



“Receiving the Kingdom As a Child”
Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Scripture: Mark 10:13-16
September 20, 2009

Homiletics professor, Tom Long, says that today’s passage “is one Bible story that has just about everything going for it. It has children. Lovable, adorable children. But it’s not just a sweet children’s story. If a story is going to be compelling it must have villainy. This story has a supply of villains; not dastardly villains, but sort of obstructionist villains in the form of the disciples, who for whatever reason, try to keep the children from coming to Jesus. So it has children and it has villains; but it also has a hero. The hero is Jesus, of course, and in good heroic fashion he combats the villainy of the disciples, condemning them for their stupidity and then celebrating the whole thing by embracing the children and giving them a blessing. Children, villains, a hero and to top it off there’s a moral to the story. It comes from the mouth of Jesus when he says, ‘Let the little children come to me and do not stop them because to such as these belongs the kingdom of God. And I have another truth for you: unless you receive the Kingdom of God like one of these little children, you will never enter it.’ It has everything going for it. Children, villains, a hero and a moral. It has everything going for it except one thing – clarity. We sort of think we know what this story means, but what does it mean really? What does Jesus mean when he says, ‘Unless you receive the Kingdom of God as a child, you will never enter it?’”¹

Students, scholars, preachers and New Testament commentators all take a crack at it, but they don’t all agree; multiple answers abound. Some think they know what it means. They ask, “What do we find charming about children?” And they offer the answer: innocence. That’s it! What is unique about children is their innocence, and unless you stop your sinful ways, you will never enter God’s kingdom. If you’re going to enter it, you need to be as innocent as children.

If you think that’s what this passage means, I invite you to skip worship next Sunday morning and instead go to the under six classroom. Take five children and give them just two toys and they will change your tune about childhood innocence!

What does it mean to receive the kingdom as a child? New Testament scholar Ernst Best reminds us that one of the mistakes people make when interpreting the Bible is that they often forget the differences among cultures. We read a passage about children and without thinking, we impose our culture’s concept of childhood on this 2,000 year-old story from the Middle East. Best points out that our culture is “child-centered and we idealize children, but in the ancient

world it was the mature adult who was idealized.”² We may miss the meaning of Jesus by imposing our cultural view of children on the story.

Some take this difference in cultural views into consideration. One commentator points out that in ancient times there was a rabbinic saying that said paying attention to children was like drinking too much wine or associating with the ignorant; it was a total waste of time. Jesus rebuked his disciples for trying to shoo away the children and then he flipped this “waste of time” teaching on its head by demonstrating a new attitude toward children.³ Maybe Jesus was upset with the way children in his culture were treated. Perhaps he was sending a message to the adults who viewed children with contempt.

A few years ago a colleague was preaching at a Methodist Conference Center. He arrived at the sanctuary early that morning to set his notes in the pulpit and mark his passage in the Bible. While he was doing this, “one of the directors of the conference center came up to him and starting chatting. After talking for a while, he said, ‘Well, we had something really embarrassing happen here last week.’ The minister said, ‘Embarrassing?’ The director replied, ‘We had Reverend so and so as our guest preacher – he named one of America’s most prominent preachers – and he said, ‘Right in the middle of his sermon, a baby started crying.’ The minister said, ‘Yes, I guess that was embarrassing all right.’ And the director said, ‘No, that wasn’t embarrassing. What was embarrassing was what happened next. Reverend so and so stopped midsentence, glared at the mother and said, ‘Madam, I cannot go on with that child disturbing me.’ And with tears of shame streaming down her face, she picked up the child and fled from the sanctuary. Maybe there were jerks like that in Jesus’ time! And what Jesus is saying in this story is ‘You can take your pompous attitude and stuff it! The kingdom is more about the child you just ran off than it is about you.’”⁴

Some have said that, years ago, Westminster was guilty of that attitude. The only children permitted in the sanctuary during worship were the ones in the stained glass window depicting this passage.

What does it mean to receive the kingdom as a child? One contemporary scholar says that in the ancient world children were not important. Men had all the rights and privileges, women were, at best, second-class citizens and children had no status at all. He says that to receive the kingdom as a child means to regard ourselves as unimportant.⁵ In other words, we need to be humble. No boasting about good works, no clamoring about an unshakable faith. Unless we approach God with genuine humility, we will not taste God’s kingdom. What does it mean to receive the kingdom as a child? Maybe it underscores the importance of being humble.

One minister who was preparing to preach on this passage noticed that as he perused numerous commentaries he found a range of answers to what it means to receive the kingdom as a child. Many spoke out of our current cultural view of children and others attempted to recover the ancient view. He decided he would try a different approach. He turned to a source he would rarely consider: Matthew Henry, a Puritan pastor who lived in the 17th and 18th centuries. He wrote a commentary on the entire Old Testament, the four gospels and the Book of Acts.

As a sidebar, I’m always amazed by the number of sermons and writings produced by ministers in earlier times. Initially I thought today’s ministers must be lazy in comparison. But then I’m reminded that they didn’t have to create a unique worship bulletin every week, sit through 10 committee meetings, edit newsletters, oversee programs for every age and interest, and deal with 400 emails. Okay, got that off my chest! Where was I?

Oh yes, Matthew Henry, the old Puritan. What did he think it meant to receive the kingdom of God like a child? He said that when those parents brought their children to Jesus

they were discipline problems and they wanted Jesus to straighten them out!⁶ Matthew Henry thought that children could use a bit more discipline, so that must have been what Jesus meant.

What does it mean to receive the kingdom as a child? New Testament scholar, Lamar Williamson, hangs his hat on the dependency of children. He points out that children cannot support themselves, they are dependent on their parents to take care of them. To receive the kingdom as a child is to recognize that we are totally dependent on God, just as children are dependent on their parents.

What does it mean to receive the kingdom as a child? Jesus really could have made this easier on us, don't you think? If he would have simply tossed out the word describing the child-like characteristic to which he was referring, we would have it nailed down once and for all. But what if Jesus didn't want us to nail it down once and for all? What if he was not referring to only one characteristic?

Often Jesus told parables, and one of the reasons he used this method of teaching was because a parable often has a constellation of meanings so that it can speak to us in a fuller sense than merely one thought. Furthermore, a parable enables us to hear the message in different ways depending on our circumstances. I'd like to suggest that when Jesus instructs his followers to receive the kingdom as a child, he did not want us to fixate on only one child-like characteristic.

Picture with me a scene where a few of us sit down with Jesus and gain insights into what he meant when he called on us to receive the God's kingdom as a child. "Jesus, did you mean we need to set our accomplishments aside and push our egos out of the way so that we can approach God with humility?"

And Jesus responds, "Yes, and what else?"

"We need to recognize that we are totally dependent on God. We did not create the world. We came into it with nothing and we will leave it with nothing. We are totally dependent on God."

"Yes," Jesus says, "And what else?"

"Do we need to be certain in our minds that we believe the right things about God?"

Jesus answers by countering with a question of his own: "Do you really think little children have made great leaps in theology? Faith is important, but faith is more than specific beliefs. Faith is trust."

"We need to trust God more don't we? We need to trust God to be with us when times are difficult. We need to trust God to give us courage. When we're confused, we need to trust God to show us the way forward. We need to trust God to open new doors for us.

"Good," Jesus says, "And what else?"

"Children have incredible imaginations. I guess we need to spend less time hashing over regrets and more time dreaming about the future."

"Good," he says, "and what else?"

"There are a couple of things children possess that most adults have lost: joy and wonder. What is more delightful to witness than a child who gets the giggles? Their entire body convulses with joy. Their laughter is like a contagious virus infecting everyone in the room. No inoculation can halt the spread of glee. Moods lighten, spirits soar, and the sun glistens."

"And what about the way their eyes marvel at water rushing over rocks or a night sky filled with a million stars? Or the way their hearts stand still when they gaze into a bird's nest filled with eggs? Their enchantment with God's creation reminds us that we have lost much of our ability to wonder and we've rationalized too much of the mystery out of life. To receive

God's kingdom as a child, we need humility, to be totally dependent, to trust, to dream, to be joyful and to recover wonder."

I hear Jesus say, "Yes, yes, yes! And what else?"

NOTES

1. Tom Long, "Children and the Kingdom," at the Festival of Homiletics in Atlanta, Georgia, May 2009.
2. Ernst Best, *From Text to Sermon*, (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1978), p.56.
3. Paul J. Achtemeier, *Invitation to Mark*, (Garden City, New York: Image Books, 1978), p.146.
4. Tom Long, "Children and the Kingdom," at the Festival of Homiletics in Atlanta, Georgia, May 2009.
5. Ernst Best, *From Text to Sermon*, (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1978), p.56.
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