

The Peace of God is a Child

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Mark 10:13-16

¹³ Some people brought children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them, but the disciples scolded the people. ¹⁴ When Jesus noticed this, he was angry and said to his disciples, “Let the children come to me, and do not stop them, because the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these. ¹⁶ Then he took the children in his arms, placed his hands on each of them, and blessed them.

I.

A long time ago, in the days when Jesus was still in Galilee, some people brought children to Jesus to touch and bless. Jesus’ companions and students stopped them. Thinking they were doing the right thing, they spoke sharply to them. But Jesus saw it. And he got angry. Jesus. Angry. He was angry because children were at the heart of his vision of the new thing God was doing. *“Let the children come to me, and do not stop them, because the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I assure you that whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God like a child will never enter it.” Then he took the children in his arms, placed his hands on each of them, and blessed them.*

It’s a short story, but it raises many questions. The kinds of questions we assume we know, or we are too afraid to ask. Here’s three for starters. What’s this Kingdom of God? How on earth can Jesus say it belongs to children? And what does it mean to receive it like a child?

As we reflect on this little story, let me share another one, about children, and about an angry...woman. But it may not be what you think.

It was an unusual event I was attending. Admittedly it was yet another gathering of pastors in a denominational office building. Only this was the first time ever we had brought together American pastors from the US and pastors from Burma serving churches in the US. Our facilitators included two Asian-American women, engaged in Refugee Ministries.

What was also unusual was the level of trust that developed, as we shared the struggles of people coming together in Christian churches, sharing the same buildings and in some cases sharing worship, trying to make the adjustment to being multicultural churches. Many of these are churches like our congregation, located in urban neighborhoods or downtown, progressive folk who have known each other for a long time.

So what do pastors talk about when they let their hair down behind closed doors? Conflicts, of course. And what kinds of conflicts were we having in our churches as we came together across the lines of culture, history and expectations? Were we having theological struggles? No. Political disagreements? No. But we were having a little issue or two around the place of children in the church. With some embarrassment one of our US pastors was sharing how hard it was for his older American members to deal with the huge number of little children all over the sanctuary during worship. Noisy children. Children running around. How to communicate with the newcomers that children in America were to be quiet in church?

It was Florence, a Chinese-American staff member who helped organize the event, who broke the conversation open. Usually mild and reserved, she had lightning in her eyes. “This conversation makes me angry!” she said. “When I hear those feet running in church I hear... happy feet. I hear my own feet. When I was a little girl in Hong Kong, and I first went to church, I went without my family. Only later did I bring my parents. And the people in that mission church welcomed me. They gave me food, yes, but they also gave me so much more. And so today I do not mind a little noise from children in church—and neither should you. The children are why the church exists. God wants those feet to be happy.”

II.

What is this Kingdom of God to which Jesus referred all the time? It is not pie in the sky, it is not somewhere else. It is right in the midst of us, in this life, in the way we live and love, share and speak and stand up. And at the heart of it are children. Little children, big children, every kind of boy and girl and yes, youth as well. Rich children, poor children, slave children, refugee children, struggling children, happy children, wounded children, healing children, learning children, growing children: God’s children, our children.

Many in this world talk a good line about how we love children, care for children, etc. But the reality is harsher than the words. In this city and this wealthy country, children from poor families continue to struggle to access a fair and equal education. Around the world, child labor, paid poorly or not paid at all, continues to place a dirty question mark upon our claims of humanity. Trafficking of humans and trafficking of drugs continue unabated, both involving children in horrendous ways.

So when Jesus claims that God’s Kingdom—the kind of new relationships we call the “Peace of Christ”—is all about receiving Children, a new world that needs to be received like a child, he doesn’t just ask us to be childlike in our spirituality! He invites us to solidarity with the children in our neighborhood, in our city, and all over the face of our world.

Our salvation is tied up with the deliverance of the world’s children. Our salvation is about the liberation of captive children. Our feet can be happy when we hear the happy feet in church, when we receive the children in the name of Christ, remembering that we all once were—and remain—God’s children.

This past few days we have heard about terrible violence in the world: mass violence in yet another college; and in Afghanistan, the deadly bombing of a hospital in the midst of a battle, an airstrike most unfortunately labeled “collateral damage.” Do you, like me, sometimes feel helpless as the stream of violence goes on? What does it mean to receive the Kingdom, the Peace of God, in a world like this?

I am convinced that it begins with each of us where we are. We cannot change the whole world singlehanded. But we can, each of us, look at where we are, try to sense where we are called. We can listen for the feet—the happy feet and the struggling feet. We can offer welcome and blessing and healing in the name of Christ. We can raise a voice in protest, offer a hand in comfort, and, if you are like me, send a few more dollars and letters of shared sorrow to Doctors without Borders, who operated the hospital destroyed in that city far away from here.

We cannot do it alone! That is why we have community-- that is why we have the children who give us strength and show us the way, ask us the questions and point us to the truth.

III.

When we come to the communion table, we bring a lot of assumptions. When we come to the communion table, it is natural to think of it as the same old ritual, once again. But we are not gathering simply for magic, nor to be reminded only of heaven’s rewards.

The communion table is where we remember that the peace of God is already among us. We gather to renew our conviction that the justice and forgiveness, the mercy and love to which Christ pointed us, are *possible*-- not only in the next world but in this one. We gather here to remember we do not do it alone.

We need community, we need the love and reassurance and challenge of our sister and brothers, and most especially of our children. It is when we feel most greedy and protective, wanting God’s blessings for ourselves, we need this table to remember that Christ came not only for us but for the happy feet whose echoes from the past, the present and the future continue, our deepest blessing.

Jesus made the disciples bring the children into the middle of the gathering where adults thought they ruled. And in so doing, he began to turn the world upside down. The next time someone tells you Christianity is all about heaven, tell them no, Jesus says that the kingdom is among us! Tell them the Peace of Christ is a Child. Tell them there are happy feet among us, runners whose steps testify to grace and truth, sounds that speak of the mercy and love of God.