 7 when my dad had his heart attack. I was 7 when my next oldest sibling was a senior in high school. I was 7 when our next-door neighbor moved to California, so I lost my first best friend.

All of those pales in comparison to what I'm about to share: I was 7-years-old when Anita started attending Longfellow Elementary. To this day, I wonder what happened to Anita.

I don't remember Anita's last name. What I remember, though, was that she wore the same dress to school like every-other day. Anita's dress had some mileage on it. It was a white dress that went right to her knees. It had little flowers on the front. It reminded me a little of the dress on Forrest Gump's Jenny early in the movie after Jenny had been abused by her father.

Somehow, Anita got labeled because she was rarely clean, and she didn't always smell the best. Thing is: None of us took time to know her story. It was easier to judge her and label her even to the point of refusing to drink from the center fountain on the playground community water fountain because someone at some time saw Anita take a drink there, so it had boogers or cooties or germs or whatever.

Losing my childhood innocence that year started an unfortunate trend, so I'd choose a darker, dirtier path than the path of joy; ultimately, that path I chose became destructive. Anita was just the first victim along the roadmap I made for myself rather than the one God would lay out later for me. There would be many other Anitas along the way because I didn't take the roadmap God had prepared for me.

My problem was that I was privileged and privilege meant I could make fun of a classmate and not realize the consequence of the consequences until years later. My privilege meant I left a lot of Anitas along the road of life like roadkill. Only when God's children realize – really realize – that the roadmap of life is the way of humble servanthood that walks with the Anitas of every day. That's why Jesus placed the little boy the center of him and his disciples.

Consequences come with consequences. In making fun of a classmate, I chose the way of the wicked, the privileged, even as Psalms often suggests, the wealthy, rather than the way of being part of a stream that makes fruit possible to grow, and success possible to happen.

What I couldn't see was how the consequence of my consequences meant sacrificing joy.

The problem for Jesus' disciples when he announces a second time that he is going to die is just like the consequence for taking the way of wicked the psalmist writes about. When the disciples start jockeying for pole position, they are thinking of their quest for power and control and wealth using a roadmap that takes you nowhere. As Ecclesiastes suggests: all your money won't buy you another minute of life.

As both passages suggest, there is another route, and despite the glamour and the warm fuzzies often attached to it, it's actually just the opposite. Bear with me as I put this into a slightly different context.

When I was working on my doctorate, I researched and wrote a paper on the ancient practice of *exposio*. The word is spelled like exposition without the i-t-i-o-n.

Exposito was an ancient practice oppressed people took to deal with poverty and oppression at the expense of some family members. To a certain extent, *exposio* still happens

today but in much more humane ways. I actually saw this firsthand when I was in Haiti. In antiquity, if a family had too many children or a child that was disabled, it was not uncommon for any disabled child to either put out on the streets in hopes someone else would take them in as a servant of some sort, or they'd be taken to the country and left for the wild animals. While the second is no longer practiced; instead, children with disabilities in some places sometimes go to orphanages, where they are cared for. Family is still welcome to visit the child, but when a child is a drain to a family, it's not uncommon to see it.

I mention this because when Jesus takes the child and places it among the disciples, he isn't placing the child there because he represents a warm fuzzy. In Jesus' time, children had no material value. In fact, they had less value than slaves and wives until they would get old enough to do whatever chores they could do to help out.

In doing this, Jesus is spelling out for the disciples the difference between the roadmap to life and the roadmap to disaster the Psalmist describes. And honestly, when people choose the roadmap of disaster, my experience suggests they'll live a lifetime striving to get their innocence back.

The problem with the way of the wicked is it's not sustainable. The way of wickedness is like the dust I clean up with Swiffer before throwing the bush part away. Wickedness is not sustainable because it cannot be; it has no connection with God's vision for humankind or creation.

God invites us to a way of sustainability in all our relationships.

God invites us back to the way of innocence – the way of truth and life – returning to the flowing waters God created, so God could chart a new path with our lives. It is a path that

will produce fruit. The water God charts you through is a map worth taking, too, because it is a map that depends on God.

It was definitely the map I needed God to unfold for my life, so the waters could wash away the lousiness of how I treated all the Anita's I've known.

And the spring God has charted for you suggests something special, too. It suggests becoming the last, the least and the lowest of all like the child Jesus hugs and places in the middle of his disciples because in becoming the last, least and lowest, you serve and in serving, discover the way of loving and honoring all the Anita's from yesterday, today and tomorrow.

God's healing path for your life means making up to any of the Anita's you've left along the roadside, wherever she may be. I tend to think there are a lot more Anita's out there than people realize, and likely more than people remember.

God has a map charted for each of us when we orient our lives toward God's ways rather than our ways. God has a map charted for each of us because not one of us is capable of charting our own course apart from God; thank God God's there to help.

So, today's message isn't just for the Anita I remember as a 7-year-old all those years ago. Today's message is for all the Anita's who are counting on us to go from being one of the disciples jockeying for position, to the child at the center of it all, who finds the joy in serving every life he meets.

In the name of the triune God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – one God in perfect community. Amen.