

“Children and the Kingdom of God”

Mark 10:13-16

*“Let the little children come to me; do not stop them;
for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.”*

It would be easy to sentimentalize the scene we just heard described in Mark’s Gospel, Jesus holding small children in his arms, saying that the Kingdom of God belonged to such as these. It’s the kind of thing that tugs at the heart, and there are many sentimentalized artistic versions of this story designed to make sure that tug is felt. After all, what parent or grand parent wouldn’t be moved by the thought of a child of his or hers being held in the arms of Jesus? But when we are overly sentimental we sometimes miss the power that an image or a story has to speak to us on a deeper level.

The power of this story, for me anyway, lies in the tension present, the tension between those bringing their children to Jesus and those trying to prevent and prohibit them from doing so. It seems pretty clear that it was the parents of these children (Luke says *infants*) who were bringing them. And we can understand that, can’t we? Certainly, any devout Christian parent today, given the opportunity to have Jesus touch their child, hold their child in his arms, bless their child, would gladly take it.

The parents present that day would not have had the same understanding and beliefs about Jesus that we have today, of course. For them he was perhaps just a wonderful rabbi, a warm teacher who seemed to be in touch with God. Still, it was natural to want him to touch and bless their children. And that, it seems, Jesus was more than happy to do.

And as for who it was that was trying to prevent the parents from bringing their children to Jesus, Mark says it was the disciples. He says that the disciples “spoke sternly” to them. And Jesus ends up saying to his disciples, “Let the little children come to me; do not stop them....”

Why is it, one wonders, that the disciples end up on the wrong side of the aisle so often, working counter-productively to what Jesus has in mind. How often that happens in the Gospels! “Lord,” they say, “we saw someone casting out demons in your name and we forbade him.” And Jesus has to tell them that they were wrong.

“Lord, shall we call fire down from heaven to consume them” James and John ask when a Samaritan village has been less than hospitable. And Jesus rebukes them.

When Jesus talks about his coming suffering, Peter says, “That will never happen to you.” And again Jesus rebukes him.

When Jesus inquires where they can buy bread to feed the multitude, Philip says, “Six months’ wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.” And Andrew adds, “There is a lad here who has five barley loaves and two fish, but what are they among so many people?”

And here, when the disciples see people bringing the little children to Jesus, they speak sternly to them, no doubt thinking that they are doing the right thing. They are trying to run interference for Jesus, keep the riff raff away, keep the annoying children at bay, leave him free to do the important business. But Jesus becomes indignant and says to them: “Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the Kingdom of God belongs.”

Missteps, mistakes made by the disciples. Thinking that they were doing the right thing, that they were being helpful, and instead, as it turns out, doing exactly the wrong thing. Gee! It kind of makes you wonder, doesn't it? Could it be possible that we, ourselves, as followers of Christ, as disciples, could do things that we think are right, helpful, and instead be dead wrong and be doing exactly the opposite of what we should be doing?

Most of us here grew up in a church where we did not receive communion until after we had gone through what was called at that time, communicant's class. Children were not permitted to receive communion in those days. I was serving our second church when the denomination proposed the change that would permit children to receive communion, and I can remember that there was some resistance to it. People said that children did not understand what it meant, that they should wait until they were old enough to get instruction.

What I tried to explain at the time, was that we are part of a denomination that practices infant baptism. Some other denominations believe that a person cannot be baptized until he or she is old enough to understand what is happening and to make a conscious choice. But as Presbyterians, we believe that children of Christian parents are already part of the family of God. By baptizing them, we are giving visible expression to that belief. One person said: "Children live and breathe the air of the Kingdom of God."¹

So that when our denomination decided to include children at the Lord's Table, we were actually becoming more consistent in our beliefs. Just as we don't expect infants to understand what is happening to them when they are baptized, likewise total understanding of communion is not a requirement. Also, when people objected to children receiving communion because they didn't understand what they were doing, I would sometimes ask them if they could explain the meaning of communion to me.

As you can see from our bulletin, baptized children, with the permission of their parents, are welcome to partake in the sacrament. Some parents may wonder when that permission should be given. According to a brochure put out by our denomination, a suggested guideline for parents is this: "If your child understands that this is a special time when we eat together in church to remember Jesus (and not a snack!), they most likely understand enough to begin a lifetime of exploring this wonderful, mysterious practice of our faith." It goes on to ask, "In truth, how many of us fully comprehend this sacrament?"

I personally think that when the denomination excluded children from the Lord's table that we were all doing pretty much what the disciples were trying to do that day, keeping children away from Jesus.

Here at Westminster we have been consciously trying to be more inclusive of children in our worship. We have been using children as acolytes to light the candles on the communion table for a long time. More recently, perhaps you have noticed that we have been using young people as liturgists, sometimes in combination with their parents and in one case with a parent and grandparent. Some of the bread we are using for communion this morning was baked by the children in the 3rd to 6th grade class taught by Jill Fandrich, and they also helped prepare the elements today. In the Worship Center, the young children get to learn about and experience worship at their own level.

But notice that Jesus says in this text that the Kingdom of God belongs to "such as these," what exactly does he mean? Who are the "such as these?"

Often this text has been sentimentalized again by interpreters who have spoken about some of the characteristics of children, waxing eloquently about their innocence, their humility and so on. But when Jesus says that the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these, it is much more likely, at least according to several interpreters, that Jesus is thinking not about the characteristics of children but about their status.

Children in this context represent the powerless, the vulnerable, weak persons, those who might be considered to be a nuisance. Children in the ancient world were quite vulnerable. According to one source perhaps as many as 50% of children in antiquity died before their tenth birthday. Many children didn't make it that far, by any means. For a variety of reasons, in the first week parents would sometimes expose their infant to the elements and let it die or be taken by others to become a slave. Most parents, according to this source, saw their children as an investment – to help them with work that needed to be done, and ultimately to provide for them in their old age.² So it is in this context that we have to understand Jesus' words. The Kingdom of God belongs to such as these – the vulnerable, the powerless, the weak, including children.

We are nearing the end of what our denomination has designated at The Decade of the Child, which runs from 2001 to 2011, and which calls upon the church to focus on the health and well being of children – not just our own children, but children all around the world.

The traditional greeting of the Masai people of Kenya is this: "And how are the children?" The Masai place a high value upon the children. Even tribe members who do not have children of their own will always give the traditional response: "All the children are well."

If we were to ask that question as Christian people today, on World Communion Sunday, gathered around the table of the Lord, we would have to think of not just our own children, but all of God's children, all around the world.

Do **all** the children have adequate health coverage?

Are **all** the children succeeding in school?

Are **all** the children safeguarded from sexual exploitation, dangerous work and warfare?

Are **all** the children shielded from media violence and protected from aggressive marketing?

Do **all** children have access to clean water, healthy food, time to play and other things that make for normal growth and development?³

It would be easy to get sentimental about Jesus holding children in his arms. But what we are called to be is not sentimental but practical and useful. We are called to care for, protect and nurture our own children, the children in the church, and as best as we are able, to care for all the children and all of the vulnerable, the powerless of the world, for of such is the Kingdom of God.

¹ John Mark Hicks

² *When Children Became People: The Birth of Childhood in Early Christianity*, O. M. Bakke

³ *Children: God's Gift – Our Call*, PC (USA)