

“Children and God’s Kingdom” GPPC 10-7-18
Psalm 26, Mark 10:13-16

One thing that makes the Bible interesting is that it’s often unclear. Of course, much of scripture gives us clarity. “Do this. Don’t do that. Say this. Don’t say that. Believe this. Don’t believe that.” As Mark Twain said, “It ain’t those parts of the Bible that I can’t understand that bother me. It’s the parts that I do understand.” Nonetheless, a lot of the Bible is shrouded in mystery, or at least shrouded in “partly cloudy with a 50% chance of insight.”

I went to one of those church-wide child protection policy workshops yesterday (yes, our congregation has a strong policy). And at the workshop, one of the ministers noted that she once taught Sunday school to a class of seven-year-olds. She was trying to explain a difficult Bible passage to the kids and one of the girls finally asked, “Will this make sense when I’m older?”

The right answer is a firm, “Maybe.” Scripture makes us speculate a bit. And the speculating, we hope, makes us think, struggle, and grow

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a bit, even if we never completely understand, because, after all we are dealing with God, whom we will never completely understand either.

This morning imagine the scene, if you will. Mark says “People were bringing little children to Jesus in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them.”

How many children? We don't know. Exactly how old? We don't know. We just know they were little. Boys and girls? Probably. Was Jesus standing or sitting when people brought these little ones? It doesn't say. Were the little ones happy to see Jesus or did some of them cry the way kids sometimes do when foisted onto Santa's lap? We don't know. Did parents bring the kids or did somebody else? We don't know. We would guess parents, right? And *why* did people bring the children to Jesus? We know the answer to this one: so that Jesus might touch them. But why would they want Jesus to touch them anyway?

They must have believed that Jesus had some sort of power, some sort of blessing to give to the children. And maybe that seems silly to us, but go turn on YouTube and watch the videos of kids meeting their sports heroes, and being touched with a high-five, or a fist bump, or a

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hug, or being given a shirt or a hat or a ball. Watch and see these videos and notice the reaction of the children and the parents and the crowds.

When it was playing in theaters a few months ago, some of you may have seen “Won’t You Be My Neighbor,” the movie biography about Fred Rogers. At one point in the movie we see video of children and their families, bundled against the cold, and lined up around the block in Pittsburgh waiting to meet Mr. Rogers. And then we see how the kids and their families reacted when they met him. It’s hard to watch without crying. And if this is how people react with sports stars and with Mr. Rogers, then imagine how they might have reacted when encountering the holiness and love of God in Jesus. Imagine how powerful that was. Not so silly, is it?

Now imagine how the people brought these sweet little children to Jesus for him to touch them. What a beautiful and moving scene. Turn up the violins. Paint a gauzy scene. Cue the Hallmark movie.

But Mark says, “The disciples spoke sternly to them.” Clank. Why? Once again, the Bible does not tell us. But Bible scholars give us clues about the attitudes of the time toward children. One professor says,

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“Children were generally thought to be willful, lacking in understanding, and in need of stern discipline (Isa. 3:4, Eccl. 10:16; Wis 12:24; 15:14), and rabbis did not waste time with children.” (Alan R. Culpepper in *Feasting on the Gospels: Mark*, 305.)

Another scholar says rabbis of the time “debated whether children would be raised from the dead and included in the age to come...” [whether] “children of the [irreverent] in Israel would have no share in the age to come... that the children of non-Israelites would neither be raised nor judged.” (Adela Yarbro Collins, *Mark*, 472.) And those are just a few samples of the arguments and attitudes that are simply stunning in our 21st century ears.

Children of the time had virtually no status or rights. So we assume that the disciples tried to keep people from bringing the little children to Jesus, because they figured the children were just a bother to their Lord. Children would just get in the way, and, of course, in the way of the disciples’ own constant need to fuss and fight for position. Not that we would ever do that.

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But Mark says Jesus became indignant. Or it can be translated he became “angry.” When Matthew and Luke wrote their versions of this story, they cleaned it up a little, and took out that word that can be translated as “indignant” or “angry.” But Mark included it. Why? Why was Jesus angry? Because so much was and is at stake. Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.” According to Jesus what’s at stake is the very nature of God’s kingdom, how we understand God’s will, God’s reign that even now is beginning to dawn, God’s kingdom that finally is unstoppable.

As one professor put it, “No great figure in antiquity has ever had time for children—Plato, Socrates, Aristotle—you go down the line. Children are either something mothers should take care of or problems to be ignored. There is only one great figure in antiquity who ever spent time with children, and it is Jesus.” (Thomas G. Long, sermon, “Children and the Kingdom”)

Jesus takes time to be with the children. He takes them in his arms, lays his hands upon them, and blesses them.

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Jesus loves the little children. And so does his church. So we care for the children now. We pay to rebuild their homes in Wilmington and in Indonesia. We play with them and mentor them. We give them food in Greensboro and in Ethiopia. We work to provide them with all the health care they will need, and with safe neighborhoods and well-funded schools and teachers. We work for comprehensive immigration reform that will keep parents and children together and provide opportunities for families and for businesses to thrive. We strive to leave a better world for the children, don't we?

And we bring the children to church to learn in Sunday school about right and wrong and telling the truth and treating others the way we want to be treated, not merely the way we can get away with.

And we bring the children to worship God and to learn how to worship God, and we're patient with them, because they're children. And we bring them and worship with them and hope to be a good example for them (though we often fail), because God is the most important subject of all. And we know that learning about God and

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growing in faith take time and practice. So we take time to be with the children.

And we remember that children in the Bible are first simply children, but then they are also the symbol for all people who are without status and power. Children symbolize all those people who are mistreated, ignored, devalued, whose voices are ignored or overpowered. Children are metaphors for all those people who are waiting and longing for the day when God's truth will be told and might will no longer make right. That's who children are. And Jesus loves the little children.

And finally children are metaphors for us all. As Jesus says, "Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it."

And what does that mean? We can only speculate. But maybe it means that each of us can only enter God's kingdom, God's reign, like little children who can bring nothing to the budget meeting, no multi-year plan, no petition, no essay, no power lunch, no back room deal, no quid pro quo, nothing. We, finally, like children, cannot earn our way

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with God. We can only participate with God in doing what we hope is right and loving with all that can receive from God's hand. Like little empty-handed children gathered round and Jesus takes us in his arms, lays his hands on us, and blesses us.

[Sung] "Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world. Red, and yellow, black and white, they are precious in his sight. Jesus loves the little children of the world." ©Jeff Paschal