

“Don’t Be Childlike, Take Care of the Children!”

Steve Ramer
October 20, 2019

Scriptures

Mark 9:36 And he took a little child and had her stand in front of them, and he put his arm around her and he said to them, 37 "Whoever accepts a child like this in my name is accepting me. And whoever accepts me is not only accepting me but also the one who sent me."

Mark 10:13 And folks would bring children to him so he could lay hands on them, but the disciples scolded them. 14 But Jesus grew indignant when he saw this and said to them, "Let the children come to me and don't try to stop them. After all, God's domain is made up of persons such as these. 15 I swear to you, whoever doesn't accept God's imperial rule the way a child would, certainly won't ever set foot in it." 16 And he would put his arms around them and bless them by laying his hands on them.

Sermon

We Mennonites trace our history back to an early 16th century movement called Anabaptism.

A movement in Europe that early on sprouted a wide variety of groups that were trying to take the words of Jesus seriously.

But some of these groups maybe took Jesus a bit too literally ...

For instance, one group responded to the instructions that we just read by literally acting like children.

To make sure that they belonged in the God's Kingdom, they began to crawl on the floor, speaking gibberish, playing with dolls and well, acting like babies.

I'm guessing that we would all agree that that was a bit extreme and not at all the point that Jesus was trying to get across.

But I also want to question the more common interpretations that are given for these passages as well.

The most common use of these passages is to see children as a metaphor to encourage us adults to consider adjusting our thinking and return to the innocence of our youths.

To stop being so cynical and controlling, returning to that more simple phase of happy innocence where we greeted the world with wide-eyed amazement.

Another popular interpretation calls us to embrace the child within seeking to fill our brokenness through self-love and acceptance.

Now, I do not think that these are bad or wrong lessons to take away from these passages.

What I would like to say this morning is that, I don't think that that was what Jesus was really talking about either. I think his challenge is much bigger.

Again, this morning, I will be using the scholarly work of Ched Myers' book, *Binding the Strong Man* as I revisit these stories.

First off, we must listen to what Jesus actually said. He did not say that we are to "become children," but that we are to "accept the child" and to "accept the kingdom of God as a little child."

Next, we need, as always, to take what he did say with in both its larger social as well as literary context. What we read this morning is part of a larger literary narrative that began back in chapter 9:33 where Jesus begins this new narrative by asking his disciples a very embarrassing question, "what were you guys talking about?"

The disciples had been arguing amongst themselves about the leadership structure of Jesus' movement, and specifically, who deserved positions of authority.

Rather than scold his disciples, Jesus responded by laying out the primary distinguishing characteristic of his new social order. Those who are first or on the top of the current social order must now take a back seat by giving up their special privileges. And those on the bottom, who society defines as least worthy, will be put to the front of the line so that their special needs will be met, thus ensuring a healthier community for all.

The first case study in this larger narrative concerned divorce, a practice that at the time was horribly biased in favor of men. The changes that Jesus advocated went completely contrary to the current system by seeking some rights for women.

Moving on, then, to lift up the value and needs of children, seems a logical next step for both familial and social justice. After all, we know that children in that culture as well as in ours always suffer the most when a family splits up. So too, both our time and in the times of Jesus, children are those with the least amount of social status and power.

To use Jesus' earlier comparison, they are the least of the least or the very last of the last. And the very bottom of the bottom.

And so if it is true that God's kingdom is upside-down then it must apply to everyone, especially to the children. Similarly, if we seek to follow Jesus and to "receive the Kingdom of God," then each one of us (even those who are not parents) must seek a healthy and just world for all children.

But it appears that even those closest to Jesus, his own disciples, found that message too difficult to comprehend.

Despite what he tells them in 9:35, by 10:13, only 30 verses later, Jesus, in disgust, mind you, harshly scolded them for excluding children.

But we too know that exclusionary habits die hard. They quickly and easily re-infiltrate even the most egalitarian of organizations. It almost seems natural.

So many of us want to be important and to be able to exert some level of power and control.

We easily become competitive and begin comparing what I do and what I am worth vis-a-vis others in the group.

That's how hierarchies are built and rules are established. Organizations then need gatekeepers who can enforce the rules, limit access and make sure the undesirables are kept outside.

And so Jesus must provide a second object lesson to counter exclusion.

Everyone must have equal access to both the message and the blessings of God's kingdom.

The invitation to God's way is for everyone and must not be limited by gatekeepers or any kind of barriers.

"Jesus' loves the little children, all the children of the world...
...precious in God's sight!"

And of course, they are not loved more than the rest of us, but because they are the most vulnerable, the most weak and those most dependent physically and emotionally, God (like any good parent) gives a bit more attention to their needs. And God's desire is that the human family also be a bit more protective and attentive to the needs of its weaker members.

This is what Liberation Theology calls,
“God’s preferential option for the poor.”
These Liberation theologians, from mostly post-colonial countries,
provided a much needed critique of a Church that too often took
the side of the wealthy and powerful rather than the poor.

We also know, all too sadly, that children are disproportionately
the victims of war, poverty, abuse, curable diseases and famine.
In Jesus’ day, children were non-entities, they simply didn’t count.
But now, in our very modern and high-tech world,
children seem to only be statistical numbers on a page.

But Jesus brought them into the center of both the crowd and the story.
They are given status and value as human beings.
They too are worthy of his time and attention
and most powerfully, of his touch and affection.

They are human beings and not merely a metaphor
for the innocence of childhood.
Which if you ask me is a bit condescending and devaluing,
and I don’t think that that is how Jesus treated anyone.

If we read the rest of Mark’s gospel, his narrative leads us
to the conclusion that not all was well for the children of his day.

He only includes three stories about children.
Two are daughters, one of a synagogue ruler
and the other of a foreigner who were so sick.
The other was a deaf and mute “son” who also suffered
from life threatening epileptic seizures.

But in addition to physical violence, we know that children
are also victims of emotional and psychic violence as well.
Through both simple observation and newer psychological insights
we know that children are the primary victims of violent
and dysfunctional extended family units.
Children are ideal candidates for exploitation by the virtue
of their complete dependence (material and emotional) upon adults.
Deprivations and abuse experienced in childhood often lead
to serious mental health problems as adults.

And far too often the adult who was abused and traumatized
as a child repeats those same abusive behaviors.
A vicious, seemingly out of control cycle repeats

from one generation to the next.

Failing to break the spiral leads not only to extreme individual costs but to serious societal damage as well.

Excessively authoritarian or emotionally-starved parenting, can create leaders and other sychophants who thirst for power and control over the weak in a futile search to overcome their insecurities.

How many dictators or would be kings seem to fit this description?
How many well educated folks find themselves willing to be bullied, giving away their rights to some megalomaniac who provides them both a sad comfort from childhood and a reason to belong?

The way of Jesus provides the cure and real hope to break the cycle. Each one of us can find a way out of all those destructive spirals. The way of Jesus is non-violent, non-hierarchical and builds a just world. Each and every "system" whether it is economic, social, religious or familial must remain true to those three characteristics.

And considering the fact that our first experiences in life are within our family, the practice of kingdom building needs to start at home. Jesus is promising us no less than an entire new family, one truly based upon total access and full acceptance. A perfect family? Hardly!
But it is a place to belong, a group of folks trying their hardest to live nonviolently, no- hierarchically and committed to building a just world.

I find it curious that he does not make it a command, or a demand but offers it to all of us as an invitation. Whoever welcomes, whoever receives, whoever accepts...

But this too makes sense, because if our damage does go all the way into our unconscious, or into our souls, we know, (likely from personal experience), that external commands and demands, or even the threat of punishment seldom works.

If the invitation is voluntarily accepted and seen as necessary, changed behaviors are typically more likely to occur and to stick! Jesus' way is nothing less than a new extended family. A family not related through the genetics of their own blood but by the blood willingly poured out by Jesus the Christ. Those who were formerly strangers and enemies can now become kin to each other.

Mere acquaintances can now become kindred spirits
and our mutual kinship trumps any national citizenship.
This new community can then authentically begin to phase out that
most unfortunate and very troubling patriarchal, hierarchical,
and empirically loaded term “Kingdom of God,”
that feminist theologians have been encouraging us to drop for decades,
for a far more appropriate descriptor - the “Kin-dom of God.”

Now, maybe some of you might not be all that excited
about this, as you glance to your right or to your left,
but we are all related, part of one big happy
(and sometimes still a little bit dysfunctional) family.

A family that is inviting and including every child,
old and young, poor and broken in this old world.
Indeed, the children are our future and how we care for them
may likely not only save us, but also the world,
in both this lifetime and the next!

Steve Ramer

Pastor Fort Collins Mennonite Fellowship
300 E. Oak St.
Ft. Collins, CO 80524
(970) 412-7510

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