

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“More: You Must Be This Tall”

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Mark 10:13-16

January 21, 2024

Today we continue in our series “More,” this look at the radical form of discipleship that Jesus describes to his disciples. We’re going through a section of Mark’s Gospel which features a series of pretty challenging teachings, teachings that go against how we are conditioned to view the world a lot of times, with all of it going back to this revolutionary understanding that to become greatest among those who follow him, one must be last of all.

If you made it past last week, I’m glad you’re still with us. We spoke of love and marriage, divorce and remarriage, and how the call of a Christian life as it could pertain to something like marriage means both a testimony to the love of God in the way one loves your spouse, but also a call to speaking compassion into pain.

I’m tempted to say that it’s all downhill from there, but today as we pick up where we left off, we come to a short text that on the surface sounds nice, but once you start thinking about it, it might be just as challenging as last week: children. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

People were bringing 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 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.

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Father in Heaven, we thank you for this Word assuring us of your love and embrace of us, for truly we could never approach you in a manner deserving of your welcome and grace. You welcome us as children, as your children, and as your children we pray that your Word would nourish and guide us. And for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

People were understandably bringing their kids to Jesus, because why wouldn’t you? This healer, this teacher was going around the countryside. Amazing things were happening. As a parent you would want such a person to bless your child, or at the very least, you wouldn’t want such an opportunity to pass without bringing your child to him. But as they were doing so, the disciples are turning them away, like grumpy elves at a photoshoot with Santa. They “spoke sternly to them.”

If this is the first time hearing that, you may be taken aback by their actions. Speaking sternly to kids and their parents coming to see your teacher? What on earth has gotten into you? It's not like Jesus was out there kissing babies like a politician or anything, but the scene had to have looked something like that. Why would you chastise and turn away kids and their families?

We touched on this a couple of weeks ago briefly, because this isn't the first time a child had featured in something Jesus wanted to teach his disciples, but children then were not considered to be the treasure that they are almost universally considered today. Parents loved their children, of course. But socially, they weren't really given much mind. Why? Well because they didn't contribute all that much, so the thinking of the day went.

They aren't completely off base there. Children then were very different from children today. Children today can do a lot for themselves, much less dependent than back then. Children today ask questions, sure, but they never ask the same question twice or multiple questions back-to-back-to-back like the children back then were known to do. And children today are always respectful and neat and would never do anything too loud for a given social setting. Children back then, though...

In fact, it probably strains our imagination even to consider that children sometimes can be a bit of a nuisance or a bit much to manage. I mean just take the last week. I know all you parents out there feel the same way the Howells do. A week straight of having the kids cooped up in the house? Simply delightful. Sign us up for another one!

Maybe this isn't quite such foreign territory for us after all. The disciples speak sternly to the children. How dare they presume that their teacher, this man who was delving into matters of God, of the law, of death and resurrection, of the kingdom of the Lord, this man whom they had seen still the storm, walk on the water, and transfigured on the mountaintop, flanked by none other by Moses and Elijah themselves, that this man could be bothered to bless a gathering of kids. Bigger issues to tend to. They just need to move along and let Jesus get back to his kingdom work.

But then Jesus sees this, and he is, it says, "indignant," and corrects his disciples with those beautiful, powerful words that subvert so much of what they assumed to be the case as far as who had enough worth, enough value to presume to approach their teacher: "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs."

If you've heard that before, it's possible you've heard it enough to dull its impact, but think of it this way: Jesus isn't saying, "Let the little kids come to me, because they can come along too," as in, well yeah I guess the circle can be drawn wide enough to enfold even these. Jesus doesn't say that. He goes a step further. He takes those who would otherwise be among the first

to be excluded and instead places them not just within the circle, but at the center of it. Not just included within the kingdom of God, that is, the reign of God, the rule of God, the reality of God unfolding on earth as it is in heaven, not just within the kingdom, but those to whom the kingdom of God belongs. This has some pretty wide-ranging ramifications, not just for children, but for everyone who claims to follow Jesus.

We talked last week about how the Christian call upon marriage wasn't just to be a declaration that you love another person, but that within a Christian context, as a disciple of Christ, you are following that call to become last of all, servant of all, holding up another as greater than yourself, specifically in the way you love your spouse, as a reflection of the self-giving, sacrificial way that God loves you. It's not just a feel-good story about love. It's a witness, a testimony to the gospel.

In a similar way, so too goes the call to parents. Now obviously not the same thing. For the most part, at least these days, you choose who you marry. It's a choice you go into, so it should be considered to be a calling that you entered into within your life. Obviously not necessarily the case as parents. Some become parents without expecting to or wanting to or just before wanting to. Others deeply wish to become parents but face complications. It's not just choice here, is the point.

But insofar as the treatment of and raising of children goes for parents who also claim to follow Jesus, the manner in which we love and raise our children isn't just a matter of developing constructive, contributing members of society. It's to be a reflection, a testimony, of the self-giving, sacrificial way that God loves us, his children. You want to become greater? Start by giving yourself up for your kids—and I'm preaching to myself here now—guiding them with long-enduring patience, abundant grace, loving correction, and unconditional love.

And it doesn't even stop at parents. Y'all remember what happens when we have a baptism of a child and everybody stands up? If you've ever stood up at one of those things, you have made this promise. The whole church makes this promise, a promise to support an entire family in raising a child in the faith. That means the way the church loves and treats children should be a reflection of how God loves us, a testimony to their privileged place in the kingdom of God.

Does that always happen? Maybe not. It's hard. But the stakes are high. Because Christ teaches us that not only to such as these does the kingdom of God belong, but also any who does not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it. Now the tables have completely turned. The gatekeepers, those who would like to consider ourselves to be the ones magnanimously including children, now we're the ones on the outside looking in. Why? Because it's those who receive the kingdom of God like a little child who enter into it. Those who don't, won't.

It's like this. You know theme parks? Dollywood, yeah? You go to a roller coaster, what's at the entrance to the line? It's some measuring stick poking out of the ground, usually dressed up a bit, but with a sign that says something to the effect of, "You must be this tall to ride this ride," much to many a child's dismay. And children will grow their hair out, stuff extra socks in their shoes, walk on their tiptoes just to brush the top of their head along the minimum height to be able to go into the ride. Y'all know what I'm talking about. Nothing against those things, of course. They're there for a reason.

But in this sort of thing, it's as if the whole thing gets flipped. To enter the kingdom of God, it's no longer a roller coaster that you have to be tall enough or old enough to get into. It's like a child's playground, into which practically you can't be over a certain height just to fit into it in the first place. Have you ever tried to maneuver in those things when you're too big for them? I have. It's not fun. It's not meant for me. That, Jesus says, is what the kingdom of God is like. It's like this Peter Pan Neverland thing. Once you grow up; you can't go back.

Too often in a life of faith, especially as, God willing, we grow and mature—which can be a very, very good thing—we can lose so much of what it means to receive the kingdom of God, the reality of God, as a little child. If we consider ourselves knowledgeable or learned, we shouldn't. If we consider ourselves worthy, we are not. If we consider ourselves assured of ourselves, we should consider ourselves more vulnerable. If we consider ourselves too cynical, we should approach the Lord with more wide-eyed wonder and delight.

And in all of those things, those the world would have excluded first, the children, are the testimonies of how beautiful the kingdom of God can be. They're not tagalongs. They're our guides.

Just the other day, we were having dinner, and we were talking about a Bible story we had read them that day out of one of those kids illustrated story Bible things. Jack was asking questions about it, one of which was "When did God get his powers?" you know, like a superhero origin story. If any of you have any tips on explaining the self-existence of the Almighty to a child, I'm all ears.

Needless to say, Jack wasn't quite clicking with some pretty abstract thought there. But then he said, and this is what stuck with me: "God says things funny sometimes, but it's really good."

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

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.