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"God's Family"

Job 1:1; 2:1-10 Mark 10:13-16 Hebrews 1:1-4;2:5-12

INTRODUCTION TO JOB 1:1; 2:1-10

How can the justice of Almighty God be defended in the face of evil, especially human suffering and even or particularly the suffering of the innocent? Job, even after losing everything he owned and all of his family except his wife and suffering from a terrible sickness still confessed his trust in God. Hear the word of the Lord from Job 1:1; 2:1-10.

INTRODUCTION TO MARK 10:13-16

Two weeks ago we saw Jesus gather a little child in the midst of his disciples and say that to become a part of God's family they must become trusting and believing like a little child. In this morning's passage from Mark we see some parents following Jesus' example and trying to bring their little ones to Jesus but being turned away by the disciples, earning a stern rebuke from Jesus. Hear the gospel of Mark 10:13-16.

Let's Pray. Lord thank you for this your word. Open our minds and hearts to receive and to respond to it as we seek to serve you and our neighbors. Make us mindful of all your children and how we belong not only to you but to each other. And the people said, "Amen."

I love children. They are great fun. Some time back I saw an article that showed how first graders perceived their world.

Youngsters were asked to participate in a creative writing exercise in which they were to complete a famous saying, such as "Don't count your chickens before..." One little girl answered that one with, "Don't count your chickens before you fry them." "People who live in glass houses...shouldn't be seen using the bathroom," said little Nathan. "It's better to be safe...than on fire," answered David. "Don't bite the hand...that is not clean," said little Stacy. Here's one for you who enjoy gossip - "No news is...boring," said Mandy. This one I love - "Sticks and stones may break my bones...but hugs won't," said Ryan. (1)

Childhood is the time of our lives when we are most fragile, most vulnerable, and most at-risk. This was as true in the first-century for the children Jesus scooped up into his arms as it's for twenty-first century children who run the gauntlet of a world full of cruelties and abuses.

Nevertheless, Jesus insists, little children are just as much a part of God's family as adults are. For those who can see promise, instead of simply problems, who can find beauty in the midst of decay, who can envision peace while bullets fly, who can hear a symphony within the din of discord the kingdom of God is at hand.

Children had no status in Jesus' day. In fact, you went from childhood to adulthood. There was no such thing as adolescence. When they reached puberty they entered the adult world.

We have heard the phrase, "Children should be seen and not heard." That was the rule for raising children in the pre-Dr. Spock years. (I raised my children in the Mr. Spock years). If children were allowed in adult company in those days, they were to recognize their status, which was inferior. They were there to learn from the adults. So they were to be "seen and not heard."

In the ancient world, children were neither seen nor heard. So when children were brought to Jesus, and the disciples rebuked those who brought children to him, the disciples were merely reflecting the attitude of people in the ancient world about children. So when Jesus, in turn, rebuked the disciples, he was upsetting another established idea, another institution in that society. For the first time, children were seen to be of importance as children and not just as potential adults.

The reason the passage is here in Mark is to remind the Church that children are persons of worth; children are precious in the sight of God. If God is only ascertained through reading, through debating, through studying, through decision making, through self-evaluation, and in using all of the innate faculties of adults, then children are of no use to the Lord. This may have been the thinking of these disciples, so they became ecclesiastical bouncers keeping parents and infants out of the presence of Jesus.

Here are the lessons Jesus is trying to teach his disciples:

1. We do not make the rules about who comes to Jesus; Jesus does.
2. We do not discriminate in who hears the gospel.
3. We must not place barriers in the lives of people who desire to come to Christ.

The early Church was a most uncommon gathering of people. In fact, the very presence of the Church in the Roman and Greek world was in itself a revolutionary sign, for people who would never get together in that society ... not only got together in the Church, but also they formed a most intimate community. Here people were forming a religious community who in the world had nothing whatever to do with each other: Male and female, who in other communities would never be together publicly, unless they were married; Jews and Greeks; natives and foreigners. It was typical in those days to hate the foreigner, have nothing to do with them. Slave and free. Of course you would never get together on an equal basis with slaves if you were a free person. All of that is recorded in Paul's letters, especially the Letter to the Galatians. (That's how we became a church that could one day celebrate communion with fellow Christians around the world!)

Now Jesus adds children to that mix. Which is why the Church started the practice of infant baptism. It probably didn't become a regular practice until the second century, because at first, baptism was just for converts, those who could profess their faith in Christ. But if baptism is entrance into the Church, the Church said, we will baptize them

and receive them into the community, and teach them the faith. Later when they reach the age of making up their own mind, we will ask them if they want to continue in this journey of faith.

Jesus changed the way we look at children in the Church. But not only our children, not only the children of the faithful, he also changed the status of children in the world. The Church not only felt a responsibility for their children, children of faith, they also reached out to the children of the world, especially to those children who were suffering.

One of the first things the Church did in the Roman world was to pick off the streets those children who had been abandoned because the families could no longer care for them, or because they were not wanted. Abandonment of children was a common means of birth control in the ancient world. And the Church, because it had the command from its Lord to care for all children, loved these children, cared for them, adopted them, built orphanages for the children in the world.

Two thousand years ago the Church came into a world that practiced child abandonment, and they did something about it. From what I can see, there is still a form of child abandonment practiced today. Getting rid of unwanted children by ignoring them, not paying any attention to them, separating them from their parents is a form of the old Roman practice of child abandonment. You would think that an enlightened civilization would do something about that. You would think that they would have the intelligence to see the consequences of such social policy.

We are called to reach children who have never been to a Sunday School or a Vacation Bible School. We are called to reach children who are being born to parents who are ill-prepared to care for children. We are called to care about children who are being condemned to the cycle of poverty and despair, of crime and drugs; children who have nobody to read to them, nobody to play with them, nobody to supervise them, nobody to care for them, children who are expected in this society to be invisible. To use a biblical word, these are the children who are "rebuked," about whom Jesus said, "Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of God."

The early Church also recognized that those words were reminiscent of what Jesus said in the judgment scene in Matthew, at the end of his teaching, where he pointed to the poor and the outcast, to the naked, the hungry, and said, "If you have done it to the least of these, then you have done it to me."

In this passage we come to see that God welcomes little ones who cannot make decisions, cannot debate or enter into arguments about religion or even express faith. Yet, Christ touches these children as if they were to be included in His family, because they are.

Jesus had a special place in his heart for children. It was the custom in Palestine for Jewish mothers to bring their children to a famous Rabbi for a blessing. Yesterday I was blessed when at the Blessing of the Animals service when precious people brought their animals to me to be blessed. One by one I put my hand on them and prayed a prayer for them and their pack. One of them turned over for a belly rub.

One might think it strange that the disciples would have tried to stop such a thing. They were not boorish or ungracious men - they were simply trying to protect their Master from being overwhelmed.

One of the things we need to note in this lesson is that Jesus was indignant - ANGRY – when they did. It is not hard to imagine how Jesus feels about the situation of the children of our world today. He would indeed be angry over the lack of elementary rights denied to those we call "underprivileged." He would be angry over our limp acceptance of the preventable poverty which condemns children not only to suffering but to the withering of the soul. He would be angry over our tolerance of all the vicious forces that prey upon children. He would be angry that his own people are content to let it happen.

How do we keep children away? The obstruction, the stopping, may be unconscious. It may come simply from neglect to take some positive action. We can do it by making Christ unattractive through our own example. We can do it by showing from the decisions we make that we do not consider Jesus very important - if we are at worship on Sunday, OK; if not, OK too. We can stop the children of a community, a nation, and a world by our provision of nothing but lip service in their behalf.

In his book, The Moral Life of Children, Robert Coles tells the story of Ruby Bridges. Ruby was six years old when a Federal judge ordered that an elementary school in New Orleans be integrated. Ruby and three others were the first black children to enter that elementary school. Every morning as she arrived at school and every afternoon as she went home, accompanied by federal marshals, fifty to a hundred people met her at the door. They shouted obscenities, threatened to kill her, and they spit at her. Dr. Coles was researching what happens to a child living under stress. Coles was so sure that Ruby would crack under this stress that he asked her teachers to watch for signs. One day a teacher noticed that Ruby was talking to the people who greeted her so angrily at the door of the school. The teacher asked Ruby about what she was saying but Ruby denied talking with them. So the teacher called Dr. Coles to report what might be the first signs of cracking. And when Coles met Ruby what he discovered was that each morning and each evening as she passed the crowds, she was not speaking to them but praying for them. "Why Ruby," he asked. "Why would you pray for them?"

"Because they need praying for," she said.

Coles replied, "You know, frankly Ruby, I don't feel like praying for those people."

Ruby said, "There are sometimes I don't feel like praying for them either, but you should pray for them even if you don't feel like praying for them."

"And what do you pray?"

"Forgive them. They know not what they do."

Folks, Ruby caught that kind of faith from her parents and from her church.

"Let the children come to me and hinder them not for such is the kingdom of heaven."

A church was gathered one Sunday for communion and the minister was beginning the familiar words of the communion service. She explained that this is the Lord's Table and that Christ invites all faithful people to come and share with Him in the meal which He has made.

Suddenly a young child who was sitting next to her mother rushed out of the pews and ran up towards the communion table. Her mother, horrified and embarrassed came running after her and caught the child just before she reached the table. As she carried her squirming daughter back to her seat, the little girl cried out for everyone to hear, "But I want to eat with Jesus! I want to eat with Jesus!"

Just like the disciples in our text, I imagine some of the grownups in the church were clucking their disapproval at this unruly child and at the mother who failed to keep her in line. But I wonder how many of those disapproving adults could emulate the spirit of that little girl as she rushed towards the communion table. I wonder how many grownups anywhere are as prepared to receive the bread and cup as this little girl was. 3

When we come to the Lord's table we hear these words, "This is my body that was broken for you. This is my blood which was shed for you." These words remind us that we don't deserve anything at all. All of our righteousness is as filthy rags, as Paul reminds us. But that's all right. Christ came for the undeserving. Christ came for us. We are of unimaginable worth to God. Not because we've been in church all our lives, not because we put a twenty in the offering plate, not because we are virtuous people--but because Christ died on our behalf. This is not to minimize the importance of good works. It is to say that when it comes to salvation, our good works are irrelevant.

In human society some people may eat in the fine dining room while others eat back in the kitchen, but not in God's family. In God's family, everyone is invited to dine at the Master's table. Here all are equal.

Jesus came to give us gifts so that we might lift up Jesus so that he might draw others to himself so that they could be brought into God's family that includes you and me. Jesus came to call us to serve others without expecting any accolades or reward other than the satisfaction of using the gifts God has given us until the day that we are all with him. Jesus gave his life so that we could be a part of a world-wide fellowship of people of every race, every nation, every dialect, and every age and stage of life. Jesus gave his life for us to that EVERY level of standing in society, ESPECIALLY children ... could come together AT LEAST once a year and celebrate the fact that together we ALL BELONG in God's family.

Let's pray.

God of wonders, in many and various ways you speak to your people. We give thanks that you speak to us through Jesus Christ., the eternal Word made flesh. Hear us then, as in his name we make our common supplications to you. Quiet fears within us, when events do not occur according to our will. Help us to be less self-centered in our lives and freer to respond to your will for us.

Help us to regain a child's sense of wonder and awe for your created order. Teach us to marvel at its intricate balance, rather than interfere. Lead us to work within it, since we are subject to it for our own health and well-being. Renew within us the commitment to stewardship, where all that we do becomes a response to the sacred trust we have inherited in Christ's name.

Collected Sermons, by Mark Trotter ChristianGlobe Networks, Inc

1. From Buzz Stevens
2. The Moral Life of Children, Robert Coles
3. CSS Publishing Company, Together in Christ, by Erskine White