



Would You Want to Be a Kid Again?

TEXT
Mark 10:13–16

April 2, 2017 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

Unless you receive the kingdom as a child, you will not receive it. This is not an exhortation to act childish. This is not a call to innocence, as if we could forget what the world has taught us. It is a word about grace.

Grace is sometimes amazing. It is also persistent; but most surprisingly, grace is offensive. I think it is the offensiveness of grace that has everyone angry in this story. The disciples get angry at these children, or at the folks who brought them. Jesus gets angry at the disciples — why do they think it's right to keep the children away?

Some folks wanted Jesus to touch the children — not to heal them, but to bless them. It was actually a bold thing to do. You see, in that culture, children didn't belong here. It wasn't that they were bad or disruptive, they just lacked the status.

Think of the colonial period of America. Women were important, but they shouldn't vote; that wouldn't be right. And men were important, but white men more important than black men. You get my point: We had ways of assigning status. No one had to explain these things; it was just the way things were.

It was true in Jesus' day. If you went to a synagogue, the men would be there studying Torah, but there wouldn't be women there. They didn't belong. And there would certainly be no children there. They didn't belong. That's why the disciples thought these folks were presumptuous. The children didn't belong here.

But Jesus was always pushing the envelope. He included women. He included tax collectors. And evidently, he even includes children.

Have you ever been somewhere where you didn't belong?

Dan and Marsha lived down the street from my dad. Marsha was having what Dan described as a "significant" birthday. *There's a surprise party. Come at 6:30! The guest of honor, she would come home at 7:00, and then everyone would jump out from behind the furniture and closet doors and shout "Surprise!"* Dad said he would be there.

Dad was running a little late. It's an Are tradition.

It was 6:45. He hurried to their house. He noticed folks had done a great job of hiding their cars. There was absolutely no sign that a party was going on. Marsha would be home in 10 minutes or so. He didn't want to blow the surprise, so he let himself in the

front door. He heard some conversation in the kitchen, so he walked into the kitchen, and there were Marsha and Dan, eating dinner — alone, in their house.

It took a minute for my dad to put it together. He was not 15 minutes late, but rather a week early. He couldn't say, "Oh, I thought the party was tonight." There he was standing in his neighbor's kitchen. He had just let himself in.

"I wondered if I could borrow some sugar."

"Sure," Dan said. "Would you like me to get it, or are you more comfortable helping yourself?" It was awkward.

It's embarrassing to show up where you don't belong; embarrassing when you feel like you don't belong. But if others determine that you don't belong, the embarrassment is more complicated. It can be demeaning.

We don't live in Jesus' day, and we don't live in the colonial period anymore, but we probably assign status and value as other cultures have. What determines belonging in this world? What do you think? And what determines belonging to God?

I've heard folks say this story shows that the disciples just didn't like to have children around. The problem with the disciples is that they were annoyed that children

were children and not adults. Children can be so disruptive.

Twenty-five years ago, Carol and I attended the Christmas concert of the Columbia Mastersingers. They were a male choral group in South Carolina. Everyone's favorite concert was the Christmas concert. Carol and I had tickets. Of course, our seats were so far back in the balcony, the music didn't arrive until after Christmas, but it was beautiful.

Even from our seats, we could discern the problem. In about the tenth row of the symphony hall — a place with fantastic acoustics, by the way — there was a young mother who brought a toddler to the concert. This child showed very little appreciation for male choral music.

It's a strange thing. In church, children are no problem. Any preacher worth his or her salt can outreach a baby. But in a concert, it can be distracting. All through the concert, the child would cry, protest and holler. I said to Carol, "I'm glad that's not our baby making all that noise."

I'll admit, if some of Jesus' disciples were at the concert and spoke sternly to that mother, they would have gotten the support of the whole crowd. The whole room wanted to tell her, "The kid is a good kid; the kid is probably a bright kid; the kid might even grow up to sing in a choir someday, but not tonight. That kid doesn't belong here." We want folks to be where they belong.

I think all of us think there are places where children belong and places where they don't. I think most of us would agree that children belong in school.

Children belong in school so they can learn reading and math and learn how to make friends. It's even better if, in school, they can learn how to play basketball or learn how to play the oboe.

We have a fantastic preschool both here and at our campus at Antioch. And we have the Village Child and Family Development Center. They are important aspects of our ministry because we know that human flourishing is connected to education. Children belong in school. It's why we participate with Operation Breakthrough and Front Porch Alliance. Because we are the church, we care for these children. Children belong in school.

And children belong in the pediatrician's office. They need their vaccines and to check their diet and find out if they need tubes in their ears. Do they still do that? Anyone who knows anything about Jesus knows he cared about the sick. It's why we support Dominican Republic Medical Partnership and why we support the health clinic for those without insurance. Children belong in the pediatrician's office.

And children belong in church — not only in Kids' Kingdom, where they can learn about Jesus' disciples and the stories of Abraham, but they also belong in worship. You may not know this, but parents are the most significant factor in a child's faith formation. Church helps, but children need to know that their parents have faith. They need to see their parents and all of us worship God. Children belong in here.

But I'll tell you where they don't belong. They don't belong

in poverty. United Community Services reports that one in four children in the state of Kansas participate in free and reduced lunch programs at school. Almost one in five children in the state of Kansas live below the federal poverty level.¹

It is possible for these poor children to break out of poverty; it is possible, but the odds are stacked against them, and many of them will not. I wish there were more humility about this. What I mean is I wish we could admit that we have never been as good at fighting poverty as we could be and as we should be. I wish that for the sake of the children.

Children don't belong in poverty and neither do children belong in violence. Yesterday's paper tells of a father who killed his own child. The child's name was Adrian. He was 7 years old. This happens in this country four to five times a day. There are so many calls to agencies to protect children that nationally they average 10,000 calls a day² — 10,000 calls to retrieve children from violence.

Children deserve to be safe. And children belong in a place where they belong.

Last summer we saw a little boy from Syria. His name is Omran Daqneesh. He's 5 years old. We saw him sitting dazed, bloodied and covered in dust after being pulled from the rubble of his home in Aleppo, Syria. And we have seen the tragic consequences of families who try to get their children out of that very violence. They have no place to belong.

What is it that constitutes belonging in this world? I ask that for two reasons. One is our world tells the poor child, the abused child, the uneducated child, the unloved child, the refugee child the message that “you don’t belong.” But I also ask it because whatever determines who belongs in this world, Jesus seems to reject our systems. What do you suppose makes someone belong to God?

I think Jesus would agree with Alex. Alex saw Omran in the back of that ambulance and he wrote this to President Obama: “Remember the boy who was picked up by the ambulance in Syria? Can you please go get him and bring him to my home? Park in the driveway or on the street, and we will be waiting for you guys with flags, flowers and balloons. We will give him a family and he will be our brother.

“In my school, I have a friend from Syria, Omar, and I will introduce him to Omar. We can all play together. We can invite him to birthday parties, and he will teach us another language. We can teach him English too.

“I will share my bike, and I will teach him how to ride it. I will teach him additions and subtractions in math.”

How is it that Alex knows Omran belongs? How many children have no place to call home?

Maybe Jesus was so adamant about this because Jesus was a refugee himself. Do you remember that? When he was a child, his family fled to Egypt to escape the violent hand of Herod. Maybe this is why Jesus is so emotional about this. When you have lived that

experience, it no doubt shapes how you view the world.

The disciples believed that children didn’t belong with Jesus. Why? It’s not because they were disruptive, but because they lacked the status. They weren’t important enough.

It’s important to note that Jesus does not just use this as a teaching moment. Jesus is angry. Jesus simply doesn’t see life by our rules. Jesus says these children, these who do not have status, these children who have no place they can claim, these children are the ones who can show you what constitutes belonging to God.

They belong to God not because of their status, but because of God’s character; not because of anything in their hearts, but because of what is in God’s heart. It’s grace, and grace can be offensive because it pays no attention to righteousness or accomplishment or class or status. It ignores the rules we create about who is in and who is out.

After intermission at the Mastersingers’ concert, I was confident that the child would go home. It was obviously past bedtime. But, no, we heard the child all through the second half. The last piece of the concert was *a capella*. The pianist gave the note, but the child had had all the male choral music he could stand. They couldn’t hear their pitch.

The pianist tried again, but the baby just wailed. The acoustics were very good in that room, so you could hear him clearly. I was thinking, “Why doesn’t she just take that baby out?” Still I was surprised when someone yelled

“Take it out.” The audience began to clear their throats ... uh hum ... and someone said, “Take the baby out.”

Well, mama stood up with the diaper bag and shuffled through the crowd. The door slammed shut. There was quiet! Then people cheered. I was thinking, “Now everyone is where they belong.”

The pianist gave them their pitch, and the Columbia Mastersingers sang: “Mary had a baby, my Lord.” We all got it.

By intention or by consequence, the world tells all kinds of people, including children, that they don’t belong. We push them out of the room or the community or the country. It makes Jesus angry. When people are pushed out, Jesus is going to go with them.

I think we should remember that this week. It may offend us a bit, but we would do well to remember that grace, by definition, means that God doesn’t push folks out. Maybe if we remember that, we will get closer to the day when we no longer treat each other as those who belong and those who do not. We haven’t seen that day yet, but I know what Jesus calls it ... he calls it the kingdom of God.

¹www.ucsjoco.org

²www.childhelp.org

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church’s website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.