



“Kingdom Values in Kindergarten”

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Mark 10:13-16

There was a kindergarten boy who came out of his Sunday School class one Sunday and his mother asked him what he had learned. “We learned about Moses and the Pharaoh,” the boy said. “Oh, that’s nice,” replied his mother, “Will you tell me about it?” “OK,” the boy said. “You see, Pharaoh’s army was chasing Moses and the Israelites all over the desert. It looked real bad. In fact, the Israelites ran right up to the edge of this big sea and it looked like they were trapped for sure. Pharaoh’s army was coming at them and Moses knew he had to do something. So, he got on his walkie-talkie and told his engineers to build a bridge across the sea and he told his demolition squad to put some explosives under the bridge. As soon as the bridge was done, the Israelites crossed over on it. When Pharaoh’s soldiers started crossing the bridge, Moses gave the order to blow it up. But do you know what? The dynamite was wet and it didn’t work! So, Moses issued an emergency call for air support and they came just in time to blow up the bridge. Pharaoh’s army was drowned and the Israelites were saved!” The mother was horrified as her son finished this story. “Is that what your Sunday School teacher taught you about Moses?” she asked. “No, not exactly,” the boy answered, “but if I told it to you her way, you’d never believe it!”

Children are so inquisitive and honest, aren’t they? They help us see the world in unique and lovely ways. They are filled with vital values that are worthy of the kingdom of God. On this Children’s Sabbath Sunday, we have so much to learn from our children. Robert Fulghum, a retired minister, said that most of what we need to know about living is learned in kindergarten. “Share everything. Play fair. Don’t hit people. Put things back where you found them. Clean up your own mess. Don’t take things that aren’t yours. Say you’re sorry when you hurt somebody. Wash your hands before you eat. Take a nap in the afternoon. When you go out in the world, watch for traffic, hold hands, and stick together.”

Did you learn all of that when you were kindergarten-aged? I sure did. Think about what a better world this would be if we were more like our kindergarten selves; if everyone shared their belongings, apologized to each other, and took a nap when tired. How much more just and peaceful would the world be if everyone agreed to play fair, not to hurt people or take what didn’t belong to them? How much healthier and cleaner would the world would be if corporations and nations had a policy of putting things back where they found them and of picking up their own messes? And how much happier would we be when we go out in the world if we would just hold hands and stick together? If we really did all that - no matter how old we are - we would see that the kingdom of God had finally come to earth! Kingdom values in kindergarten. Maybe there is something to what Jesus was saying after all. Maybe we should do our best to learn from and not hinder the children.

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 the meal with him. 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 beyond words, came running after her and caught the child just before she reached the bread and cup. 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!"

I've been in several churches where discussions about the noise of children in worship have come up. And it is always my response that fidgeting, laughing, and fussy children make joyful noises and that we should never hinder them. But I imagine, just like the disciples in our text, that some of the grownups in that story I just mentioned were gushing their disapproval at this unruly child and at the mother who "failed" to keep her in line. Maybe saying, "Back in my day, children didn't act like that. They were more under control and better behaved than they are today!"

But, I think, that girl had kingdom values. That little girl yearned to be near the welcoming Jesus - the one whom she knew from stories, the one whom she knew from Sunday School, the one whom she knew would always love her and protect her. I wonder how many of us 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 excited to receive the bread and cup as this little girl was. She was eager and innocent, filled with joy and anticipation. She didn't come to the table burdened by the hostilities or resentments which so often divide us; she wasn't distracted by the anxieties and hurts which accumulate when we watch the news or stay isolated and shouting in our echo chambers. All she wanted was to eat with Jesus. All she wanted was to run to Jesus, into his welcoming arms. We must not hinder the children.

One of the things we need to remember in this Gospel text for today is that Jesus was extremely angry at the disciples for holding the children back. "Let the little children come to me; and do not hinder them." Many of us grew up learning that verse in the King James Version and its flowery Elizabethan English. "Suffer the little children to come unto me and forbid them not." By using those strong words, we, of course, have no reason to think we are forbidding children to find hope, healing, love, and acceptance. Who would knowingly forbid a child's coming to Jesus? None of us would. But don't we often hinder the children? Don't we often delay, hold back, and obstruct progress in our nation and in the world, that seeks to help children live and thrive? We hinder our children by neglecting their religious lives. We hinder the children of our community, our nation, and our world by our provision of nothing but lip service on their behalf. We hinder our children when we model prejudice and anger. We hinder our children when we waste our countries resources on war and imperialism. We hinder our children every single day.

In his book "The Moral Life of Children," Robert Coles tells the story of Ruby Bridges, now a civil rights activist. 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 the all-white school. Every morning as she arrived at school and every afternoon as she went home, accompanied by federal marshals, over one hundred people met her at the door. They

shouted obscenities, threatened to kill her, and they spit on her. Dr. Coles was researching what happens to a child living under that kind of stress. Coles was so sure that Ruby would crack under the pressure that he asked her teachers to watch for signs that she was emotionally deteriorating.

One day a teacher noticed that Ruby was talking to the angry people who frequently attacked her at the door of the school. The teacher asked Ruby what she was saying to them, but Ruby consistently denied talking with them. So, the teacher called Dr. Coles to report what might be the first sign of emotional distress. And when Coles met with 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.”

That was a child who was not hindered from Jesus. That was a child who had kingdom values. There will be no real progress, no genuine hope for America's children, for all of God's children, until some sense of urgency forces us to reconsider our values. That our national leaders would want to give the richest people in our country tax breaks while so many millions of American children do not have food is unbelievable. That our national leaders would want to strip healthcare away from families when many children already cannot get medical care is unconscionable. The ultimate pride of any community is not the power of its armies or the size of its gross national product but the condition of its children. Richard Louv, author and journalist, says “that if we desire a kinder nation, seeing it through the eyes of children is an eminently sensible endeavor: A city that is pro-child, for example, is also a more humane place for adults.” So you see, if our children prosper, our society prospers. If our children are corrupted, if they suffer, if they die from abuse or neglect, our future as a nation is in trouble. We can and should do better.

How would Jesus feel about the condition of the children of our world today? Would Jesus see us as well-meaning disciples, holding back the children from health, security, and love? Or would he see us as a church that lets all children run to the table, to eat and receive communion, and to embrace him? I think Jesus would indeed be angry over how our country has hindered the children and over the lack of basic rights denied to the “least of these.” Jesus would indeed be angry over our limp acceptance of the preventable poverty which condemns children not only to suffering but to the withering of innocence, the withering of emotional stability, the withering of physical flourishing, the withering of the soul. Jesus would indeed be angry over our tolerance of all the vicious forces that prey upon children and that seven thousand children are injured by guns every year and thirteen hundred of those children die.¹ Jesus would indeed be angry that the United States has the second highest child poverty rate among the top industrialized countries despite having the world's largest economy. And that a child in the United States has a twenty percent chance of being poor and a child of color is more than twice as likely to be poor as a white child. Jesus would indeed be angry because this is unacceptable, undesirable, and wholly unnecessary.

¹ CDC team found in their report, published in the journal Pediatrics.

And here's the thing, it wouldn't take much to liberate the children and help them live into their kingdom values. A report from the Children's Defense Fund says that by investing an additional two percent of the federal budget into existing programs and policies that grow employment opportunities, increase pay, and ensure children's basic needs are met, the United States could reduce child poverty by sixty percent and raise seven million children out of destitution.

If we don't take anything else away from this day, I want us to remember how much the children of our country and our world need us right now, today. Our children and the children of the world need us step up and show them how to love others and value themselves. They need us to model how to live in community. They need us to fight for healthy food and protect them from poverty. They need us to defend them from violence and make smart and safe decisions on their behalf. If our children feel protected and confident, we will unleash their joy, their ambition, and their love of faith. And that will indeed make the world a better place.

Several years ago, an article in National Geographic provided a penetrating picture of God's protection. After a forest fire in Yellowstone National Park, forest rangers began their trek up a mountain to assess the inferno's damage. One ranger found a bird literally petrified in ashes, perched statuesquely on the ground at the base of a tree. Somewhat sickened by the eerie sight, he knocked over the bird with a stick. When he struck it, three tiny chicks scurried from under their dead mother's wings. The loving mother, keenly aware of impending disaster, had carried her offspring to the base of the tree and had gathered them under her wings, instinctively knowing that the toxic smoke would rise. She could have flown to safety but had refused to abandon her babies. When the blaze arrived and the heat scorched her small body, the mother remained steadfast. Because she had been willing to die, those under the cover of her wings would live.

Under the protection of God, we can be assured we are safe and secure like the children of this world want to be and need to be. If we can trust in the protection of God, that God is our refuge and fortress; that God is our shelter; that God defends us, guards us, protects us, and keeps us safe in the troubles and trials of life, then we might do a better job of not hindering the children who run to Jesus. I pray for a day when we, as disciples and followers of Jesus, do not hinder children anymore. I pray for the day when we don't keep them at an arm's length, thinking they are someone else's problem and that we realize that Jesus took children into his arms and blessed them. We must welcome the children in our own families, in our own churches, and in our own country so that we can fully recognize kindergarten values, kindergarten values that reveal the kingdom of God.

Amen