

---

Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:5-12

Mark 10:2-16

“Let the little children come unto me.” Such a sweet image. We have it depicted on one and a half of our windows. Sweet, doe-eyed little innocents coming to our Lord. Rather than annoying him, the children delight the Savior with their golden curls and quiet adoration. Yeah, right. Most of you have raised children. You've taken them to see Santa in the mall. If they like someone, they want to crawl all over them like a jungle gym. And if they don't like them, they will have a death-grip on your legs like you wouldn't believe.

So maybe Jesus, being Jesus, exuded a calming aura around children. Maybe. Even if he did, it doesn't change how children – even the best of them – can really be at times. We make this way more sentimental than it should be. We tend to look at this through grandparents' eyes rather than parents'. Parents know the realities of children. And if you've spent any time in a classroom, well, doe-eyed little angels is probably not the first thought that comes to mind.

But so many people want to tell us that accepting the kingdom like a child is all about innocence and trust, unquestioning acceptance of what an authority tells you. Not my kids. They want to know the why and why not about everything. Granted, I try to foster that inquisitiveness. I love to answer questions. “Why is the sky blue?” It has to do with the refractive properties of light and the index of refraction of a nitrogen-oxygen atmosphere. You see ... It is at about this point that their eyes glaze over and they go to find their mother. My other favorite answer comes from the TV show *Night Court*. Because if it were green we wouldn't know where to stop mowing.

My point is that your average child is all about the questions. They are hard-wired to be curious about their world. Their brains are forming connections and interactions that will define them for the rest of their lives. So it amazes me when I hear folks say things like, “I don't want to question my beliefs. I just want to have a child-like faith.” I have met the children of such people. They know that there is nothing “child-like” about unquestioning belief. Kids question everything.

So how does our Lord want us to enter the kingdom of heaven? What is it about children that Jesus would use them as an example of what the kingdom of heaven is all about? Notice, first of all, it has nothing to do with belief or faith. Those words are nowhere in our reading today. Also note the fact that it is about receiving the kingdom of heaven, not salvation. The two are not necessarily synonymous. To dwell in the kingdom of heaven is to be in a different realm than the purely material. Our Lord taught that the kingdom of heaven had come near; that it was in the hearts of those who followed him. So what kind of person dwells in that kingdom?

Rather than an overly sentimentalized view of children, what is the reality of children? For the most part, and certainly so in the First Century, children in and of themselves had no status. Their identity came from their parents, primarily their fathers. The “bar” in people's names from that time

means “son of.” It is much like “Mac” in Scottish names of “O” in Irish ones. A child's identity was as the offspring of someone. As children of our heavenly Father, our identity comes from God. As little children, it is not us, but our family that is important. Our identity is as children of God, members of God's family.

The kingdom of God is not for the rich and powerful, it is for those who have no identity in themselves. Those with no social standing whatsoever are invited to be citizens of God's kingdom. It is a kingdom with no distinction of class or gender or status. The citizens of God's kingdom are all brothers and sister and joint heirs with Christ. No matter what our standing in the world, in God's kingdom, we are all one. Which is great news for those of lowly status here and now, but a bit troubling for those who are used to preferential treatment. It is great to be exalted about our station. It is painful to be humbled.

Although not in our readings today, you might recall the parable of the generous boss. That's the one where the workers are all called at different times in the day, yet each was given the same reward for his work. Those who worked all day were indignant that the late-comers were treated the same way they were. We humans sometimes have a hard time accepting grace for ourselves and an even harder time accepting grace given to someone else. “It's not fair.” we cry. But that is the way of the kingdom of God. In God's kingdom, we are all one. And that doesn't just kick in after we die. We are striving to live in God's kingdom right here, right now. And that means accepting that others whom we might not deem worthy of the title, are, in fact, fellow children of God. And we should treat them as such. “For the one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father. For this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters, saying, 'I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters, in the midst of the congregation I will praise you.'”

If Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers sisters, on what basis are we ashamed? True, there are some people who do awful, nasty, hurtful things. But we are still called to love them. There are some people who seem to actively try to get us to dislike them. Still we must love. As followers of the Lord Jesus Christ, we don't have the luxury of self-indulgent spite. We are not allowed to hold grudges or withhold forgiveness. Even as he was being unjustly executed by the state, our Lord forgave his killers. As his followers, can we do anything less?

There are studies that suggest that any response to racial differences at a biological level don't really kick in until about the age of fourteen. How many times have we heard stories – especially in an older time that I hope we are working hard to eradicate – heard stories of two children from different races who learn only after their friendship is established that some thought it wrong to exist at all? While we are wired to be wary of strangers, racism is a learned behavior. Perhaps that is the essence of a child-like faith: Not unquestioned acceptance of doctrine, but unlimited acceptance of others.

When we can accept others as they are, without preconceived reservations, without prejudice, without bias, then we are living in the kingdom of God. There are some people that we would do better

not to be around. I'll admit I've got family members in that category, but that determination is made as a result of the relationship, not outward appearances. Not status or class. How we respond to others should be based upon the person, not some categorical characteristic we have assigned a group.

How does one receive the kingdom as a child? By asking questions; wanting to know the whys and wherefores, and by being willing to trust. To hold hands and walk together. To be brothers and sisters in the family of God. To fight and to love, all at the same time. To know that we are part of something so much bigger than ourselves. And to find comfort in that thought. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. *Amen.*