

**Mark 10: 13-16 “Irrepressible Joy” Rev. Janet Chapman 10/13/24**

In our brief text today, Jesus tells the disciples that unless they become like little children, they won't be able to enter into the kin-dom of God. Obviously, he didn't mean for them to be child-ish, for we have enough childish behavior going on in the world as it is. What Jesus was telling us was that we had to assume certain child-like qualities, certain child-like traits if we were going to be a part of God's kin-dom, part of God's people. In case, you are concerned that I have lost my ability to enunciate, I am intentionally using the word kin-dom instead of king-dom because we don't live in a society where kings have the same influence as they used to, not to mention that kings are male and God has no gender. Using the term “kingdom” in our understanding of language within the 21<sup>st</sup> century is not only sexist, but it is elitist and hierarchical; something that has no place in God's realm. God's realm is not based on who is better than anyone else and our language needs to evolve in order to help people understand that. When the fullness of God becomes a daily reality in our world, scholars insist, we will all be brothers and sisters together – kin to one another. Therefore, you will hear me talk far more about the kin-dom of God than kingdom, if for no other reason, than to help bring the Gospel to the children among us.

I love working with kids and spent the first 20 years of ministry specifically working with college age and younger. I love their spontaneity and upfront honesty. Some of my favorite church-y stories come out of children's moments such as the one where a preacher was sitting with the kids and says “Boys and girls, what's this big, has a long furry tail, and climbs trees? There was dead silence until one kid raised his hand and said, “I know I'm supposed to say Jesus, but it sure sounds like a squirrel to me.” I may have shared with you the story of the Christmas pageant where a neuro-divergent child wanted to be a part of the play (if you aren't sure what that means, read the article in the October church newsletter). The Director decided to give him the Innkeeper part because all he had to say was “No room.” The night of the Pageant, Mary knocks on the door and he opens it and right on cue, brusquely says, “No room!” Mary says, “But I'm sick and I'm cold, and I'm going to have a baby, and if you don't give me a place to sleep, my baby will be born in the cold, dark night.” The boy just stood there, deep in thought. The buddy behind him nudged him and said, “No

room, say ‘No room!’” Finally, he turned to his assigned buddy and said, “I know what I’m supposed to say, but she can have my room!” I love kids, no matter who they are, because they are often the first to get it.

Tony Campolo thinks that one of the things Jesus liked most about kids is that they are aware of their own self-importance in a healthy rather than arrogant way. The verses we heard today come within the context of the Pharisees asking a question for which they know there is no good answer, “Does the Law allow a man to divorce his wife?” We see them do this over and over, “Is it lawful to pick grain on the Sabbath?” “Should we pay taxes to Caesar?” “If a woman marries 7 brothers, one right after the previous one dies, whose wife will she be in heaven?” Having an unhealthy regard for themselves, the Pharisees want to reveal the flaws of this Galilean who challenges all that they stand for. This time, they choose the legality of divorce to which Jesus turns the question back on them asking “What did Moses command?” They are forced to recite the law, “Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and divorce her.” Then Jesus tells them their hardness of heart is the reason Moses said such a thing – if humanity hadn’t been filled with such hardness, there would be no necessity for such a statement. The real crux of the issue, Jesus says, has to do with the institution of marriage and what it was intentionally designed to be according to God, a relationship between two people which is steeped in unconditional love and servanthood. Marriage was never meant to be a relationship based in power or who has the authority to divorce who? Such relationships are likened to two people headed in opposite directions, such as, when I was at a big mall and was headed up the escalator while my daughter was headed down the escalator on the opposite side of the building. We kept looking for each other, texting each other about being on the same escalator when we really weren’t, and finally figured out I was riding up while she was riding down. If we had kept that up, we would have never found each other. And that happens no matter how hard people try to make it work. Professor William Oglesby once said in a pastoral care class, “People say some marriages are made in heaven, but it appears to me that some are born in hell!” In a broken world where people are often going in opposite directions, divorce is sometimes necessary.

Some marital relationships remind me of a theory that sociologist Willard Waller discovered called the “principle of least interest.” In child-like language, the principle boils down to this: In any relationship, whoever loves the most exercises the least power, and whoever exercises the most power is exercising the least love. Imagine a marriage where one spouse, spouse A, doesn’t love spouse B very much, but spouse B loves spouse A intensely. Ask yourself: Given that arrangement, who is able to dictate the terms of the relationship? Who calls the shots? Who holds the power? The answer is obvious. Spouse B will do anything for spouse A and since Spouse A doesn’t care much for the other, spouse A is in the position of control. When one spouse holds significantly more power than the other, hell comes knocking. Invariably, I get asked at least once a year, “Who is supposed to be the head of the house? Who is supposed to run things in the home?” It is all I can do not to say, “If you were a Christian, you wouldn’t ask such a stupid question! A Christian never asks who’s going to be the master. A Christian asks who is going to be the servant. If you are a Christian, you don’t ask who’s going to be number one, you ask who’s going to be the last.” Jesus loved us so much that He was willing to give up His power and take on the form of a slave. An ideal relationship is one in which both spouses say to each other, “Honey, my dreams, my hopes, my aspirations mean nothing to me unless I can help you to become all that you can be. I will sacrifice and compromise to support you become all you can be.” It’s the only marital argument Jesus might fully support, as Philippians 2:3 tells us to “outdo one another in love.”

With such a principle in mind, Jesus calls the little children to his side. As I shared a few weeks ago, children had no power or wealth in society, they had no rights or influence. They were at the utter mercy of their guardians. So Jesus tries to teach us to enter the realm of God with the spirit of a child, not with the attitude of one in power. A child’s love is boundless for the one who takes care of them, who looks out for their best interests, who is willing to sacrifice in order that basic needs are met – this is the one that the child surrenders to in love. That child-like love is the kind of love we are called to offer to our Divine Guardian. That kind of love is what is found in the kin-dom of God. It is that kind of love that inspires an understanding and practice in self-esteem. A teacher in an inner-city school run for children from disadvantaged backgrounds once asked her 3<sup>rd</sup> grade class, “Can you name something

fantastically wonderful that didn't exist 50 years ago?" One little girl raised her hand and said, "Me!" Campolo tells a story of a little girl named Jennifer who was watching a lightning storm out her window. As the lightning was flashing and the thunder was roaring, Jennifer's dad got worried that she might be freaking out in her bedroom so he went rushing in. She was standing on the windowsill, leaning against the glass, spread-eagle. The lightning flashed again and almost immediately came the thunder. He said, "Jennifer, what are you doing?" She said, "I think God is trying to take my picture." These are kids who have a pretty good concept of who God created them to be. They know they are valuable. They know they are precious. They know what it is to live in joy, irrepressible joy. It is joy that bursts up in our lives when we go about doing good and not trying to control those around us, when we don't try to manipulate our circumstances in order to achieve joy. Joy is never within our own power to conjure up like pleasure can be, for joy often comes when we least expect it and bubbles up like a fountain from within, like the camp song says, "I've got joy like a fountain, and it flows like a fountain in my soul."

These are the child-like traits Jesus is trying to teach us hard-hearted folks, young or old. I wouldn't be authentic if I didn't clarify for you that sometimes living in a state of child-likeness has nothing to do with age, with being chronologically young. One day, two boys were playing and one asked the other, "Wouldn't you hate to wear glasses all the time?" The other responded, "Nooo, not if I had the kind of glasses Grandma wears. She always sees how to fix a lot of things, and she sees lots of fun things to do on rainy days, and she sees when people are sad or tired or worried, and what will make them feel better, and she always sees what you mean to do even if you haven't gotten things just right, and she sees how to love me even when I don't love myself. I asked her once how she could see that way all the time, and she said it was the way she learned to look at things as she grew older. So it must be her glasses." No matter your age, Jesus says, "Become as little children, see with the eyes of a child, rediscover your sense of joy and worth... and enter the grace-filled, unfolding kingdom of God." Amen.