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 World Communion

Children of God
Mark 10:13-16

Today we continue our study of the Gospel of Mark, in Chapter 10. The context of our passage today is that Jesus is being 'tested' by the Pharisees, they ask if it's lawful for a man to divorce his wife... and Jesus responds by telling them that it is only because of our hard hearts that divorce is allowed, ideally man and woman belong together. Like everything Jesus says, we need to know the context of his words. He's not saying divorce is never needed or justified. They were testing him. And he knew that men were divorcing their wives for insignificant reasons! Jesus said it is not God's intention for marriages to be broken, and he was aware that in those days it was especially unfair to women because they were considered property, and could be divorced for any reason! It is no coincidence that Jesus then talks about the value of children—because like women, children were of the lowest social status. Jesus cares about the lowly!

People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. ¹⁴ But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. ¹⁵ Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." ¹⁶ And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

Have you ever seen the movie *Finding Neverland*? It tells the story of how author James Barrie (played by Johnny Depp) wrote the wildly successful play Peter Pan in 1904.

The culture of the theater in Barrie's day was dominated by well-dressed patrons who expected dignified and "important" productions. Barrie wanted the crowds to capture the wonder of his play. So when opening night came, he used the tactics of Jesus—he brought in 25 children as his special guests, much to the chagrin of the theater owner who wants paying patrons!

As the 25 orphans take their seats, the disapproving patrons raise their eyebrows. But then the curtain rises, and the orphans let out squeals of delight, hanging on every word of the opening lines. The tuxedoed adults, not

quite grasping the wonder of the play, look at the children who have caught on immediately. And then the adults look again at the stage and their eyes start to brighten and they chuckle. Infected by the children, the patrons soon get caught up in the wonder of the play.

When the opening act closes the audience roars in applause. The now-convinced theater owner peers in from a side curtain at the exuberance and simply whispers, "Genius." *Finding Neverland* (Miramax Films, 2003); written by Allan Knee and David Magee, directed by Marc Forster

it is often the least of these and the ***children who enter that kingdom first*** and show the rest of us the way.

Kids frequently show us the way when it comes to God.
Listen to some ***honest prayers from kids:***

Maybe ***Cain and Abel*** would not kill each other so much if they had their own rooms. It works with my brother. — Larry

I didn't think ***orange went with purple*** until I saw the sunset you made on Tuesday. That was cool. — Eugene

Are you really ***invisible*** or is that just a trick? — Lucy

Did you mean for the ***giraffe*** to look like that or was it an accident? — Norma

Instead of letting ***people die*** and having to make new ones, why don't you just keep the ones you got now? — Jane

I don't ever ***feel alone*** since I found out about you. — Nora

Art Linkletter used to say, "***Kids say the darndest things.***"
But in the passage today, it is ***Jesus*** who says the most amazing things.
And what He says is not only about ***children***
but about ***each one of us, for we are children of God.***

14 But when Jesus saw the people bringing children to him, he 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.

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

16 And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them. (Mark 10:13-16).

Wow.

In order to understand the full impact of Jesus' words we have to understand the **role of children in Jesus' day**.

Children were considered a blessing,
Jewish parents might take them to a Rabbi for blessing,
They were an important part of family life,
but NOT in the way we might think today.

Children were considered the **property** of the father,
and useful if they could help sustain the family **economy**.
sometimes after age 7 children were treated as miniature adults,
and certainly by puberty they were given the **same responsibilities** as adults.
http://www.academia.edu/1004684/History_of_the_Treatment_of_and_Attitudes_toward_Children

A good number of children
in those days didn't live past childhood.

Conditions were **harsh**.

And children were not the **treasures** we consider them today.

The book *A History of Children* talks about how a baby could be **abandoned** without penalty or social stigma for many reasons, including an poor appearance, being illegitimate coming from poverty or simply being one of too many children. ... Such an infant was considered an **unclaimed thing**. If picked up by wealthy persons, the child could become a slave, or a play companion, ...It wasn't really until **Christianity** took hold that things changed, especially for Roman children. Christianity taught that children were gifts from God, and therefore harm to a child was a violation of God's will. Gradually, Christian Roman emperors increased the penalties for abandoning children, and they limited the number of years a child could be enslaved to five years." *A History of Children: A Socio-cultural Survey Across Millennia*, by A.R. Colón with P.A. Colón, Greenwood Press, Westport, CT (2001), pp. 104-106.

Basically, children in Jesus' day were the most **powerless and vulnerable** members of society.

So, what if that's precisely **why Jesus reached out** to them?
And why this passage is so important to us?

What is Jesus **saying to us** in this story?

Jesus says we should receive the kingdom of God like a child—
we should be **child-like** in our faith.

But what does **childlike really mean?**

Jesus does NOT say we should be immature.

What if Jesus is talking about their **status**, their place in the world in relation to the grown ups?

Given the fact that he was just asked about women and divorce, what if he's talking about how the children are also lowly?

What if he's saying we should look at ourselves as lowly too?

This would fit with his previous teachings—
that we are called to be followers, not our own leaders.

That we are called to be servants, last of all,
and welcoming the least and the little!

This is yet another difficult teaching, and so contrary to our culture!

It doesn't **sound so great**—to be like a lowly child.

Who wants to be low on the totem pole in life?

But this is Jesus we're talking about.

The One who turns everything in our lives, **upside down!**

Think about what children represented then—they had **no power**,
they were completely **dependent** upon the adults around them,
they were **vulnerable**,
and they had to place their **trust in the adults**—not themselves.

Wow.

Could this be what Jesus is calling us to do and be?

Dependent upon God?

Vulnerable?

Trusting in God, not ourselves?

What if that is **Jesus' message to us today?**

What if instead of being **pull yourself up** by your bootstraps Americans,
We are supposed to be **trusting and dependent**—on God?

What if instead of being **self-sufficient**,
We are to be **God-sufficient?**

And what if we **need the care and love of God**—to make it in this world,
To really **thrive?**

In a Time magazine article called "*The Power of Love*", Jeffrey Kluger pointed out how newborn babies display the need for affection we all have. He says, of all the urges that drive us, it's the passion to be held that makes itself known first. If a baby is startled fresh from the womb, German pediatrician Ernst Moro discovered in 1918, its arms will fly up and out, then come together in a clutch. They are trying to hold on—it's the **Moro reflex**.

Holding is good, and floating free is bad—a lesson that's not learned after birth ---it's 'preloaded at the factory'. In fact, doctors have long known that children who aren't held fail to thrive.

Not surprisingly, it's a need we **never outgrow**. Jeffrey Kluger, "The Power of Love," Time (1-19-04), p. 63;

What if that's true,
And the person who's **love and care we need the most, is God?**
Our heavenly parent?
The one who scripture says wraps loving arms around us,
and shelters us under his wing?

Ah, to be **child-like in our faith**—what if that's the key?
Jesus says it's the way to **receive the kingdom** of God!
And that kingdom is the new life Jesus promises to all his followers.
The question is, do we want THAT kingdom?
And are we willing to be like kids to get there?

It's interesting that when **adults are encouraged to be childlike**,
Great things can happen!

In one experiment, led by the psychologist Michael Robinson, he randomly assigned a few hundred undergraduates to two different groups. The first group was given the following instructions:

"You are seven-years-old, and school is canceled. You have the entire day to yourself. What would you do? Where would you go? Who would you see?"

The second group was given the exact same instructions, except the first sentence was deleted—**they didn't imagine themselves as seven-year-olds**. After writing for ten minutes, the subjects in both groups were then given various **tests of creativity**, such as trying to invent alternative uses for an **old car tire**, or listing all the things one could do with a **brick**. Interestingly, the students who imagined themselves as **young kids scored far higher** on the creative tasks, coming up with **twice as many ideas** as the other group.

The famous cellist, **Yo-Yo Ma** says something similar. "When people ask me how they should approach performance, I always tell them that the professional musician should aspire to the state of the beginner...Because why is that kid playing? He is playing for **pleasure**. He is playing because making this sound, expressing this melody, makes him **happy**. That is still the only good reason to play." Jonah Lehrer, *Imagine* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012), pp. 110-111

Living in **childlike trust and wonder**—
 what would that do for **our relationship with God**?
 Can you imagine have a childlike faith?
 What does that look like in **our lives**?
 How could we start to live that way?

How can we recover the wonder of life?
 How can we be followers, servants, least, last, and lowly?
 It is by the grace of Jesus.

Ellen Decker tells about her 5 year old son offering the following prayer during family devotions: "Dear Jesus, sorry for the mess we made in the yard today." After a slight pause, he concluded, "Thank you for the fun we had doing it." Ellen Decker, *Pennsylvania. Today's Christian Woman*, Vol. 18, no. 4.

There's something very special about children---
 And something very special about welcoming them.

Remember when the disciples were arguing about who was the ***greatest?***
 And Jesus says to be great you must be last, and serve?
 Right after that, he took a child in his arms and said,
*Whoever welcomes a child in my name, welcomes me,
 and the one who sent me. (Mark 9:37)*

When we have child-like faith we can receive
 the kingdom of God that Jesus promised.
 And when we ***welcome children, we are actually welcoming Jesus.***

Child-like faith means being ***trusting, vulnerable, dependent*** upon God,
 Instead of ourselves.
 And welcoming children means welcoming Jesus himself!

So let's leave today asking ourselves,
 How are we showing ***trust, vulnerability and dependence*** on God?

And how are we ***welcoming Jesus through children***—in our lives?
 And in our church?

We can ***learn so much from all the young people*** in this church
 we are so unbelievably blessed by them!
 We see this blessing coming down our center aisle each Sunday.
 Young people can change our lives, and our church,
 if we ***learn from them, how to receive*** the kingdom of God.

Friends, hear the ***Good News of the Gospel:***
 We are called to be like children--
Dependent, vulnerable, trusting.
 And we are called to welcome the children.
 May God give us the grace and courage to let go of so many of our 'adult' ways,
 And receive the kingdom of God like a child.

Amen.