

Receiving the Kingdom as a Little Child

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George W. Truett Theological Seminary

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Mark 10:13-16 (NRSV)

People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said 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. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

With the Psalmist, I pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be pleasing to you, O God, my rock and my redeemer.

I begin with this prayer in part because I am afraid I am going to offend you right from the start with my first story. Some of you who know me have just come to expect that. To the others of you, I apologize ahead of time; perhaps the next hour and a half of preaching will be enough to help you forget it.

But picture yourself with me, Eric Weeden, Mallory Homeyer and 10 of our students in Nairobi, Kenya. We are gathered at the Baptist Children’s Center that Buckner operates in an urban slum with about 150 preschoolers. We have been teaching them the best of American Hymnody – Sit Down, Stand Up; My God is so Big; and Deep and Wide. We then ask them to teach us a song. I prepared our students to be blown away with the voices of these children. I was prepared to be like Christ, gathering the children in our midst and asking them to teach us a thing or two about Kingdom singing. And so they began: “He’s got the whole world in his hands.” And we all joined in. We know this one.

They sang another verse we knew, “He’s got you and me Brother, Sister” and another “He’s got the little bitty baby.” And they kept going. I didn’t know what would come next. I had sung all the verses I knew and then some. But the children sang on; they sang, “He’s got the wee choo choo in his hands,” – I stopped and looked around. I was taken aback. It’s a common slang term for little old lady - not the most empowering way for a group of social workers with some training in gerontology to be singing about older adults, but we sang along.

And then another verse, “He’s got the big, fat mama in his hands.” I’m not even kidding. We all stopped this time. The kids looked at us like ‘what? What’s the matter?’ it’s true – for our mama’s, bigger is better and God loves ‘em that way. Ok, how do you argue with that? We didn’t stop them; we just sang along.

The children we visit on these trips have an almost magical appeal – we can’t help but fall in love with them. We can’t help but realize that despite their struggles, the beauty they possess is a sign of

the kingdom of God within them. Yet, we know that children are as marginalized today as they were this day that Jesus blessed them. This passage from Mark asks us to consider how children are doing in our world today – asks us to consider how other children of God fare when we, like the disciples, pay more attention to our own interests than those of the most vulnerable around us.

The passage also provokes me to consider what it means for the Kingdom of God to belong to those who come as children. Is it the vulnerability of children that leads to Jesus' embrace? Is it something about how they approach faith? It may be their laughter or it may be their struggles that lead Jesus to welcome them. What is it about the children that evokes the disciples' response as well as Jesus' own? And if the kingdom does belong to those who are like children, then what are the traits of children that we are to be paying attention to?

As the parents brought their children to Jesus that day, I can't help but wonder what they were thinking. I wonder what the kids were thinking? I wonder what they had to say to Jesus? We know the kinds of things they say to him now: Dear Jesus, please let us have candy for dinner. Dear Jesus, make that homework I forgot to do show up in my backpack tomorrow. Dear Jesus, make my brother be nice to me (or just make him go away). (or maybe that's just how I pray?)

Jesus had grown so frustrated with his disciple that he probably did this to get a good dose of the laughter children provide. I can see him asking the children what they wanted to talk to God about. If those kids were like some of ours, there's no telling what they said. We could stop right now and spend the rest of the hour telling the stories of the things our children have said to God and about God. It would offer many insights on the Kingdom of God, I am sure! And I'm sure Jesus could have used some humor himself that day when his disciples just couldn't seem to understand what he was trying to teach them about the kingdom.

He had just shared with them twice that he was going to be killed and on the third day rise again. He had just healed a child, a beggar, engaged a ruler and a Pharisee sharing what his new Kingdom would hold in store for each of them. He had already talked to the disciples about greatness, at least once. And their response:

"So... Jesus... really, which of us is best? No - really – is it me?"

"And, Jesus, when we get this Kingdom all set up, I want to sit on this side and my brother wants to sit on that side. Can we save seats?"

Now, when I hear what the disciples are saying, and I hear Jesus say that you have to be like a child – I can't help but think that the disciples already have childishness down to an art. My children are notorious for holding up a restaurant while they fight about who gets to sit next to mommy. She only has two sides to sit on but all four of them want those prized spots.

And the questions they ask us as they seek our blessing are just as entertaining: Which of us made the best picture? Who is the best helper? Who is really better at piano? Who did it the fastest? "And you have to pick one!" Haden likes to add. These longings from our kids can be cute. Coming from the disciples, it seems they've missed the point of the Kingdom journey.

It's a well-framed story that this part of Mark's gospel begins and ends with two stories of blind men being given their sight; meanwhile, the disciples are blind as to who Jesus really is and what his teachings really mean. When the disciples are at their most childish, Jesus pushes them away, draws in the children and says, "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."

Jesus' calling to enter the Kingdom may refer to being child-like, probably not to being childish. But, it may also be about other characteristics of children. It's often said that this verse is about childlike faith, for example. And there is some value to that. But too often this kind of interpretation sounds as though children are just innocently accepting of whatever we adults have to say.

My experiences are tainted by four little children in particular. They often accept what I say as true; but almost as often they question me. And they are full of questions, silly ones, but they also ask some pretty direct and serious ones. The questions they ask are real, they are probing, and they are specific. Years now after the death of their grandmother, they ask: Where is Nana? With God, I say. Where is God? In Heaven? Where is that? Why? And what does that mean? And on and on. I don't blame them; I'm really asking the same questions. It may be a simple faith, but it's not simpleminded. Maybe it is this kind of authentic engagement with real questions that Jesus is pointing to in the children.

Since the disciples are consumed with greatness and being first, maybe Jesus sees something else in the children's interactions as well. Some scholars point to humility of children; my children are humble at times, but they also want to be first in line every chance they get. In a lot of ways we let them be first in our lives. They are our top priority. We spoil them and work to give them the best. Many of us parent that way, and many of us respond to each others' children with the same lavishness. We want our children to know they are loved, but we live in a world where children don't typically fare so well. We live in a state where incomes are generally on the rise, yet 1 in 4 children are poor, where 1 in 5 children don't have access to healthy foods on a daily basis. We live in a nation where 8 million children are uninsured (1 in 5 in Texas, again). And almost 900,000 children each year in America are abused or neglected; that's one every 36 seconds. And each day around the world, 30,000 children die from preventable causes: 10,000 from diarrhea; another 10,000 from a mosquito bite. We live in a socioeconomic system that teaches us 'me first' and frankly, that often that means 'children last'.

It seems Jesus' world wasn't much different. Judaism teaches us about the welfare provisions of children in the ancient world, but we know that children are largely valued for their ability to contribute to the family workforce, for continuing a family lineage, and not necessarily for whom they are in and of themselves. Jesus' embrace of the children was an embracing of yet another group of outsiders, another group of nobodies.

These children were probably wrestling and arguing, "me first!" "no, me first." But the disciples knew the children wouldn't really be first – they wouldn't really matter much to the kingdom: "It's

me who matters, or my brother here, right?” And Jesus says, no, once again, it really is another group of nobodies, the children. The disciples themselves surely remembered what it was like to be on the outside, but now they had experienced the inner circle, and they weren’t fond of sharing that space.

Jump to today and leave it to modern day disciples to create a field of study out of this debate over what Jesus means in Mark 10. Child Theology is the result: a fairly new approach to theology that seeks to make sense out of what it might mean for Jesus to place children at the center of Kingdom thinking - what it means to worship, pray, live, and enter the kingdom as a child.

One author in this field, Keith White, asks, "What difference would it make if we did as Jesus did, placing a child in the midst, and letting the child's perspective guide our approach to faith?"

This field recognizes that a child is neither a tabula rasa, nor a predictable innocent, always vulnerable and trusting. The life, and the lessons of life, learned from a child are complex, varied, and diverse.

A poem by a teacher, Jane Clements, of the Bruderhof Community puts it like this:

*“Child, though I take your hand and walk in the snow;
though we follow the track of the mouse together.
Though we try to unlock the mystery of the printed work, and slowly discover why two and
three makes five
always, in an uncertain world -
Child, though I am meant to teach you much,
what is it, in the end, except that together we are
meant to be children of the same Father
and I must unlearn all the adult structure
and the cumbering years and you must teach me
to look at the earth and the heaven with your fresh wonder.”*

While serving as a Mennonite Pastor in Richmond, I had an elderly teacher who knew what it meant to place a child in our midst. Opal, then in her 90’s, reminded me almost weekly of her basic parenting principle: accentuate the positive and negate the negative.

In our church, Opal would occasionally lead our children’s story. Her stories were vivid and detailed, but they wandered through the years of her life in such a way that didn’t always keep the children’s attention (she said the same thing of my sermons!). However, when we would invite the children to tell their stories, Opal was always the first to take a seat and the last to get up. In part, this was because she didn’t have the strength in her legs to get away from the kids, but she, as a portrait of Christ, sat with the children and drew the stories out of them like no else. Little boys whose only response to most of us was a shoulder shrug and a giggle, would sit and talk to her as though she were Christ in their midst. In many ways she was – in part because she knew the value of having a child in her midst.

The day she shared the most with me about her life and her faith was one of the days I visited her in

her retirement community but was nervous about the visit because Haden was with me. Haden was almost two and quite energetic. I took him along knowing Opal would love having him there, but I was afraid he would tear her place apart. She had more little African violets planted in ceramic pots than I had ever seen and I could just imagine the mess Haden would make with these. I had heard several of her stories over and over again and knowing I'd be hearing them again while cleaning up dirt, broken plants and bits of ceramic was not appealing.

This day, however, turned out to be quite different. Placing a child in our presence opened up memories of stories I had never heard. She began with her mantra: accentuate the positive, negate the negative and I thought this was going to be a long afternoon. Instead, I learned that these words were no mere power of positive thinking. They were mantras of resilience and resistance rooted in family and community identity. This widow shared stories that day of her life and loss, memories of being a German Mennonite immigrant, of being poor as a child in a new country during the Great Depression, of marrying young in order to survive, of the torture and experiments her new husband endured when he chose to serve God and country as a conscientious objector during World War II. Her son, a generation later, didn't fare much better when resisting the war in Viet Nam. In addition, he stood up for civil rights and this mother told stories of being afraid for her son's life. When I served as their pastor, this son was in his 60's, but Opal still talked about him as though he were the toddler in her lap instead of Haden. She remembered their struggles, shared them honestly, taught me that accentuating the positive was a lesson of faith that brought her through those years of hardship and helped her see the power of God in all things for good. An amazing lady she was.

All of this is to say that this story about children may not only be about children, at least not to the neglect of other voices. It's about setting aside our own interests as we invite those on the margins to take the honored seat at the center – on Christ's lap, as we listen and learn that the kingdom belongs to them. Opal talked a lot about the value of seeing and hearing the children in our church. I learned to see her as a child of God, sitting with Jesus sharing her stories and receiving his blessing.

I have come to realize that many of the references to children in the Bible are not necessarily about children as young human beings, but metaphors for describing the journey of all of us. In the Jewish Scriptures there is continuous reference to "the children of Israel" for example and as we know this phrase refers to the whole of the Jewish community. Likewise in the Fourth Gospel followers of Jesus are referred to as "little children". Here, in Mark, it's about receiving the kingdom *as* a little child.

Jesus, known for parables that point to realities larger than the stories themselves, is talking about the value of children, but is also talking about being childlike. Child-likeness may not merely be that phase in human development before maturity or adulthood; but rather it is a parable of the whole of our lives. When God draws us in as a Mother Hen her chicks, it applies to us as children, adolescents, younger and older adults reminding us all of God's embrace. When we are taught to pray, to say, "Our Father", it is not just when we are little children, but as children of God at any age who need to remember to depend on God.

Some of the most important descriptions of faith that Evangelical Christians use relate to experiences that we associate with childhood. Two obvious examples are Adoption and being Born Again.

Whatever Paul and Jesus mean when they use these symbols, we know that they are not calling adults to cease being adults; but at the same time it is clear that we must hold on to the Kingdom as a child, lest we, as adults, lose a vital sign of the Kingdom of God.

As we enter a new semester in the SSW, my prayer is that we will seek to receive the kingdom as little children in new ways.

Our students often express that they are called to listen to the stories – of children, as well as the stories of adolescents, young families, older adults and all of God’s children. At the same time, each of our students, all adult learners, knows the value of sitting as a child as they listen to each client. Students, as you listen to them, may they take you up, lay their hands on you, and bless you. May they be Christ to you. And may we learn from you all as you learn from them. May the rich and varied experiences of the diverse populations we serve strengthen our professional practice, but may they also inform our faith – may hearing their stories help us receive the Kingdom.

For me, it is truly an honor to take this seat in the Garland Chair, but it is not about sitting to the left or the right of my dean. It is about joining her, all of my colleagues, our supporters in the community, and our students as we sit at the feet of Christ.

I am mindful of the ways we, in the SSW, experience the kingdom by receiving each other as children. Not by treating each other as children – that may be the norm in higher education, where colleagues claw to the top asking for the seats to the right and the left, pushing others out of the way. Here, however, we truly seek to embody a culture that seems more kingdom-rooted. We do not always live up to it, but our desire is not to separate out the kids and the adults, the students from the graduate trained faculty, task supervisors from the BOA, or the faculty from the staff. Our desire is to gather humbly as children with each other at the feet of Jesus. That is one of the many things I love about this place. Sometimes we do it better than others, but may God grant this longing of our hearts in new ways at the start of this year.

You may think I’m childlike enough, my wife certainly does, but my hope is that you will see me and that we might see each other as Jesus taught us to be – as little children coming to Christ, receiving the Kingdom, and being blessed. May this be our prayer today and tomorrow, and for the months and years ahead.

And may the gospel ring true in the practice of our lives: When Jesus saw these things, he said 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. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them. May it be so.

Amen.