

Seeing Beyond  
Mark 10:13-16  
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)  
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He was eleven years old and living in a foster home. Well, he lived there when he would stay around. But most of the time he lived in alleys, taking shelter in abandoned sheds, sneaking an apple from a market or walking out of a grocery store with a loaf of bread in his jacket. Most of the time he was out on his own, having too much experience with disappointment to trust the adults in his life.

She was only four but she knew what it was to be hungry. After all, she lived in a war zone, a place where the whim of governments to work toward peace or to choose not to, controlled whether she ate. It didn't matter that there were aid agencies trying to get food to her neighborhood. Even they couldn't stop the war. As someone put it, the people weren't starving, they were being starved to death.

They came across the rugged wilderness which followed nights of travel and days of hiding, trusting people who didn't look trustworthy and hoping to make it another day. The choice was risky, but she knew it was the risk she must take for her life and her children's. Finally they arrived at the border, only to be separated. She - sent back to a country that wasn't even hers, they - locked up with other children. It's been 897 days.

There are many paintings of Jesus with children, but not these children. The paintings show Jesus holding an adoring child on his knee, Jesus with an outstretched hand gently touching the head of a child, Jesus with one or more children who are gathered around quietly as if ready to hear his next wise saying.

And, for most of us, the children in the paintings are the ones who come to mind when we hear this passage. After all, they are the easier children to envision. In none of these pictures are the children crying and squirming to get off Jesus' lap as we have sometimes encountered with little ones' first visits to Santa Claus. In none of these pictures are the children dirty or hungry or sick. Instead, they look plump and healthy, clean and well. In none of these pictures are the children abandoned or living in war zones or dying of starvation or taken from their parents. In none of these pictures do we see the disciples standing nearby with scowls on their faces.

So, we often just relax into the last sentence of our reading today which said, "And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them" (Mark 10:16, NRSV) and then move on.

If we want to pretend that this story is just another tale to demonstrate Jesus' perfection, then we can leave it there.

But, what if we are willing to hear the challenge that this passage contains? What if we are willing to have honest conversations and ask hard questions? What if we are willing to admit

the ways we are more like the disciples than like Jesus and what if we are willing to ask who Jesus wants us to welcome today?

Because, friends, these are really the questions that come from this passage. While it is good to see the work that churches like ours have done to create space where children are welcome, to allow room for colors and wiggles in worship, to invite young people as leaders in worship - while all of this is good, the point of this passage isn't just to convince us to have a children's rug at the front of our sanctuary.

In fact, we should remember that this passage is actually the conclusion of a section where Jesus is being challenged by the authorities with a question about divorce law. And in both the conversation about divorce and this episode where people are bringing their children to Jesus, he affirms healthy, life giving community and he positions himself on the side of those - in this case, women and children - who are devalued.

So, we are reminded of the world around Jesus - a world that still exists for some today. Because, while there were certainly spouses who loved each other deeply, and people who fell in love, while there were certainly good and loving parents, and children who were treasured gifts, the larger reality is that within Jesus' culture both women and children were understood to be possessions. Marriages often were arranged as business deals between families. Women largely needed men: for safety, for stability, for resources. Children were a sign of blessing - not because of the value of the children themselves, but because of their ability to continue the family name, because of the way another generation was understood to keep the family line going, and sometimes because of their value as workers in the family business.

And so, we should not be surprised by the disciples trying to stop the children from being brought to Jesus when we remember that it was set in a time and place where children were household commodities and not generally invited into public spaces, certainly not invited to engage with leaders who were drawing much attention.

When we hear Jesus say, "Let the little 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" (Mark 10:14-15, NRSV) - when we hear this, it is about the children *and* it is about so much more than the children.

In these words Jesus, who was willing to challenge the systems and powers of his day, was asking people to see things differently, was asking people to see beyond their usual expectations and the rules of their culture.

In these words Jesus was reminding those around him - maybe particularly those leaders who had just challenged him - that the ways of God were not about being served but about serving...that the heart of God was not bound to those with power but to those considered powerless...that value in the kin-dom of God was not measured by strength but by vulnerability...that the borders of God's realm could not be drawn on a map.

So, yes, this passage reminds us of our need to continue to find ways to welcome and include and value the children in our midst. *And* it also reminds us of our need to welcome all who are vulnerable, who are left out, who our society says have little value. This passage challenges us to shape our decisions and our systems to be *for* the hungry and homeless, the immigrant and the invisible.

And yes, this passage reminds us of our need to be trusting and dependent like children. But if we really listen to that reminder it is not about praying prayers and saying that we trust God, but rather it is a critique of the very systems of power and wealth and security that our very way of life is created to depend on.

Friends, we talk about this frequently - it is easy to be hard on the disciples. It is easy to treat them as if they are only a foil in the story, there to draw attention to the opposite characteristics that we see in Jesus.

But, if we are honest, we are more like the disciples than we want to admit. After all, it is easy to fall into the trap of hushing voices that speak words that challenge us...it is easy to find ourselves leaving people out even as we claim to be working on their behalf...it is easy to find ourselves threatened by the presence of people who do things differently or more loudly or in a more messy manner than we are comfortable with...it is easy to find ourselves rewriting history so that we are the heroes even as we quiet the stories of so many.

Friends, there is a place in God's kin-dom and in our congregation for the colicky baby, the tantrum-throwing three-year-old, and the sullen teenager. This passage reminds us that we are called to do everything in our power to show that this is true.

*AND*...not only this.

For there is also a place in God's kin-dom, and thus if we are choosing to be on God's side, in our congregation, in our lives, in our communities for each one who has been pushed aside and left behind, for each one whose vulnerability has left them hurting or angry, starving or homeless, for each one who doesn't look like us or show up in a classical painting of Jesus.

As we continue this journey through Lent, we are invited to be challenged by these words and to pay attention to the ways that we choose our own safety and security over openness, the ways that we choose the systems of this world over the ways of God, the ways that we stand in the way rather than being a welcoming presence.

We are invited to become vulnerable and to see the vulnerability of others, that together we may form communities of love and care for all of God's children. May it be so.