

October 4, 2015



“Children, Siblings and God’s Table of Grace”

Homily by Rev. Robert English

Mark 10:13-16

People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, ‘Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.’ And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

If you were to do a google image search of “Jesus blesses the children” you would see thousands of images of Jesus, looking particularly pastoral and loving, embracing a company of perfect angelic little children, dressed in all white robes, which are pressed, perfect and pristine; whose faces radiate with all the characteristics we love to associate with childhood: awe, wonder, love, and innocence.

Being a new parent I now know that these pictures are a lie, a terrible, terrible lie. Even if the children would have been dressed in their best white robe it would have become dirty in a matter of minutes, their faces would have been red and puffy from all of the crying about not getting their way, and their noses would have been snotty with the latest cold circulating around the ancient near east.

And yet, these images have become so ingrained within me over the course of my life of faith that it is extremely difficult for me not to think of them as we hear the Gospel story from this morning.

Like others, I presume, there is a tendency within to romanticize this story and to read into it all sorts of modern understandings of childhood, in order to come to the final conclusion that Jesus wants us to be more like children; i.e. innocent, filled with wonder and less cynical about the world that we live in. Now, these are not necessarily bad things, heaven knows we could use a few less cynical people in the world, but I do wonder if this story is about something a bit more radical about the nature of God’s kingdom.

In order to examine a text, especially a story like this, we need to put all of our modern constructs and social norms on the shelf for a moment in order to dig into the scripture itself and place it in its proper context.

Today, we view children differently than pretty much every other previous generation of people going back to antiquity.

When we see a child, for the most part, we see this tiny, beautiful little creature that has an intrinsic value. We believe that they have this value simply because they exist, simply because they are human.

There are probably multiple sources for this evolution in our human anthropology over time, including, but not limited to, the ministry and mission of Jesus. In our world here in the United States of America in the year 2015, most of us, even if we personally do not have, want or particularly like children, would probably say that children in general, contain an inherent worth, an inherent value which adds to our experience as a human species. The world that Jesus lived in and ministered to was not necessarily this way. Children had no place in society. They had no status. They were considered to be non-persons, in that their identity was solely tied to their father, until they became capable of marriage or taking up a profession. Their only real value was in their potential, what they would become, and not who they were.

And so, as the children are being brought to Jesus so that he might bless them with his embrace, the disciples rebuke the children and turn them away, acting in a way that would have been perceived as normal and completely non-controversial.

But the gospel, the good news is this:

Jesus embodies something beyond social conventions or social norms.

One of my favorite lines in this story is Jesus’ response to the actions of the disciples, the text says “but when [Jesus] saw this, he was indignant and said ‘let the little children come to me, do not stop them for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.’”

Jesus was indignant at the sight of these vulnerable, non-persons being turned away from him, from his blessing, and so he responds with a word of welcome and grace. And in welcoming them Jesus gives them a new status, a new place among God’s people, Jesus is saying that they matter, and not only do they matter, but they have a special place in God’s kingdom.

One more thing to note in this text, something that is there but you have to read between the lines to understand, is that these children didn’t come to Jesus alone. They came with those who would be caring for them, their mothers, aunts, older sisters; these women were the ones who brought the children to see Jesus.

By welcoming the children in his midst, Jesus also welcomes the women who cared for them, those on the margins, those who were not seen as wise enough or mature enough to receive Jesus' good word, those un-favored by the world, blessed and favored by God.

It's a powerful story when you think of it in these terms. Jesus welcomes in those who others would ignore, forget or push aside- Jesus blesses children, women and caregivers, who have no status, no identity - these non-persons in his midst.

The embodiment of God's grace and truth, blesses snot-nosed, dirty, unkempt, whiny children, he embraces them and says you are blessed, beloved child of God.

Jesus teaches us that when you set a place for those who are on the margin you start to live as if all people are of sacred worth. When you welcome the ones who others have forgotten you remember that God dwells in the image of every single person on this earth. You become more immersed in the web of human interconnectedness that is the Kingdom of God, instead of being isolated or withdrawn.

Like many people, I watched every single move that Pope Francis made while he was here in the United States on his visit. I checked my twitter feed as if it were a virtual pilgrimage, following every step along the way. And I, like some of you who have shared with me, was touched and humbled by his embrace of the gospel of Jesus, his care for the poor and the weak, his words of truth that challenge power structures in our country and most of all the warmth of his smile and the deep joy he has in relating to all God's people.

Now, like every person in this world, there are some things on which Pope Francis and I agree and other things on which we disagree- but, heck I have a hard enough time agreeing with myself most of the time.

And in Pope Francis we are as strong a witness to the truth and power of the gospel of Jesus as we've seen on such a public stage in a long while. He reminds us of this powerful and eternal truth, that we are all interconnected with one another in this human family, embraced as siblings, brothers and sisters in Christ, beloved companions and partners along the way.

As we heard in the letter to the Hebrews this morning, "both the one who makes human beings holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. And so Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters."

Jesus is not ashamed to call us brothers and sisters. Part of the Christian life is to witness to this unity, to live in this brotherhood and sisterhood at all times.

And one way this is made real, made manifest, is in our prayer and the sacraments.

To quote Francis:

'Prayer unites us; it makes us brothers and sisters. It opens our hearts and reminds us of a beautiful truth which we sometimes forget. In prayer, we all learn to say "Father", "Dad". We learn to see one another as brothers and sisters. In prayer, there are no rich and poor people, there are sons and daughters, sisters and brothers. In prayer, there is no first class or second class, there is brotherhood [and sisterhood].'

One of the things that I cherish most about going to Haiti is the opportunity to worship with our Haitian brothers and sisters. It is an extraordinary experience, so familiar and yet so unique. A few years back we were in the town of Furcy in the mountains outside of Port-Au-Prince. It is a rugged terrain and the people are tough but warm. During the week we lived in the church that we worshiped in, sleeping on the pews at night. At the end of the week we gathered on the last evening for a time of prayer and celebration of communion. As we prayed over the bread and the juice we started to serve communion when Madame LuLu, our cook for the week, started to softly sing this song that she had taught us:

Let the weak say I am strong, let the poor say I am rich, let the blind say I can see, it's all the Lord has done for me.

We started to sing along with her in English and our Haitian friends sang in creole and we ate the body of Christ and we drank the blood of salvation and in that moment, there were no rich and poor people, there were only sons and daughters, sisters and brothers. And God was glorified.

As we gather around this table, let us hold in our hearts our friends, our brothers and sisters around this world who celebrate this sacrament, this meal, who sit at this table of grace with us, one body.

Thanks be to God. Amen.