

August 28, 2016

Ma10:13-16, 9:35-37

Bring 'Em On

Children are deceptive. I don't mean dishonest or manipulative (tho' some can be), but children are deceptive. I mean, when we are out with the grandchildren, people often come up and make comments about how cute they are, how well-behaved they are, how lucky we are to have them. That's all true **HOWEVER**, those kids are a lot of work as well. I see firsthand the effort and commitment their moms, dads and grandma put into their well-being. That is the "deceptive" part - most people don't see it.

Our text this week is equally deceptive. We all love that scene of Jesus sitting, embracing a group of little children after scolding his disciples for trying to shoo them away. It seems so perfect for Jesus to say, "Bring 'em on. Let them come to me." But, that is deceptive. For, in Jesus' time, children, while they were loved and valued, were not generally seen as they are today.

One interpretation suggests that in those times children were totally dependent on their parents, particularly their father. There was precious little discussion or negotiating between the generations. When Jacob wanted an update on his sons, he didn't ask even his favorite, Joseph, if he'd like to check on them. Jacob told his son to go. At some level, children were as much property as progeny.

That being said, what is Jesus telling us in this text? What does he mean by, "whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it? Well, based on the view that children belonged to their parents - and don't we often say we belong to God - then, to receive the kingdom, we must be totally dependent, fully submissive to God.

Jesus actually makes this argument in Matthew 5 - the Beatitudes. He never once says, "Blessed are the strong-willed, the powerful, the independent, the self-directed or even the successful". Rather, he speaks of the poor in spirit, the meek, the hungry, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers and the persecuted. Each description speaks to putting one's self aside and letting go to let God direct.

Jesus is challenging his 1st century followers by embracing the children. He is, as usual, going against the flow of accepted norms, and comparing true disciples to children. By his actions, he is teaching them a lesson about humility and servanthood.

Several verses earlier, Jesus referenced children as well. Then (Mark 9:35-37) he was responding to a debate among his followers over who was the greatest. And what was his response? He took a little child and put it among them ... saying ... whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me. In other words, when you can put yourself aside to serve someone as insignificant as a child, then, you'll know greatness.

Children have a lot to teach us. Both through the crazy cute things they do and say, but also by the way caring for them challenges us to put ourselves aside for the benefit of another. One commentator suggested that to really understand the message of this lesson, you'd need to substitute the name of any severely marginalized group in place of the word "child". Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a ... Syrian refugee, Chinese Uyghur or African albino (all of whom are dependent on others for their very survival) ... will never enter it.

How willing are we to open ourselves up to God and really live the gospel message of love, justice and service? Can we accept the role of a child, albeit a child of God, in order to experience the unfolding of God's kingdom?

Grace & peace,

Pastor Ron