

## To Receive the Kingdom of God

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The scene from this morning's gospel lesson is easy for us to visualize. People are bringing children to Jesus and the disciples are turning them away. We can almost see the expectant faces of the parents, the uncertain faces of the children, the scowling faces of the disciples. And we can imagine that Jesus shakes his head and tells the disciples to let the children come to him and the disciples shrug and let the children rush to Jesus. It's a heartwarming image of the disciples learning that Jesus is happy to welcome children. And while there is no doubt that Jesus does welcome the children the truth is the gospel story is a bit more complicated.

Mark tells us that some people are trying to bring their children to Jesus so he can bless them. They want the presence of God in the lives of their children and are taking them to Jesus so that they see him for themselves. So there is a purpose to their efforts. And I want to point out that there is nothing in the text to tell us the reaction of the children. While we might think they are expectant or eager to see Jesus the truth is they might be uncertain, unsure, unaware of why their parents are bringing them to him, or they may even be bored.

But as the parents bring their children we are told that the disciples speak sternly to them. Again no details about what is being said but it is clear that the disciples are upset about what the parents are doing. They don't believe Jesus should be bothered by the children. And this is where the story really departs from the scene we usually imagine.

Our translation says the disciples spoke sternly to the parents bringing their children but the word that is used in Greek is same word used when Jesus tells Peter "Get behind me Satan" and when Jesus stills the storm. Instead of being translated as "spoke sternly" in other places it is translated as rebuked which makes the scene unfold a little differently. The disciples are not simply telling the parents to go and politely reminding them to not bother Jesus. The disciples are angry and telling off the parents for bringing their children to Jesus. Which is when Jesus sees what is happening and gets upset.

Again what we picture and what the text says may not be the same thing. Our translation says that Jesus is indignant or very displeased. But the same word is used a number of other places in the gospel in places where people are not merely a

bit concerned or put off by what is happening but when they are really upset or angry with someone else- like when the religious leaders hear the crowd welcoming Jesus on Palm Sunday or when the disciples learn that James and John have asked Jesus for places of honor next to him in the kingdom of heaven. The word indicates a level of deep emotion. So Jesus doesn't simply shake his head at their actions and tsk-tsk but gets genuinely upset at what the disciples are doing.

So what the lesson says is that the disciples are upset with the parents bringing their children to Jesus and then Jesus gets upset at the disciples for turning the children away and being angry with their parents. And we need to keep that in mind to hear what Jesus then says in the midst of all that strong emotion.

Jesus says "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs." Those words come as a surprise to the disciples because they thought turning away the children is the right thing to do. Yet to be honest what Jesus says is a surprise to us as well. Not that Jesus welcomes children because that is something that we can easily imagine. But that Jesus adds that the kingdom of God belongs to them.

And I need to push that a bit because I think it is easy for us to hear those words and simply think that means that Jesus likes children. But think about his words for a moment. The kingdom of God belongs to little children who really don't know how to pray, who have never made an offering in their lives, who don't understand the scriptures, who only go to worship because someone brings them. They are still learning and growing and as wonderful as they may be to their parents and families and communities the truth is they also make a lot of mistakes and get more things wrong than they get right. That's who Jesus says gets to enter the kingdom of God.

And while we are still trying to wrap our heads around why Jesus would say that he adds "Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." Which is even more surprising. Because Jesus says that unless we receive what God offers, what God gives, what God is bringing about as a little child then the kingdom of God can not be ours. Yet I'll be honest. Even if we are surprised by that and even if we are a little confused the fact is that this is good news for all the reasons I just stated.

Because Jesus reminds the disciples and us that what God does is not something we

can figure out through study and deep thought or something we can earn with our efforts or abilities. But it is something that we can have anyway. The kingdom of God is not something we deserve or are good enough for. But it is something that we are given anyway. For the kingdom of God is not about what we do or how good we are but about what God is doing and how good God is. And for us to receive, to know, to experience, to enter into all of that we need to be like a little child.

And I say that is good news because that means we can leave behind our regrets, our fears, our uncertainty and know that God is giving to us because God loves us and God provides. We can let go of our guilt and shame and hesitation and know that God is welcoming us because God wants to welcome us. We can experience and know and enter into what God is doing and know that we are welcome because God wants us there. That is welcoming the kingdom of God. With an openness, with an eagerness, with an understanding that it is for us because of God.

And hearing those words on a day when we come to the table is that much more important. Because the gifts here are for us because God offers them to us. We do not have to be worthy, holy, perfect, blameless, or have said the right prayers, read enough of the Bible or attended church enough to be able to come to the table. We come because God invites us through Jesus to share and receive. And perhaps more importantly God welcome us and blesses us when we do.

For the lesson ends with Jesus taking the children in his arms and blessing them. And that is what God longs to do with us. So ignore those who would tell you that you are not worthy, not good enough, not holy enough to be part of what God is doing. Because that is not the point. The point is that God loves you, God forgives us, God welcomes you just as Jesus welcomes the children to him. With an openness and a willingness which reminds us that nothing else matters. Not the opinion of others, not the opinion we have of ourselves. All that matters is God's invitation for us to come and experience and know the blessing of God in our lives.