

"For of Such Is the Kingdom of God"

Two weeks ago, we saw how the disciples misunderstood the scope of Christ's kingdom. They tried to stop a man who was casting out demons in Christ's name, because he wasn't formally following along with the other disciples of Christ. They tried to forbid the man from serving Christ. But Christ challenged the disciples to see that that man was a part of Christ's kingdom. In today's passage, the disciples are again confused about the scope of Christ's kingdom. Here they try to forbid children from being brought to Jesus. Jesus again corrects the disciples.

You see, you don't have to be an adult to be a part of Christ's kingdom. You don't need to be grown up to be a Christian. Jesus in this short passage gives us good news for our children and he gives good news for all of us. He tells us that the kingdom of God belongs to children and to all who receive the kingdom as a child. This calls us to examine our own attitude toward children. Do we bring our children to Jesus? It also calls us to examine how we relate to the kingdom of God. Are we receiving the kingdom of God as a child? We'll consider these questions as we study this passage.

Let's begin in verse 15. Notice the setting. There are children coming to Jesus. But the text actually doesn't say that the children are *coming*. It says that they are being *brought*. That's an important distinction. It probably infers that these are young children. Our translation does actually translate the Greek word children here as "young children" but the word in Greek could be used for children of various ages, not just infants, for example. But the fact that these children are brought suggests that they are fairly young, presumably not old enough to be making up their own minds whether or not they want to visit Jesus. No, these are children that are brought to Jesus.

So who's bringing the children? Probably the parents. We don't know for sure. The Greek pronoun is masculine, so it tells us at least that it wasn't only mothers as some have speculated. It is quite possible that both mothers and fathers were together bringing their children to Jesus. But by the action of them bringing their children to Jesus, we realize one quality of the people bringing the children - they were believers - at least in some sense. They were bringing the children to Jesus because they thought Jesus would be of some benefit to them. Now we don't know the extent of the faith of these parents or guardians who were bringing their children. We don't know how much they actually knew about Jesus and his ministry. But whatever they had heard, they believed that Jesus could be a blessing to their children.

And so they brought the children to Jesus so that Jesus might "touch them." We've already seen Jesus touching people throughout Mark. Typically Jesus would touch people as he healed them. Here the intention seems to have Jesus touch them to bless them. We are not told that these are sick children. Presumably the parents or guardians are bringing them to be blessed by Jesus. They want their children to prosper. If Jesus is indeed the Messiah, as probably many were starting to believe, they wanted his blessings on their children. And of course in verse 16 that's what Jesus does. His touch in verse 16 is a touch of blessing.

Do we bring our children to Jesus? Do we bring them into a place where they too can be blessed by Jesus? You know, little children can't come to Jesus on their

own. Sometimes children of parents who are not Christians will later in their childhood take initiative and start going to church or youth group on their own. That is very commendable for those young kids who are quickly becoming adults. But as parents, specifically believing parents, parents who believe in Jesus as the Lord and Savior, we must see our obligation to bring our kids to Jesus. We must take initiative on our kids' behalf. When later people ask our kids when they are grown up, "When did you first meet Jesus?", it should be our hope and prayer that they could answer: "I don't remember. I've always known Jesus." It's like if you ask most kids when they met their parents, they'd find that a hard question to answer: I've always known my parents. Let's endeavor for that to be the case with our kids. Let's introduce them to Jesus from the very beginning, that they could grow up as Christians all their life.

You know, when we think about our role as parents, we probably find ourselves bringing our kids to all sorts of things. We bring them to exciting places for the first time. We bring them to school, and to sports, to clubs. But are we more concerned to bring them to line up and see Santa Clause than to see Jesus? Are we more concerned to bring them trick or treating than to bring them to Sunday School? Let's be eager to bring our children to Jesus!

Let's continue looking at our passage. In verse 13, we find the disciples trying to stop the people who are bringing the children. It says that the disciples rebuke them! It sounds like the disciples were standing around Jesus, shooing away those who had children in their arms. Why? Why would the disciples rebuke these parents or guardians? Maybe the disciples were still thinking too much from an earthly perspective. Maybe they thought, Jesus is trying to establish his kingdom; he doesn't have time for little children! Surely a great king doesn't have time to spend with little children who probably can't even understand him and his teachings anyways. Maybe the disciples themselves didn't even like children that much - all that crying and screaming; so much trouble and interruption. How can Jesus get his message out if there are crying babies all over?

Sadly this can be our own attitude. Have you ever said, or thought, "I don't like kids." Maybe you've even felt that attitude at church when you see a young child making noise during the service. Is that your attitude? Have you acted like the disciples here in our passage, shooing kids away? Or have you at least wanted to? I can understand your motivation. Kids can seem like so much trouble. They can cry uncontrollably for no reason. They might not want to sit still. They can require so much attention, and if you are not careful they can spit up on you. And so do you wish the children would just be put away?

Well Jesus does not agree with that perspective. He counters the disciples' rebuke by correcting them. Look at his initial response in verse 14. Jesus was "greatly displeased." Jesus was indignant over the disciples' behavior. In other words, Jesus was not happy with what the disciples were doing. They shouldn't have tried to stop the children. This should be our attitude as well when we see people trying to keep children from Jesus. Are we upset when people try to keep children from Jesus? Or are we more upset when we hear a child crying in church?

Instead, Jesus says, "Let the children come to me!" "Don't forbid them!" Interestingly Jesus describes their actions as similar to what they were doing earlier with the man casting out demons in Jesus name. They tried to forbid that man from his actions. And here they are trying to forbid the children. They were trying to tell the man casting out demons that he was not part of Christ's kingdom. And now Jesus says that they are telling the children the same thing. This word "forbid" only appears in Mark in these two scenes, so it seems there is a connection is being made. Just as Jesus corrected the disciples with the man who

cast out demons, so Jesus does the same thing here. The disciples were still figuring out the scope of Christ's kingdom.

And that's what Jesus goes on to teach them. Jesus says in verse 14, "For of such is the kingdom of God." In other words, Jesus says that the kingdom of God belongs to these children! Now Jesus doesn't say the kingdom only belongs to children. Or that it belongs to every child. But he does say that to such as these - referring to the children who are being brought here, that they are to be included in the kingdom. They are not to be excluded. They have as much right to the kingdom as the disciples themselves!

But by Jesus saying that the kingdom belongs to as "such" as these, it gives us a broader perspective of the kingdom. It's not saying that the kingdom only belongs to these young children. Certainly they are included. But Jesus is taking these children and using them as an example of a larger group for whom the kingdom belongs to. Jesus would be including any that are like these children. That obviously should cause you to think who might be like these children. Those for example, whom the world might think are unimportant. Those for example whom are helpless and needy like a child.

Jesus clarifies in the next verse. He says with a solemn declaration to get everyone's attention of the seriousness of the matter, "Assuredly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, will by no means enter in." Jesus first said that the kingdom belongs to those who are like these children. Then Jesus says that everyone who would enter into the kingdom must enter in a way that is like these children. I think there are a lot of ways we can think about approaching the kingdom like a child. Children have lots of unique characteristics. But I think the emphasis of Jesus here is on "receiving." He says that we need to *receive* the kingdom like a child.

You see, children receive things all the time. Especially young children. Parents or guardians have to give their children all sorts of things, both tangible and intangible. They give them food, clothing, and shelter. They give them care as they change their diapers or clean up their messes. They give them advice, leadership, instruction, discipline, and their time and support. And children, especially the younger they are, are recipients of this. Children typically *receive* all this with a genuine trust. They typically receive it simply as a matter of faith that their parents are giving them good things and not leading them astray. One commentator said that children usually receive things with an "unassuming humility". Children are often set on a course with lifelong perspectives and impressions from their parents and the people of influence in their lives. In all these things they are *receiving*.

Compare that with how we might be tempted to receive the kingdom of God. Are we trying to *receive* the kingdom, or are we trying to *earn* it? Do we make entering the kingdom all about us? About our works to earn our way into heaven? About our living to show Christ how good of a disciple we are? About our knowledge, to show how much we know about the kingdom theologically, as if that will allow us to enter heaven. Yes, we need knowledge. Yes we need to be convicted by the truth and trust our lives to it. But there is a way to do this simply as a child does it. Yes, our faith will grow and mature. Children do that. They grow and mature in how they receive from their parents. We as recipients of Christ's kingdom will grow and mature in how we receive it and understand it. But if we ever make the kingdom about us, about how we earn our way into it, instead of how we humbly receive it, then we've become misdirected. We've gotten off track. We need to receive. We need to receive. We need to receive. Not earn. Receive.

What if you told your newborn child, he had to earn your love? Or worse, he had to earn his next bottle of milk. That would be ridiculous and cruel. Children are helpless at first, but it's our great pleasure to love them and feed them and take care of them. Now this example applies to us in two ways. As sinners, it doesn't apply - we are not helpless. We are very adept at being sinners. We've spent our lives practicing it. We've become very talented and skilled sinners. And so we have no excuse for being sinners. We've earned our title as sinners who effectively belong to Satan's kingdom of rebellion. But in relationship to God's kingdom, we are as helpless as newborn children. If we are to be citizens in God's kingdom, we need God to reach out to us and care for us. As long as we keep thinking we can take care of ourselves to somehow find a place in God's kingdom, then we actually are keeping ourselves from belonging to God's kingdom. As soon as you receive Christ's kingdom as a child, you realize and recognize that Christ is giving to you his blessings as a little child. Then you have begun to taste of the kingdom blessings that are given to you from God as your adopted father.

This is part of the reason why we baptize infants in our denomination. Jesus says here that these children of believers are to be included in his kingdom. We are not to exclude them. We are not to shoo them away. We are not to treat them as outsiders. We are not to treat them as pagans that we have to keep evangelizing too hoping that one day they will come on their own to believe. If we do that, we've actually reinforced the wrong emphasis to them - that you must receive the kingdom as like an adult, and not as like a child, which Jesus says here.

Instead, as believing parents when we present a child for baptism, we are presenting our children to Jesus from the beginning of their life. We are not *just* dedicating them. We are bringing them into the covenant community using the sacrament Christ has given us to do that: baptism. You see, we baptize adults to bring them into Christ's covenant community. When an adult is baptized, they become part of the visible church and are called Christian. To the extent that the kingdom of God is visibly represented on earth by the church, then that adult who is baptized is brought into the kingdom of God. Now, of course, we know that the visible church is not identical with the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is manifested in the visible church, but not identical with it. That's why there are people who are members of the church, but aren't actually saved; they don't really belong to Christ's kingdom. They put up a good front, pretending to have faith, maybe even convincing themselves for a time, but if they don't have true faith, then they are not *really* Christian. Even though they went through the motions, and were even baptized, if they do not genuinely believe, then they are not truly part of Christ's kingdom. They visibly and outwardly appear to be, but in reality aren't.

So when an adult is baptized, they are brought *visibly* into the church. But they must join that baptism with true faith, and in so doing, they show themselves to be in the kingdom. The same is true for our children. When we bring them to be baptized, we are bringing them visisbly into the church. They become members in the visible church. We are saying that they have a right to the privileges of the kingdom of God. We even call them Christian. It's our way of agreeing with Jesus, that to such belong the kingdom of God. Even as our children receive the food and shelter we give them, with as much capacity as they are able, they receive the benefits of Christ's kingdom as much as they are able. And as they grow, just as they start getting responsibilities as a human being in the world, like the responsibility to go to school, to be law abiding, etc, we then require of them the obligations of the God's covenant. Christ calls his people to faith and repentance. And so we train these children in faith and repentance. Both the believing parents and the church require the child to profess faith and repentance in Jesus. It is our hope and prayer that these children will always live like

that. That as they mentally are able to grasp more and more the requirements of faith and repentance, that they will more and more live that out. If they don't, then the church will lovingly discipline them, just as it would any adult Christian who one day decides to stop living a life of faith and repentance. That might mean eventually removing them from the membership of the church if they persist in unbelief. But that would be the case for any Christian who joined the church as an adult as well. My point here is that I'm trying to show that baptism doesn't mean something different for adults than for children.

This position of infant baptism has the benefit of recognizing what Christ says here. We must all receive the kingdom as a child. If that's the case, then a child should be able to receive the kingdom along with adults. Other passages flush out what this looks like as well. But this passage is very important in this issue. Jesus includes these children in his kingdom. We too should welcome in the name of Christ those children who are brought to us by believing parents.

And we too should remind ourselves of the importance to receive the kingdom ourselves as a child. We should not mistakenly think we enter the kingdom by earning it. We must receive it, even as a child would receive it: as the free gift of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Our passage reaches its high point in verse 16. After Jesus corrects the disciples, he then proceeds to bless the little children as they are brought to him. He lays his hands upon them and blesses them. This confirms the words that Jesus has just said. To such as these children belong the kingdom of God.

And of course it is very fitting to think about the kingdom of God in terms of blessings from Christ. In the Old Testament, God instructed the Levitical priests to give God's blessings to those who were part of the covenant community of God's people. Of course, that included the children of believers as well. God's plan of redemption always included God taking for himself a people for his own possession. A people whom God would bless. And in the Old Testament that blessing came through the Levitical priests.

But here it is Jesus who blesses the children, not a Levitical priest. But what a greater blessing it is! Paul describes the benefit of our salvation in Ephesians 1:3 as being blessed *in Christ* with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places. And of course it makes sense that Christ would bless those who are being brought into his kingdom. That's all a part of the free gift he has given us.

And yet on what basis does Christ give us this free gift of his blessings? What right do we have to receive these blessings as a gift? Yes, Christ gives them to us as the great king who is blessing his kingdom subjects. But if we did not earn our way into the kingdom, on what basis does he bless us? Well we've said it is a free gift. His blessings are indeed a free gift, free for us, but this gift did have a cost. It cost the king his life. It's a gift that came to us through the death of the king. For Jesus to be able to bring us into his kingdom, he had to first suffer and die for his people. Apart from being reconciled to God, we are not subjects of the kingdom, we are enemies of the kingdom. We deserve cursing not blessing. Remember back to Genesis 3. Right after we sinned in the Garden, humans and all of creation suffered God's curses. These curses were but the foretaste of God's ultimate punishment to come - hell. But for Christ to now bring us into his kingdom and bless us represents a change in status.

We have been changed from enemies to friends. We have been brought into Christ's kingdom by the free gift of God - the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. On the cross, Jesus became a curse, literally taking the curses due to us, upon himself.

Jesus became a curse so that he could then bless us. He bore our curses so that we could freely be brought into his kingdom and be blessed. And by the resurrection Jesus proclaimed his victory over the curses. Jesus is now exalted to the highest position in the heavenly places where he bestows on his people the kingdom blessings.

And so for Christ to bless these little children here in our passage, it is in light of this victory that he would have on the cross. Even for the priests to bless the people on God's behalf in the Old Testament, it was in light of the victory that the Christ would later have. All of God's people, in the Old Testament and in the New, the young, and the old, and even the children, can experience God's blessings in God's kingdom because of Christ. Praise be to him!

Trinity Presbyterian Church, if Jesus is your Lord and Savior, then he extends his blessings to you today. That is why we end our service each week with the benediction. That is the formal extending of Christ's blessings to you. Those blessings come formally in our service, but are yours throughout your Christian living. This is because if you belong to Christ, then you belong to his kingdom. Christ's kingdom blessings are extended to you. And you are called to receive them.

And so let us indeed receive Christ and his kingdom blessings. Let us receive them by faith. Let us receive them humbly. Let us receive them as a gift. Let us receive them knowing that we do not deserve them. Let us receive them knowing that we have not earned them. Let us receive them... as a child. Let us receive them as those who depend on them, who need them, just as a child depends on parents and guardians to take care of him.

And so if we receive Christ and his kingdom as a child, why would we think our children could not receive Christ and his kingdom? Of course they can. Let us bring our children. Let us bring our children to Christ. May we welcome them in our midst! May we welcome them in our worship service and in all the activities of the church! May we declare as Christ did, "Let the children come!" "Do not forbid them!" May we with our children turn our eyes upon Jesus together as one family in Christ. May we together look upon the one who blesses us and who says to us, "You are my people."

And so this is why we baptize our infants, and this is also why the children are welcomed in our midst even during the worship service. We worship as a family, and that includes even our little children. Christ welcomed them; we must too. And so may the cooing, and the crying, and even any distractions or difficulties that the children might make as they are with us; may that remind us of this important truth: that we like them together are called to receive the kingdom of God, with all its' blessings. If ever one of these little ones disturbs you during the service, turn to him and smile, and thank the Lord for how he gives you his blessings. I know right now we have very few children as a church, my son is one of the few, but this exhortation is the same whether or not I personally have a newborn out there or not. Lord willing, as a church we will have more children coming soon.

And so, Trinity Presbyterian Church - welcome the children, for such is of the kingdom of God. Amen.

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