

Let the children come unto me, for to such belong the kingdom of God. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it."

What in the world does Jesus mean? Jesus, as he often does, has not given us a clear answer. It's something he wants us to ponder, to wrestle with. Because that's the way Jesus often taught. We might want to live in a black and white spiritual world, with no grays, we might want to live in a spiritual world in which right and wrong are easily decided and wrong harshly condemned, but Jesus is not always this kind of teacher.

And maybe I should back up just a little, and set the scene for us. Let's go through this entire passage verse by

verse. A little tedious, perhaps, but at least you'll know when I'm about finished.

MK 10:13 People were bringing little children to Jesus to have him touch them, but the disciples rebuked them. 14 When Jesus saw this, he was indignant.

Rap stars and rock stars and basketball stars have posses. Friends and bodyguards who surround them so that the little people won't bother the celebrity. Well, Jesus didn't have a posse. He had disciples – people he was teaching to be like him, think like him, act like him.

And today the disciples aren't doing so well. The disciples thought they were doing the right thing: keeping people away from Jesus. "Don't bother the Master, he's busy."

“Don’t invade our space, he’s teaching us.” Something like that.

Such behavior made, and makes Jesus indignant. Not at those would dare to ask Jesus to touch their children, but at those who would keep them away. Folks, we who are believers are the modern-day disciples. And folks, as disciples our job is never to keep people away from Jesus, but always to bring people to Jesus.

There are plenty of people leading desperate and difficult lives. People who could stand to be touched with the redeeming, reconciling, cleansing love of Jesus Christ. People who will not have hope until they have hope in Christ.

And Jesus will be indignant with us if we act like his posse and keep these people away.

But we do. I wonder when it was that disciples, church members, began to think of themselves as gatekeepers, keeping the undesirables away from blessed saints. But that's not what we are called to do. There are churches where if you drink alcohol, you aren't welcome. There are churches where if you have on a military uniform, you're not welcome. Or if you're not dressed just right. Or if you have a tattoo showing. There are churches where if you are the wrong gender, don't try to be a church leader.

We sometimes think our highest calling is to lead moral lives, to be good moral examples. And, folks, this IS

important, because when we as Christians are immoral, then we mock the very Christ we serve. But at the same time, our highest calling is NOT to condemn sin, but rather to offer others the touch of Jesus' love. Jesus become indignant when we think we are so righteous that we must close the doors of our heart or church to someone else.

I find something very simple and very moving about the hopes of those who brought the children. They just wanted Jesus to touch the children. Touch. Love. Caring. That's the most basic, and perhaps most important aspect of our relationship with Jesus. Doctrine is important. And good morals are important. But it all begins with knowing that Jesus loves us. That he touches us with his life-redeeming, life-affirming love.

And now since this is a day we baptize a baby and celebrate our preschool, I want to say that this is why our preschool exists. To touch children (and even their parents) with the love of Jesus Christ. When a child comes to preschool, and leaves to go home, if that child has felt welcomed and wanted, if that child has learned that she or he is special, even if she can't draw correctly or even if there is a two-year old accident, then we have succeeded in our calling. The calling of our preschool is not to give the kids a head start on getting to Harvard, but a head start in getting to know Jesus' life giving, life affirming love.

And it's not just the rule for preschool. It is true for our church. I hope that everyone, stranger, first-time visitor, or oldest rat in the barn, is touched with the love of Christ each and every time she or he comes to church. It's a covenant, a promise, that we must keep for one another.

And parents, it's your task as well. Your children are the greatest responsibility God will ever give you. And indeed discipline is important. Don't be afraid to set limits and stick to them. You aren't on earth to be your toddler or teenager's best friend. You are here to teach, to set limits (and of course their job is to test limits, which is where all the fun begins.) Free Advice: "Because I said so" works.

At the same time, what the child needs to know most from you is love. A child needs to earn our trust, needs to earn greater responsibility, needs to earn good grades, needs perhaps even to earn an allowance. But a child must never be in the position of earning our love. Love must be a given. Always. And through the touch of our love, children even begin to understand the touch of Jesus' love.

Speaking of which. Now, we can imagine that the people who were bringing the children to Jesus might well have been women. Then, and now, women tend to be the primary caregivers to children. Did the disciples shoo them away because they were women, and therefore

unworthy of the Master's time? Perhaps. In any case, they told the people to get lost, they and their children.

But Jesus has different ideas about how disciples should act. Let the children come to me. Jesus' way is the way of extravagant, welcoming, love. Disciples, don't set limits. Don't be a posse keeping folks away from me. Find them, bring them.

So, then, Jesus has become indignant at his disciples for daring to keep people away from him. He makes his point clear. ***I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.***"

Now, here's where it's a little more difficult to understand exactly what Jesus is saying. This Kingdom of God. It means eternal life, but it also means experiencing the presence and power of God in this life. So, then, what does it mean to enter the kingdom like a child?

Let me state first what I think it does not mean. Some have said, it means to accept without questioning. Come again? Children do nothing but question. No, to accept the kingdom like children is to ask more questions, now fewer, it seems to me.

Others have said: to accept it simply. Not to delve deeply into questions about God and faith and life. But the Scriptures demand a certain maturity from us. St. Paul implores the folks in Corinth to grow in faith: **1CO 3:1**

Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly--mere infants in Christ. 2 I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. . . . No, there are complicated issues out there, and Kingdom Christians must face them, not as children, but as adults.

Others have said: to accept the Kingdom like children is to be innocent, and gentle. Are you kidding me? Have you never met a two-year old? They can be as cruel and nasty as any creature ever created. And besides, Jesus spent his ministry reaching out to the not-so-innocent: tax collectors and adulterers alike were made welcome, along with soldiers of the occupying army.

No, I think to accept the kingdom like a child means to accept it as a gift, something we cannot earn and might

not really deserve. Now, in our society, children are rightly regarded as precious. But in Jesus' day, they were at the very bottom of the social ladder. They had no claim on Jesus' love, no right to receive it. Except, that Jesus wanted them and invited them.

That's how you and I must accept the kingdom. Realizing that we haven't earned it. And not trusting in our own goodness, for when we do, then we think that we are so good we have the right to keep others away, which as we know is what makes Jesus really, really, indignant.

So, that's about what I wanted to say this morning. Know that Jesus loves you and wants you in his kingdom. Accept that you are accepted.

Oh, and the final verse of our Scripture this morning.

And he took the children in his arms, put his hands on them and blessed them.

May we be a church which acts like that to children of all ages, no matter who they are, no matter what their sins, no matter what their possibilities. Amen.