

Receiving the Kingdom – Mark 10:13-16

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From the book *Children's Letters to God*, come these gems:

“Dear God, I bet it is very hard for you to love all of everybody in the whole world. There are only 4 people in our family and I can never do it. Nan.”

“Dear God, Thank you for the baby brother, but what I prayed for was a puppy. Joyce”

“Dear God, my brother is a rat. You should give him a tail. Haha. Danny”

“Dear God, I don't ever feel alone since I found out about you. Nora.”

Maybe Nora had just read these verses from Mark 10 or had them read to her before she wrote that letter. Because, today, children take center stage and are embraced and loved by Jesus.

It's a good day today to lift up the value of kids. Kids in our families, kids in our schools, and kids in the church. We are blessed here at FPC to have a small but mighty core of young children and youth who are finding their place in the family of God.

We want the worship service to be a place where all our children feel welcome—during the KidsZone but before and after it. And I trust you will turn to a child either during the passing of the peace or before or after worship and greet him or her with a smile, a hello, a handshake, a high-five. If you see the child regularly, I hope you get to know that child by name and greet them so that they truly know they have a place here at all times.

While we lift up children and their value, much like Jesus did in this passage in Mark, this text is not primarily about children. It is about Jesus and who children represented.

In the time this story was written, children were of little value: worthless, second-class citizens. A child was a burden – dependent,

helpless, nonproductive. A child was not a full human being until adulthood.

This text says more about *Jesus* than it does about children. “In my kingdom,” Jesus says, “even helpless, dependent, valueless *children* belong in the kingdom of God.” Even children. Here is the Lord who serves the lowly, exalts the humble; whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.

Thank goodness that, with very few exceptions, children are not relegated to second-class status today like they were then. But the point is as pertinent today as it was then: We receive the kingdom as a child would.

What does that mean?

There are certain qualities children possess that Jesus may have found so pertinent to having the ability to receive the kingdom of God that he uses this reference to drive home his point.

The first quality of kids he may have had on his mind, as they were presented to him on this day and as he spoke of how we must receive the kingdom, is their little need for status.

For the most part, young kids (under 12) aren’t interested in what the world thinks of them. They don’t make every decision factoring in what the decision is going to do for their place in the eyes of their peers—whether it’s going to make them look good or more successful or more respected by the in-crowd.

We adults have a problem with that every once in a while. We receive the kingdom of God conditionally. Sure, we’ll serve others—but only if it makes me look good in the eyes of a certain social group. Sure, we’ll be kind—but only if a group I’m trying to impress sees me being kind. Sure, we’ll show up for a church function—but only to please a certain family member or friend.

Adults often receive the kingdom of God conditionally. But there’s no pretense with children. They receive because their desire to receive is pure. And Jesus validates that.

The second lesson kids teach us that maybe Jesus wanted to use in his teaching is that humility, vulnerability, and weakness are okay.

Kids have no qualms about wearing their emotions on their sleeves—from anger to fear to joy. They don't even have a problem telling you they can't do something on their own.

In this day and age, we often hear the term “snowflakes” applied to young people who don't seem to be able to “tough it out” when it comes to challenges presented them. And maybe there is a certain amount of toughness lacking in general among some people.

But the same applies to the opposite end of the spectrum: There seems to be a reluctance on the part of people of faith to show their vulnerability. We hesitate to show emotion, we hesitate to show our doubts or our fears. We hesitate to ask for help when it comes to enduring through a difficult spiritual or emotional experience.

Kids teach us that it's okay to be vulnerable. Because when we let our guard down, we're more ready to receive what the kingdom of God is all about: grace, forgiveness, and a willingness to sign on to what God would have us do.

Another lesson kids teach us through all this: We should worry less about the future and live in the moment. That doesn't mean we don't plan for the future (that's prudent). But sometimes our planning ahead gets in the way of the opportunities to experience right in front of us.

Kids are great about living in the present, aren't they? It drives us adults crazy at times at how lacking they are in seeing into the future. But they appreciate the beauty of the present: a playdate with a friend, a snow cone on a hot summer day, a few minutes of play with their dog or cat, a funny video on YouTube. They enjoy what's right in front of them. And to receive the kingdom of God might involve doing something similar: recognizing the joys and challenges of today and doing something with them rather than always thinking about what's coming next.

And finally, another trait of children that maybe Jesus was trying to instill in all those who receive the kingdom of God is that it's okay, even necessary perhaps, to be child-like. That doesn't mean being childish. It means living with a sense of wonder and curiosity

and excitement that kids are more apt to live in every day. They are intentional about living right where they are and expressing what they appreciate and what they're struggling with on a daily basis.

We are wise to adopt a mindset of childlikeness in our daily living. It makes receiving the kingdom of God more authentic, meaningful, and fruitful.

Tom Long, writing in his book *Shepherds and Bathrobes*, characterizes well how receiving the kingdom is often easier for people like children, historically marginalized and thought of as being second-best in society.

He says, "The treasure of the gospel, which will one day fill the earth with its power, must first be planted in those weak and helpless places which yearn for it the most, hunger for it most deeply, and thus can believe and cherish it most fully.

"There is a scene in Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* when Blanche, an unlovely person desperately seeking love, meets Mitch, a man who is grossly overweight, who is embarrassed that he perspires profusely, and who, like Blanche, is frantically lonely. It is not their strength, but their mutual weakness, which brings them together, and because they are both so needy, Blanche is able to trust Mitch with the tragic story of her life. Mitch then takes her in his arms and says, "You need somebody, and I need somebody, too. Could it be you and me, Blanche?"

"She looks at him in amazement, then reaches for him, her eyes filling with tears, and says, "Sometimes there's God, so quickly."

"It is the places of weakness in our lives and in the world which are most open to the amazing intrusion of God's presence. And part of the good news is that it is precisely there where God leaves the treasure."

The children of today, the Blanches and Mitches of today, are those who particularly treasure the Gospel. And that Gospel is made alive when we as God's servants welcome them and emulate them. It might actually be a child, but it also might be the person who has spent years and years wandering and wondering about God's love

for them. It might be the person or people that our society has traditionally kept on the margins and never fully accepted—due to their looks or their backgrounds or their diverse identities.

And when we welcome them, we are more inclined to find the lessons from them about what it means to receive God's kingdom.

A pastor named John Killinger once confessed this: "I remember the Easter Day when several street folks, scruffy and poorly dressed, came up to me in my white robe in the forecourt after the last service and asked if it was all right for them to enter the church. I directed them inside and returned to greet the people remaining in the forecourt. When I didn't see them emerge from the church after a few minutes, I stepped inside to check on them, and saw them standing around in the huge sanctuary. With the suspicious nature born of having things, I suggested to a custodian that he keep an eye on them, and I went back outside.

"When all the members and visitors had departed, I stepped back into the sanctuary. At first I didn't see the street people. I walked down the aisle. There they were, all of them, scattered across the front of the chancel, kneeling in prayer.

"I stood there breathless for a moment, watching them. Tears formed in my eyes. I had never seen anything so beautiful. When at last they began to look up, I walked among them and asked if they would like me, as the pastor, to offer a prayer for us all. They said yes, and I knelt among them, shepherd of a new flock, my hand on the shoulders of two of them, and prayed the most heartfelt prayer I had prayed that day.

"Theirs is the kingdom of heaven. What hope is there for the rest of us?"

The hope for us is that we, too, will have a greater awareness of what it means to receive the kingdom—with sincerity and free of the trappings our society brings: too much of a focus on status and a tendency to always look ahead. Instead, here's what children teach us: a willingness to be vulnerable, playful, and curious, and an ability to live in the moment. In these cases, the kingdom comes alive and

God's work is done. Amen.