

October 6th, 2024

Mark 10:13-16 “Where the Children are Blessed”

It's World Communion Sunday today. On this day Christian churches around the world are sharing communion ... even the ones who don't practice weekly communion like we do. The tradition got started in 1933 in the Presbyterian Church here in the US and has grown into a world-wide, cross-denominational event. The point of this observation is for each participating church to acknowledge that even though we have different ways and methods of doing communion and even though we have different theological ways of interpreting communion, we are united in Christ. In the gospel story, Jesus spent much of his time talking about the reign of God and how that reign is different than any earthly kingdom. For example, in earthly kingdoms, the subjects serve the king. That's just the way it is and always has been. But during the last supper before he was betrayed, arrested and crucified, Jesus quite literally turned the table around and served his disciples. What a backward thing to do! What kind of a king would roll up their sleeves to host and *serve* a dinner for the people? It's supposed to be the other way around, right? For the next few weeks, we're going to be in the Gospel of Mark which is *still* my favorite of the four gospels. We're going to spend some time trying to understand this backward kingdom that Jesus preached about and how even today the values, practices and structure of this kingdom sounds strange to us, even those of us in the church.

The subheading of today's scripture is “Jesus Blesses Little Children.” There are many paintings and illustrations either depicting this event or interpreting this event for contemporary audiences. We even have one hanging in a in Room 4. I was going to take it out and bring it this morning because I was concerned you weren't going to believe me when I described it to you. The problem is, this is where we store our handbells, and it would have taken quite an effort to move everything out of the way just to take it down for show and tell. So, here's the description: White Jesus, wearing a white robe, is sitting on a white

bench in a fertile green garden with three white children – two girls and a boy. All of them are dressed in early 1950s church-appropriate clothing. The boy is sitting at the feet of Jesus holding a World War II-era toy airplane although he is being very attentive to Jesus. The older girl standing to his left is equally attentive, but I can imagine her being a little cranky about the amount of attention her mom had to pay to get her hair to look as fancy as it did. The youngest girl is sitting on Jesus' lap, and here's where it gets tricky. She's looking at Jesus' face inquisitively, but she's also pointing at his outstretched palm which leads the interpreter to ask, "What does Jesus have in his hand?" Maybe a quarter that he pulled from behind one of the kids' ears? Maybe a little pebble or a butterfly? Who knows! I'm sure that many of you who have either taught or been a student in Sunday school class here at First Christian Church know what picture I'm talking about, and I recognize that it may hold a special place in your heart. So please don't think I'm making fun of it. For its time and place, it's a great picture. If nothing else, it's a great example mid-20th century church Americana.

I visited Google images to see if there were other paintings or media that fit the category of "Jesus blesses children." There was a *lot*. Some of them were similar to the one in Room 4, but there were also quite a few where Jesus and the children all look appropriately rustic and middle eastern. In most of them he looks very happy to be with the children and the children look happy to be with him. I was reading an article about our text for this morning where a pastor mentioned that his son thought the painting in their church was evidence that Jesus must have run a pre-school or a day care center. The most popular interpretation of this story is, "Jesus loves the little children." We even have a song about it – "Jesus loves the little children, all of the children of the world, red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in his sight." But then when you back up and take a bird's eye view of the "who, what, where, when and why" of the story, you realize there's an even deeper meaning than just "Jesus loves the children."

In the ancient Roman world, there was a hierarchy of power and authority that was understood by all citizens of the Empire. At the very top of the hierarchical pyramid was Caesar. He was so high on the top that he was thought to be a divine being, which wasn't that much different than other empires of the day. One of the Caesar's titles was, "Autokrator" or "Basileus" which simply meant "King." Caesar Augustus, the emperor during Jesus' birth claimed to be the son of the goddess Venus and was sometimes called "Son of God" because he was adopted by his father Julius who was thought to be a God. Tiberius Caesar who ruled during Jesus' time was often called, "Lord and Savior" of the people. One level down from Caesar were members of the ruling class which included senators, governors, scholars and those movers and shakers who made the rules. Below that was the merchant class. These were the people who dealt in goods and services that were distributed throughout the Empire and to neighboring kingdoms. They had a fair amount of power, and sometimes they would level up to the ruling class. Then there was a huge drop in the gap of power and economic security. This one can almost be labeled, "and everyone else in the societal structure." This is where the farmers, craftsmen, fishermen, weavers, and other producers fit in. Anything or anyone below that level fit more into the category of "property." In the family structure, the father was the leader with women and slaves below him. Then there were children. Children had no rights in society. They were often treated as commodities which I have a hard time getting my head wrapped around. Graham had this friend who grew up on a farm, and he was poking fun at how we let our dog, Ninja, stay inside the house. I asked, "Why wouldn't we?" He said, "Dogs weren't meant to live in houses. Especially Ninja. He's a herding dog. They're bred to keep predators away from livestock and round up the herd. Dogs were domesticated to help us hunt and work. They're tools." That wasn't the most blasphemous thing I ever heard, but it's up there in my top five. What do you mean dogs are tools? You're a tool for saying that.

But in the ancient world, children were commodities. When a child was born out of wedlock or with a physical or mental disability, the father

had the right to give the child away. The value of a child was primarily economic. Their purpose was to be workers and heirs, not for sentimental value. So here was Jesus in our scripture lesson for today telling his listeners to let the children come to him because it is “to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.” In saying this, Jesus took the entire Roman establishment and flipped it upside down. Those who are at the very bottom of the social structure are at the top in God’s kingdom. Those who are disregarded by society are favored by God. Those who are on the outside are welcomed into the kingdom. By turning this all upside down and saying that the lowest of the low are on the top, Jesus also opened up the circle to include anyone who has been shunned by society due to economic injustice, discrimination, or anyone else in the community at large. Thank goodness we have a different understanding of kids today. Thank goodness we have recognized that children have rights. Last week we were mentioning how much has happened in the world of medicine in many of our lifetimes. Children have only recently been given rights. Children used to be cheap labor in coal mines and factories. They were great for fitting into tight places where adults couldn’t go. Before child labor laws, there weren’t many protections in place for kids in the workplace. It’s possible that some of your parents or grandparents worked in these conditions as children. Thankfully we became enlightened enough to realize this wasn’t right. These days, the minimum age for non-agricultural jobs is 14 years old. Children under 16 can only work certain hours so they can go to school. Children under 18 aren’t allowed to work in hazardous occupations. The Fair Labor Standard Act sets subminimum wage standards for certain employees, including those under 20, full-time students, and apprentices.

With that in mind, there’s still a lot of work to do to protect children, especially when you hear some of these statistics -- A whopping 13.7% of children under 18 live in poverty here in the US. During the 2023-24 school year, 4% of K-12 public school students experienced homelessness in the past year. One child in abused or neglected every 47

seconds in the US. More than 4,000 children are arrested each day – one every 21 seconds.

So, back to the scripture. Yes. Jesus loves the little children. Red and yellow, black, white and every lovely shade of brown in between. But Jesus reminds us that the Kingdom of God *belongs* to these children and that we must all become like children before this kingdom is ever realized. Let me make an important clarification. I am *not* saying that in order for the kingdom of God to be realized, we must *act* like children. No. We're gold medalists when it comes to acting like children. What we are called to do is *receive* the kingdom of God like a child. We adults, even adults in church, over-analyze everything and become brutally practical in our understanding of how things should work in the world. We are so tied to the way things are and always have been that we can't even imagine a kingdom that is as upside down as Jesus describes. But Jesus calls us to actively work towards realizing the kingdom of God here and now. Think of what we say in the Lord's prayer – "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done." Where? "On earth as it is in heaven." That's what we are called to do. Making sure that the principles of God's kingdom are in place here on earth. Sometimes that means inverting some of the power structures that we see in the world. That means we have to re-consider the way we even understand power. And let me tell you, this will not win you any popularity points. Yes, Jesus loves the little children of the world. But we are *all* God's children. And yes, we're workers. Jesus said that the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few, and therefore we go into the world to bring in God's harvest. And yes, we are heirs. In Romans, the Apostle Paul says that we are joint heirs with Christ, heirs to the kingdom. In Hebrews he says we are a royal priesthood. Our task is to turn our understanding of the world upside down so that we can receive God with the innocence and wonder of a child.