

World Communion Sunday (Year B)

Mark 10:13-16

People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, '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.' And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

One of my favorite musicals, OK, let's be real, my *favorite* musical, is a musical that I haven't even seen yet. But I know all the music. It a little musical called *Hamilton*. Written by Lin-Manuel Miranda, it chronicles the life and death of the first Secretary of Treasury of this country, an immigrant from the Caribbean named Alexander Hamilton. One of my favorite musical numbers in *Hamilton* is a song which tells the story of the Battle of Yorktown during the Revolutionary War. The Battle of Yorktown was the beginning of the end of the bloody war, and signaled the final major battle before Lieutenant General George Cornwallis surrendered to the American Continental Army.

History would long remember this battle as the moment when a rag-tag group of colonialists defeated the most powerful military empire in the world. As legend has it, Cornwallis instructed his troops to sing a drinking song as they marched away from Yorktown. The name of the song? "The World Turned Upside Down." It is the name of my favorite song in the musical. The final chord of the song has the entire ensemble singing a beautiful and complex chord that has such tension within it and at the final moment, resolves itself and leaves the listener breathless.

Sometimes, when the unexpected happens, we are left breathless. Sometimes, when the world turns upside down, we feel like a complex chord that has yet to be resolved until we understand what it is that just happened.

Today we begin a four-part sermon series in which we explore the ways that the Kingdom of God, as described in the 10th chapter of Mark's Gospel, is an upside-down kingdom, one that subverts the natural order of this world.¹ The world of Mark's gospel was a tightly ordered world with a very strict hierarchy. It was a hierarchy that was dictated, first and foremost, by the military might of the Roman Empire. At the very top was, of course, Caesar. He ruled with completely authority and was regarded with almost divine status. Beneath him were the political elite and the upper class. Beneath the top 1% were everyone else, lower-class commoners. The men were the head of the households. And...at the very bottom of the hierarchy were children.

Children were to be seen and not heard. From the viewpoint of those times, children were seen as nothing but future laborers. Children had no rights. There was no Children's Defense Fund or Child Protective

¹Kelley, Jessica Miller. *A Preachers Guide to Lectionary Sermon Series: Thematic Plans for Years A, B, and C*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016.

Services, looking out for the welfare of the children. If a child was born out of wedlock or born with a physical defect or illness, it was a common occurrence to simply leave them on the street to die.

Children were at the bottom, plain and simple. And, in many places in this world and perhaps places even here in Lexington, such is, unfortunately, still the case.

But in one moment, Jesus took this whole system and turned it upside down.

We often tend to romanticize today's story. Who among us has not seen some painting of a tranquil scene in which Jesus sits gently in a field with a bunch of children clinging to him? It makes each of us look at it and go, "awwwwwwwww." If you want to find such a scene, there's one painted right here in this building in the BLC wing.

And while those paintings are all well and good, they tend to gloss over the controversial part of this passage. And that controversy comes from this fact: Jesus was deliberately subverting the political reality of the world in which he lived.

Jesus understood that children were at the bottom. As we will see in a few weeks, Jesus' disciples were fighting over who among them would be at the top. Jesus decides to turn their worlds upside down.

We are not told where the children came from. One minute, Jesus and the Pharisees are arguing over the issue of divorce and, the next minute, children are swarming around them. We are told that they were brought in order that Jesus might reach out and touch them.

But the disciples would have none of it. They spoke stern words to the people who brought the children and, perhaps, even to the children themselves.

Eyes were rolled. Sighs were made. It does not take a big imagination to see the disciples shooing the little ones away, telling the adults who brought them that Jesus couldn't be troubled with kids. But just as the little ones turn away, Jesus flips. Instead of flipping tables, he flips expectations and rebukes the disciples. He criticizes their attempts to broker who can and cannot access him.

He tells them to welcome the children. Jesus then takes them up in his arms. Jesus lays his hands on them. And Jesus blesses them. We are not told what the disciples' reactions were. Their silence in the text probably mirrors the stunned looks that were on their faces as they watched their leader prioritize...*children*.

And, as Jesus is often likely to do, he turns the encounter into a teaching moment. Truly I tell you, he says, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.

Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.

Those are words that are worth pondering. Those are words that are worth soaking in.

Now, friends, please remember that the Kingdom of God is not some "place" or "reality" that we go to after we die. Rather, the Kingdom of God is an invitation for here and now! Jesus is not talking about preparing for something that's after this life; he's talking about something that we are invited to participate in *this* one! And, Jesus says, in order to participate in it, one must approach it as a child would.

We must receive the kingdom as a little child or else we're never gonna get it. We have to access our inner child or else the Kingdom of God is going to remain a mystery forever.

I do hope that each of you will join us this Wednesday at 5:30 as we watch the Mister Rogers documentary, "Won't You Be My Neighbor." I say that because that movie will express much more clearly what I'm about to lift up to you.

To receive the Kingdom of God as a little child is to be vulnerable. Vulnerability is something that we try to *not* experience. To be vulnerable, we are told, is to be weak. However, vulnerability gifts us with a healthy dosage of humility that can lead to all kinds of learning, discovery, and growth. I believe Jesus would agree with the fact that it is hard to understand the Kingdom of God if one does not take off one's armor first. Now, on a pastoral note, I must mention that what I just said is *not* meant to romanticize the vulnerability of children around the world who suffer from violence, hunger, and disease. That is not the kind of vulnerability I'm talking about. I'm talking more about the vulnerability that leads us to depend on one another for grace, mercy, and love. *That's* the vulnerability that welcomes the least of these to the Kingdom of God.

To receive the Kingdom of God as a little child is to be a part of never-ending creation. To be a child is to understand that every day is a new day with new things to learn. Whether it's learning to tie your shoe, ride a bike, or sing a hymn in worship, to be a child is to live in a constant state of growth. How sad is it that so many of us adults grow out of that! The Kingdom of God must be such a scary place for the person who thinks they know everything. But for the child who acts like a sponge to soak up new things, the Kingdom of God must be very exciting!

Finally, to receive the Kingdom of God as a little child is to understand that we're part of a big family. Children need community. Children, as Mister Rogers would put it, need a neighborhood, a place where they are loved, valued, respected, and known. Because a neighborhood is where you learn things. Good things. Bad things. Joyful things. Sad things. To receive the Kingdom of God as a little child is to understand one's place in a neighborhood that is wild and wonderful, scary and yet full of promise and potential.

So, friends, let us gather around the Table this day as *children* of God. Let us embrace the upside-down Kingdom and understand that where we have been stubborn, the Kingdom calls us to be curious. Where we have been stiff-necked, the Kingdom calls us to be malleable. And where we have been individualistic, the Kingdom calls us to be one big family. Together, let us explore this upside-down kingdom and let the little ones among us lead the way.

In the name of the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.