

Like Children

Jesus said “Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.”

When I was a child, in my Sunday school class we had a book that had a picture of this Gospel story. It showed Jesus—with blond hair and blue eyes, by the way—seated on a large boulder, as if it were a bench, with lots of children, whose clothes looked vaguely middle-Eastern but whose faces and hair looked a lot like American schoolchildren from the 1950s, gathered around him, sitting on his lap, leaning on his knees, while he blessed them. It was a very sweet picture—and it looked a lot like a church picnic, or a Sunday school class—and it was very clearly designed to make children (and their parents) feel good about going to church.

Perhaps you had a Sunday school book or you’ve seen pictures like that one. It’s a nice way to imagine this story. But depictions like that might also do this story a disservice, in that they make it easier for us to forget—or not to notice in the first place—how unexpected, how radical, how outrageous Jesus’ words here really are. “It is to people like these children that the kingdom of God belongs” is a sentence that would have turned upside down most of Jesus’ contemporaries’ most basic ideas about kingship and belonging and God.

The reason for that is that the ancient world did not value children in quite the same way we do today. A lot of our notions of childhood were formed in the Romantic Movement of the 19th century, when the natural innocence and purity and wonder of childhood were much extolled. Before that, reaching all the way back to the ancient world, attitudes toward children were not always so generous. In Jesus’ time, children were valued, to be sure; but they were valued as a kind of investment for the future, they were valued for the adults they would become, rather than for the persons they were at present. In Jesus’ time, children had no status in society, no rights, no power, no voice—in many ways children were regarded as not quite human yet; they had the potential to *become* human, when they grew up, but as children, they weren’t even entirely *people*.

We don’t see children that way these days. But with that in mind we can look back at this Gospel story and understand it a bit better. When the disciples turn away the mothers who want Jesus to bless their children, they’re not being mean or insensitive or officious—they’re doing what any adult would do, keeping the children where they belong so that the adults could do what adults do, talk about things like wisdom and spirituality and the kingdom of God, things children wouldn’t understand anyway. When Jesus gets indignant with the disciples, he’s doing something that surprises everybody—probably even the parents—and when Jesus says the kingdom of God belongs to *the children*, he’s standing the whole idea of kingdom on its head. Jesus is saying that the kingdom of God, God’s active reigning power in the world, is made manifest not in the powerful and the decisive and the movers-and-shakers, but in those who have no power, those who have no status, those who are not yet finished, those who are works-in-progress still growing into what they can become.

In fact, as surprising as that sounds, Jesus frequently talks about the kingdom that way. A lot of Jesus’ parables compare the reign of God to things that are small but are growing. The kingdom is like a mustard seed that starts out tiny but becomes a very large shrub, Jesus says. The kingdom is like a little bit of yeast that makes the whole loaf rise, Jesus says. The kingdom is like a seed that grows in secret, we don’t know how, until suddenly it’s ready for harvest, Jesus says. And the kingdom belongs, Jesus says, to those who are like children, those who are still growing, those who are still evolving, those who are still seeking, those who don’t have all the answers and haven’t made all the decisions, those who know themselves to be works-in-progress still growing into what more they can yet become.

And what that means for us, is that if we want to receive the kingdom of God, if we want to participate in the reigning activity of God in the world, then we need to give up the illusion that we have all the answers, we need to let go of the presumption that we have all the power, we need to admit the truth about ourselves that we are all seekers, we are all pilgrims, we are all people on the way, we and our whole church are all still works-in-progress, still being formed and shaped and grown into what we yet can become. If we want to participate in the reigning activity of God in the world, then we need to stand with those who, in the ordinary way of the world, have no power, no prestige, no position—like children in the time of Jesus—we need to stand with those who are still on the way and be on our way with them. If we want to participate in God’s reigning activity in the world, we need to let others not like ourselves shape us and form us and love us and teach us, at the very same time we shape them and form them and love them and teach them, so that *together* we become the place where God’s creating kingship may come forth.

Think about how we’re doing that right here in our service today. Today we have our annual Blessing of the Animals between the middle and late services. When we bless our pets, our companion animals, in the spirit of St Francis, we are doing something more than just being cute or sentimental about them. When we bless the animals we enter into a certain kind of relationship with them, we make a promise to seek their good and their well-being and their flourishing as fellow creatures of God. And we ourselves are shaped and formed and schooled in how to be more loving and more serving as we do that. My cat Beckett cannot speak for himself; but he has a certain way of meowing that I’ve learned means he wants me to come sit on the couch with him; and sometimes in the midst of a busy day Beckett will start calling us, and Lee and I go sit on the couch, and Beckett jumps up between us—and we all just sit there and enjoy each other’s company for awhile, and in the midst of a busy day a moment of calm and quiet and affection is created for all of us. We enter the kingdom of God’s creativity when we let ourselves be works-in-progress with our companion animals.

Today is also our first World Poverty Outreach Sunday, a new version of the MDG Sundays we’ve kept for the past couple of years. Today we are being mindful about giving for mission work in the poorest places in our hemisphere—Honduras, where we’ve been going for several years, and Haiti, where we are just beginning to consider a new mission partnership. When we raise money and go on mission trips to these places, we don’t just barrel in there and say “Here we are: we have lots of money and lots of power and lots of answers and we know what’s best for you and we’re going to do it.” No, when we go to Honduras or Haiti, we go to listen, to learn, to build up relationships with those who have no ordinary political or economic power—to find out from them how we can help them grow, and then grow ourselves in the process of helping them. In Honduras we’ve learned how church buildings can be places for worship and places for education and places for community meetings, and how when we help build a church building we are creating public space for the good of the entire town. In Haiti we’ve begun to have conversations with a small town in the mountains, and have learned that we can do for them more than we can know by helping to build a school, and to sponsor teachers and materials, and to visit them to teach them things we know and learn from them what they know. When we go to Honduras and Haiti we encounter people not like us and become works-in-progress with them, growing together into being more the people God delights in us to be.

Jesus said “It is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.” And the upshot of that saying is not just a feel-good picture like my old Sunday school book—but it is a picture of all sorts and conditions of people, all sizes and shapes of creatures, coming together to be works-in-progress, not having all the answers, but seeking with each other to grow in the grace of God. As we come to Jesus today, seeking his blessing, yearning to be nourished with his Body and Blood in communion, may we be works-in-progress, created and re-created daily to work God’s mission of communion in the world. Amen.