

Mark 10:2-16

When I first started out in ministry I preached on this very text and praised the virtues of children, how they never worry and how they are not as competitive as grownups, etc.

Jesus said that we must be like children to “receive the kingdom of God” and I preached a sermon on how wonderful kids are and how Jesus blessed the children and how children bless our lives every day with goodness, charm and joy. That’s what I preached from this text many years ago, but something happened in the meantime which makes it impossible for me to preach that sermon today.

Someone told me right after the service that I was unrealistic and didn’t really know what I was talking about.

That was quite a shock to a newly ordained pastor who thought he had all the right answers to a harmonious Christian life. Since then I learned a lot, but it seemed that I had more questions than answers, just like a little child.

As time went by I observed hundreds of children and listened to many families that had problems with their little darlings and wondered what Jesus really meant when he said we are supposed to be like children to receive the kingdom of God.

One parent said when you walk into the bathroom and see an entire roll of brand new tissue paper lying in the toilet, and the toilet all plugged up, it makes you wonder.

Or: When you see a whole pile of freshly washed and folded clothes lying all over the place like a tornado had hit, it makes you wonder. When you see dirty dishes all over the kitchen and the whole house, it makes you wonder.

When you see your child sitting on the kitchen floor, trying to share her plate of food with the dog, it makes you wonder.

Sometimes it makes you more than wonder; sometimes it makes you want to cry.

What is it that kids can teach us about the kingdom of God?
Is it the way they live without worry, the way they live according to
Jesus' words, "Do not worry about tomorrow"? (Mat. 6:34)
One frustrated parent said: We have seen how worried and sick our child
got just moving from kindergarten to first grade and
we wonder what's going to happen when they get to high school.
Don't kid yourself: kids do worry!

So what is it that kids can teach us about the kingdom of God?
Do we learn from children how not to be so competitive and
how to be happy with our gifts and achievements and
not be so obsessed with what the next person has or does?
Well, consider poor Charlie Brown
in Charles Schulz's comic strip Peanuts.
He is walking with his friends on the way to school one morning.
It is "show and tell day," and Lucy is asking Linus if he remembered to
bring anything for the class to see.
"Yes, I did," says Linus, as he unfolds some papers.
"These are copies I drew of the Dead Sea Scrolls.
They are made from sheepskin and were found in a cave by
a Bedouin shepherd boy.
I'll try to explain to the class how these manuscripts have influenced
modern Biblical scholarship."
Lucy responds, "Very interesting, Linus."
Then she turns and says, "Are you bringing something for show and tell,
Charlie Brown?"
"Well," says poor Charlie Brown, "I had a little red fire engine here,
but I think I'll just forget about it."
Again, don't kid yourself, even in kindergarten, the kids compete and
they feel badly when they don't measure up.
Yes, there are a lot of reasons to wonder what Jesus meant when he said
that we must be like children to receive the kingdom of God.
But that's only part of the picture.
The truth is: there are actually many kingdom values found in
kindergarten, if we only know how to look for them.

In fact, most of what we need to know about living is learned in kindergarten:

Share everything.

Play fair.

Don't hit people.

Put things back where you found them.

Clean up your own mess.

Don't take things that aren't yours.

Say sorry when you hurt somebody.

Take a nap in the afternoon.

When you go out into the world, watch for traffic, hold hands and stick together.

Yes, all these things can be learned in kindergarten!

Think about what a better world this would be if everyone had something to eat and then lay down for a nap.

How much more just and peaceful would the world be if everyone agreed to play fair, not to hit people and not to take what didn't belong to them?

Think about what a better and cleaner world this would be if people and corporations had a policy of putting things back where they found them and of cleaning up their own mess.

And how much happier would we be when we go out into the world if we would just hold hands and stick together?

If we really did all that, no matter how old we are, we would think the kingdom of God had finally come to earth.

A pastor told the following story.

The congregation was gathered one Sunday for Holy Communion and he was saying the familiar words of the communion service.

He explained that this is the Lord's Table and Jesus invites all people to come and share with him the meal which he has prepared.

Suddenly a little child who was sitting next to her mother rushed out of the pew and ran up towards the communion table.

Her mother, horrified and embarrassed beyond words came running after her and caught the child just before she reached the table.

As she carried her squirming daughter back to her seat, the little girl cried out for everyone to hear, “But I want to eat with Jesus! I want to eat with Jesus!”

Just like the disciples in our text, I imagine some of the grownups in that church disapproved of this unruly child and the mother who failed to keep her in line: “Our children didn’t do things like that when they were young.

We had them more under control and better behaved than parents nowadays!”

But I wonder how many of those disapproving grownups would have the spirit of the little girl as she rushed towards the communion table. I wonder how many of us are as prepared to receive the bread and the cup as this little girl was.

She was eager and filled with joy and anticipation.

She didn’t come to the table burdened by resentments which so often divide people.

She wasn’t distracted by the worries and hurts which accumulate at work or at home during the week.

All she wanted was to come to the table and eat with Jesus.

When Jesus said, “Anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it,” he didn’t mean that heaven is only for children, but that people need childlike attitudes of trust in God.

The simplicity and receptiveness of little children was a great contrast to the religious leaders who let their education and sophistication stand in the way of the simple faith needed to believe in him.

Complete intellectual understanding is not one of the requirements.

Jesus said that people should believe in him with childlike faith.

We don’t have to understand all the mysteries of the universe.

It’s enough to know that God loves us and provides for us.

It’s enough to know that he is “a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love” (Nehemiah 9:17b).

We should trust God with a child’s simplicity and receptiveness, for the kingdom of God must be received.

It must be received as a gift freely given.
It cannot be achieved by human desire and effort nor by sophistication.
It may be entered only by those who know they are helpless
without claim or merit, with total dependence and with childlike faith.
"Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a
little child will never enter it." Amen.

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