

To Such as These

Jesus does and says many things in Mark's Gospel to point toward the kingdom of God. He heals people of their diseases. He forgives people their sins. He eats with outcasts and prostitutes.

Jesus also points to the kingdom when he undermines interpretations of the Law of Moses which exploit the powerless. Such was the case with an interpretation of the Mosaic divorce law so abusive of women that it allowed a man to divorce his wife on the grounds that she had burned his supper. Jesus insists that the first question to ask about any decision, including divorce, is not "What is allowed?" but "What does God intend?" In the case of marriage or any other relationship, asking that question first makes all the difference.

Of all the things that Jesus says and does to point us to the kingdom of God, none reveals the nature of that kingdom quite so clearly as this little episode in today's Gospel reading. In the middle of a very adult discussion about (What else?) sex and marriage, his disciples notice that some people are bringing their little children to Jesus **"in order that he might touch them."**

Oh, come on! First it's lepers. Next it's paraplegics let down through the roof. Then it's foreign women who don't even believe in Israel's God. Now it's snotty-nosed kids who want to take up Jesus' valuable time. What can a bunch of toddlers and infants contribute to a grown-up discussion about the weightier matters of the law?

The disciples figure this is a no-brainer. The brats have got to go. "Beat it!" they tell the parents. "Hit the road. That's Master Jesus in that house, not Mister Rogers. If you want your kids entertained, take 'em to Chucky Cheese."

Not for the first time in Mark's Gospel, Jesus' disciples prove themselves further from the kingdom of God than the folks on the outside of their inner circle, looking in. What Jesus says to those in that inner circle, he says to us in his church today.

Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.

Then, putting his hugs where his mouth is, Jesus takes the children up in his arms, lays his hands on them, and blesses them.

We must not view this scene as a pastel painting on a Hallmark greeting card. Jesus is not the proverbial bachelor uncle with a soft spot for the kiddies. This text is not about sentiment; it's about gospel. How we, the followers of Jesus, treat children speaks volumes about how we ourselves understand the Good News of Jesus Christ, and our willingness or reluctance to be taught by children reveals how near or far we are from God's kingdom.

Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.

The key to this saying is, of course, that little word *receive*. The kingdom of God is a gift, and children are closer to the kingdom because they know how to receive. Better put, they simply receive. They don't think about it. They don't wrestle with their consciences. They don't produce a hundred reasons why they are unworthy, or why their neighbors are unworthy. When you offer a young child a gift, the chances are, she'll take it.

A few years ago, when we began inviting all the baptized to come to the Table for Communion, a visitor whose grandmother is a member of this church came along. He was about six or so. His grandmother had prepared him to receive the bread and cup, but she hadn't told him everything about protocol and procedure. As he approached the Table, an elder who is several inches over six feet tall bent down until he was eye-level with the boy and said, "Brother, the body of Christ given for you."

The little boy's eyes grew round as saucers. He looked at the piece of bread held out by that gigantic hand and said, "Wow!"

To such as these belongs the kingdom of God.

There is a difference, of course, between being "childlike" and being "childish." It is the former quality that Jesus commends. He had seen enough of childishness in the grown-up members of his own company of disciples. Only a few verses earlier we find the disciples arguing over who would be first in the kingdom, and who would get the best seats at the master's table in glory. In last week's lection the disciples came tattling to Jesus about a person who had been casting out demons in Jesus' name.

"He's in trouble, isn't he Jesus? He's gonna get it, isn't he?" One gets the feeling that Jesus wanted to put all twelve of his disciples in time out. *No, he's not in trouble.* **"Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us . . ."** (Mark 9:39-40).

Like so many of us in the church today, the disciples are so focused on what's right, they can't see what's good. Children of all ages can be that way, but that's not the quality that brings us closer to the kingdom. We are closer to the kingdom when we are childlike, not childish.

- A child will stand on a wall and shout, "Catch me!" and throw herself headlong into space in utter confidence that your strong arms will save. That's called trust, the essence of faith.
- A child will come to you holding the pieces of a broken toy and expect you to put them back together again because he knows he can't fix it by himself. That's called interdependence, the essence of community.
- A child will squat for ten minutes watching an ant carry a piece of leaf ten times its size along a crack in the sidewalk. That's called awe, the essence of reverence.

Don't misunderstand. I'm not suggesting that children come "trailing streams of glory from God who is our home." None of that. Children are sinners, too, in need of forgiveness, discipline, and instruction. My own father has said many times that he never truly accepted the doctrine of total depravity until he had children. (Or was it until he had me?)

Let us not fall into the trap of making children more than or less than human. The point is, they can see some things more clearly that older people can, and some things that we see, they don't see at all.

Once Andra was rubbing a four-year-old's back during nap time at the Preschool. The little girl was having a hard time settling. During nap time you can look into that large room and see every adult there seated between two cots, rubbing one small back with each hand. ("**He laid his hands on them and blessed them.**") The little girl in question, who has known Andra half her short life, looked at Andra's hand over her own ebony shoulder and said, surprised,

"Ms. Andra! You're very white."

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My own children are in their thirty's now, but when they were young, I used to take them along with me to visit church members in nursing homes. I remember how Adam, at the age of three, was fascinated by the talking clock that one elderly woman, who was blind, had on her bedside table. At one point in the visit, I was trying to offer a prayer while Adam kept hitting the button on the clock.

Oh Lord . . . *It's now 3:04.*

We ask your blessing . . . *It's now 3:05.*

I never finished the prayer because both the woman and I burst out laughing. It was Adam who supplied the true pastoral care.

Have you noticed that about children? When they're young they aren't bothered by wrinkles or wheel chairs or dribbles running down chins. They seem to see what God sees. They seem to perceive the image of God in every person.

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Every now and then, I'm asked why we don't offer "children's church" over in the Education Building while older folks are here in the sanctuary, having "adult church." It's because there's no such thing as "children's church." There's just "church," the household of God that encompasses the generations.

Of course children wiggle. Of course they ask awkward questions. Of course their Sunday shoes clip-clop loudly on the hardwood floors as they come forward for Communion. According to the way some of us were raised, that sound is distracting, even irreverent. According to this text, that clip-clop of eager feet is music to God's ears.

Here's a suggestion. When you find yourself near a child in worship, take pains to learn that child's name, and say, "I'm so glad you're here. Our praise of God would not be complete without you."

Maybe the next time we are asked to teach Church School or help out with the youth program, the first thing that pops into our head will not be a long list of reasons to say "No."

Maybe the next time you are tempted to sleep in on Sunday and let your kids watch TV instead of joining us in this assembly, you will hear Jesus' words, **"Let the children come to me . . ."**

It is often said that children are the future of the church! Well, that's not all they are. Children are indispensable members right now. Without them we are far from the kingdom. With them, we are as near as Christ's own embrace and welcome.

Let the children come. Let us teach them. Let them teach us how to receive the gift of God's kingdom.

Brant S. Copeland
First Presbyterian Church, Tallahassee, Florida
brant@oldfirschurch.org