*Let the Children Come*

A Sermon Preached at Lawrence Park Community Church, June 23, 2019

Mark 10:13-16

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Today’s story is about two things we usually don’t connect, unless we’re talking about George, Charlotte, and Louis—kids and kingdoms. And it finishes with a bit of insight from Leonard Cohen.

Anyway, according to our story, Jesus is angry; he is all steamed up. He is, you see, inundated by children, sort of like I’ve been inundated, this past week, by grandchildren. Grandchildren, whether busy or bored, it doesn’t matter, can make finding time for sermon preparation tough.

But, strangely enough, Jesus isn’t angry at the kids; he is actually angry at his disciples for trying to keep the kids away . . . even though the disciples were just doing their job. They knew Jesus was writing a sermon for his big date on the mountain. Naturally, they figured Jesus needed some peace and quiet. So they try to make the kids scram.

But Jesus says, “let the little kids come.” And then Jesus whispers, as if by way of explanation, “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.”

So, kids and kingdoms. I’ll take each in turn. First the kids. What is it about little kids that we, as adults, are supposed to imitate if we want to enter the kingdom—whatever that might be?

Well, when it comes to receiving things, the crucial difference between a child and an adult isn’t that children are good and so deserve to receive things. I mean, which little child hasn’t scratched her friend with fingernails, or whacked a neighbour kid over the head with a toy shovel, or dumped mud pies on the living room rug? Kids are not always perfect little angels. I know this. Remember, my grandkids are visiting this week.

And the crucial difference between how a child might receive and an adult receives does not lie in the helplessness of a child. Helplessness is a relative thing, after all. Which adult here today can end the global warming crisis, for example, or bring political sanity back to Washington? We are all helpless to stop the aging clock. We are all grass that withers, a breath of wind. We, like children, are helpless.

And, the crucial difference between a child and an adult does not lie in the child's humility. To the contrary, every young child believes that the whole world revolves around him or her. Watch a three-year-old refuse to share his or her toy, sometime, or her cookie, and you'll realize that he or she cannot stand the idea of becoming less just to make someone else’s day. Kids are not born humble.

The crucial difference between children and adults, the difference that concerns Jesus, is not that the child is better, or more helpless, or more humble than an adult.

I believe that the crucial difference between an adult and a child is that children actually *know how* *to receive things*. “Receiving,” is the word Jesus highlights, after all.

What I mean is, have you ever met a child embarrassed on account the way mom and dad faithfully fed him for all those years? Have you ever met a little girl who wondered if she really deserved Christmas presents? Have you ever met a child who didn’t believe a goodnight kiss or ice cream for desert was his due? Of course not.

Children expect to receive such things as a matter or course. Children turn to adults, lift up empty hands, and know that they will be filled. Logan and Emma turn to mom and dad, and know that their diapers will be changed and their onsies will be warm and dry, and think nothing of it.

And what Jesus wants us adults to receive, with open hands, like Logan and Emma receive, is the Kingdom of God.

So Second, the Kingdom of God.

When we hear a phrase like that, we usually yawn and scratch our heads. The Kingdom of God? Boring. It’s like a lecture on past passive participles or something like that.

Unless we’re talking about the Roman Kingdom.

Consider. In Jesus’ day the Roman Kingdom crucified petty criminals in Nathan Philips Square. The Roman Kingdom took lowlifes off the street and threw them to the lions because it was fun to watch lions eat people. The Roman Empire promoted rape as a top liesure activity for its occupation soldiers in Israel. It stole Lawrence Park homes and Muskoka cottages and gave them to absentee landlords in Washington. The Roman Kingdom shipped 90% of the food you grew on the farms that had been stolen from you to Italian supermarkets across the ocean, leaving you and your children hungry. The Roman Kingdom demanded you worship its tweeter-in-chief.

The Roman Kingdom sucked life and hope and joy out of nearly every conquered people for hundreds of years. And the Roman Kingdom was going to be the death of you, too.

Except that Jesus was whispering something—well, actually, Jesus was preaching something—that gave life and hope and joy back to Rome’s victims. He was doing it on the sly, in code, by pulling children onto his lap, so that the Romans wouldn’t understand. Jesus was preaching rebellion that started with you and you and you; a rebellion that began with individual mustard seeds and little children but would eventually topple an empire.

Jesus preached the Kingdom of God.

And in contrast to Rome’s kingdom, in the Kingdom of God neighbours and strangers and aliens are beloved. In the Kingdom of God great debts are forgiven. In the Kingdom of God Caesar only gets what is Caesar’s. In the Kingdom of God you get a coat off of someone else’s back if you need it, and a visit if you are in prison. And the food! The Kingdom of God is like a banquet where even the dispossessed and desperate and dying can eat.

And the thing about the Kingdom of God is that it is a gift. Not a bicycle kind of gift, or a puppy kind of gift. The Kingdom of God is divine permission to subvert the priorities of Rome or America or the 1% or the alt-right or populist demagogues—divine permission to subvert their priorities by embracing God’s long-term goal of shalom. The Kingdom of God is permission to give your heart and soul and work and priorities to the needs and wants of your neighbour rather than to the idols of our time: distraction, mindless entertainment, and life sucking technology.

Jesus gives us the gift of meaning in a world full of institutions and powers that have lost their way, the gift of community, here, in a world otherwise full of loneliness and sadness.

The Kingdom of God is where the authentic life displaces all forms of Roman occupation of hearts and souls. So, raise your hands empty, like a child.

Next, we’ll change the system from within. First we take Manhattan, and then we take Berlin. We’re guided, after all, by a signal from the heavens.