

**REFLECTION**  
**The Reverend Dr. Phebe L. McPherson**  
**September 19, 2021**  
**JAMES H. CONBOY'S 100th BIRTHDAY**

**Mark 9:30-37**

*“Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” Then he 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.”*

It wasn't too long ago that I went back to seminary. They say a seminary education has a 7-year shelf-life. When I went back, it had been 28 years. A bit overdue, I'd say. Taking classes again, learning new perspectives with almost 3 decades of parish life under my belt—was a wonderful experience. One of the classes I took was taught by a professor whose scholarship focused on the Gospel of Matthew. One of his published theories underscored Matthew's frequent concern about the care and support of “the little ones.” Professor John Yueh Han Yieh is convinced that “the little ones” refers not to children as is usually depicted but to the early church's missionaries. Matthew's Gospel urges the community to support them in every way possible. I've heard many sermons expounding on today's quote, Mark's version:

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

Preachers often equate Matthew's “little ones” as children—as does Mark in today's Gospel. “Paidion” —and consider children to mean “the marginalized of society. “The least, the lame, the lost”—those considered to be of little or no value. I don't buy it. Matthew also uses the word “mikron,” meaning, “the little ones.” Professor Yieh's thesis about “little ones” referring to the church's missionaries is less sentimental than the usual picture of poor little children—and more specific to the purposes of Matthew's Gospel which is to help the early Church's self-understanding, to embolden it's calling and mission and to help shape the future Church. When Jesus urges the disciples to take care of the “young ones” he is referring to the next generation—specifically the young ones who are learning and serving as missionaries. “Support—or be damned with a millstone around your neck—if you do not support the young ones who are learning to serve!” Matthew's Jesus means business! “Whoever welcomes them, supports them, encourages them—welcomes me and the one who sent me.”

During this time of Covid, over the past year and a half—we've been getting to know LDS missionaries who serve in the missionary field for two years—after raising enough money to subsist. It has given me a renewed perspective. This next generation, these “little ones,” are just that—young. 18 - 19 years old. Right out of high school. On their own for the first time. They really are “little ones.” Children—learning about Christ and his Church by learning to serve others. I was always puzzled by the one pictorial stained glass window at Epiphany. It's the first thing you see when you come in the door— Jesus with the children. Why would this be chosen for a WWI chapel—for soldiers being deployed to the trenches in France in WWI? Then my son turned 15. And I realized that soldiers are children—“the young ones.” Those enlisted or drafted to serve their community, the nation, and the world are “the young ones.” In this stained glass window, Jesus gathers them, honors and supports them. He's all about blessing the next generation. Of course this is the right window, and the right story for Epiphany.

On this day, the 100th Birthday of Jim Conboy, I'd like to share with you a story I recently heard that illustrates the kind of man Jim was and the kind of Christ-following faith he practiced. As I harvest the memories I am convinced that to know Jim, is to understand that his eye was always on the next generation. There are so many stories. At Jim's 100th birthday party following this service hosted by his niece, Tabitha—it's a good time to share those stories. But right now, let's take a careful look at this one—it may help us understand what Jesus meant when he instructed his disciples “to welcome, to show hospitality to a child, the “little ones” and to “welcome Christ and the One who sent him.”

Here's the story from Bill McNemar now 76 years old:

There's never been a better man than Jim. Everyone says so. My father owned a gas station in Boomtown—on 175 near Llewelyn Avenue. Sinclair Gas Station. As a boy I used to pump gas at the station. Mr. Conboy came in regularly to get gasoline for his shiny Chevy. After I filled his tank and he paid his bill, he would slip 50 cents into my hand, every time. That was a lot of money for a 10-year old kid. Mr. Conboy was friends with my father at Ft. Meade where they both worked and his repair shop was just a few blocks up Llewelyn, inside the Fort. When I was 22, I got drafted—called up to go to

Vietnam. It was 1967. So many boys were called up—there weren't enough uniforms to go around. Jim heard I'd been drafted and told me to come see him. He said he wanted to fit me for a good uniform. He measured me and fixed me up. He found some jungle boots that were made of nylon and not just leather— 'cause its hot in Vietnam and leather makes your feet sweat terrible. In 1967 they didn't have camo-uniforms. The regular uniform was green. The belt had a brass buckle—but he found a black buckle so it wouldn't catch any light. They only supplied white underwear, so Jim gave me some green dye and told me how to use it. You know, he really cared about me and tried his best to help me. I served in the 3rd and 4th corp tactical zones—the Delta area, where the rice patties are— for 10 months and 29 days. When I was discharged, Mr. Conboy was one of the first to welcome me home.

I think we all know Jim as the best *welcomer* we've ever known. Right there, every Sunday for almost 100 years with a bulletin, a smile, and an outreached hand. Service. The Church is all about service. And supporting those who serve. Jesus says,

“Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.”

Jim Conboy has helped us understand who the greatest truly are. The world may think that the great ones are well educated, wealthy, and powerful, have status, reputation, position, and possessions. But this is not how true and lasting greatness really happens. Greatness is measured by the love you have given. Greatness is not measured by how much you have but by how much you share. Greatness is not measured by how smart you are but by who you bring along. Greatness is not measured by what you have accomplished in terms of competition and power but by who you have supported and encouraged. “There's never been a better, greater man than Jim. Everyone says so.” Bill McNemar is not the only one with a story about Jim Conboy's love and greatness. To honor Jim and to be faithful servants of Christ, may we be servants first —with our eye and our support on the community, especially those who will carry on for us.

AMEN