

Date: October 5, 2003

SUNDAY: Ordinary 27–World Communion

SERMON: Let the Children Come

Text(s): Hebrews 1:1-4, ; Mark 10:13-16

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I'd guess that many of us are familiar with the comic strip "Calvin and Hobbes." It's the one featuring the six year-old boy Calvin and his imaginary playmate, his stuffed tiger, Hobbes. Calvin is one of those children, who could have inspired the late W.C. Fields to make his famous remark that anyone who hates dogs and children can't be all bad. The cartoonist who wrote that strip must either have been Calvin himself at one time, or else he's the long-suffering parent of Calvin. In one of those strips, Calvin says to Hobbes, "I believe history is a force. Its unalterable tide sweeps all people and institutions along its unrelenting path. Everything and everyone serves history's single purpose." Hobbes asks, "And what is that purpose?" "Why to produce me of course!" Calvin says, "All history up to this point has been spent preparing the world for my presence." Hobbes's reply to this stunning insight is, "Hmm. 4½ billion years probably wasn't long enough."

One can only wonder if Calvin had been one of the children being brought to Jesus that day, in the passage that is our Gospel lesson for today, whether he would have been quite so eager to welcome them. He might have given the disciples a medal instead of a rebuke for their efforts to keep the children away from him.

When you heard the Gospel lesson this morning, if you wondered "Didn't we just read this text about children two weeks ago?" the answer is, well, not really, but sort of. It's part of Mark's literary technique in this section of his gospel that he doubles up on some stories or groups of Jesus' sayings. He does this consciously, I believe, in order to intensify the points he is making. So he told us about the disciples arguing among themselves about who was the greatest, and then had Jesus use a child as an example of how the disciples are to conduct

themselves. That was what we looked at two weeks ago. In today's lesson, he has introduced this story about people bringing their children to Jesus and his statement that anyone who does not become like a child will not enter the kingdom of God. He will set this in contrast with the story, a few paragraphs later, when James and John come to him with their ambition to hold the highest rank in the kingdom of God.

In the context of this middle section of Mark's Gospel, Jesus is depicted putting his followers through a school of discipleship. It's a school in which they are running a grade-point average of, at best, about a C-. We can get a clue to the importance Mark attaches to this section by the fact that he repeats or tells parallel stories to intensify his points.

As we saw a couple of weeks ago, Jesus' statements about children were not made in a society in which children were recognized as persons in their own right, as needing to be defended and protected by laws against child pornography or child abuse or from being exploited as a source of cheap labor. In pre-modern, rural societies, children, while no doubt loved by their families as much as children in our families, nevertheless were not accorded the status of personhood. At best they were economic units, a burden in most cases until they reached adulthood and became the social security system for their parents. And certainly while they were dependent children, they were of no more value than a good laying hen or a goat who was a prolific breeder.

We don't even have to go back to first-century Palestine for evidence of this. It's not been many years ago in the modern West that children's status has changed to what it is today. One only has to recall the photo essays by Lewis Hine and others produced back in the 1930's. Their subjects were children working in factories. I remember one especially poignant picture Hine took of a ten-year old girl in a textile mill, standing beside a giant loom, and looking solemnly into the camera. Even now, she is a witness to the fact that sixty years ago in this

country too, children were seen primarily as units of economic value, both by their families who sent them out to work and by the manufacturers who employed them.

The National Center for Children in Poverty at Columbia University reports that in 2001, 16% of American children live below the federal government's poverty line, 7% of them classified as living in extreme poverty. 38% more of them live in low income families where the family income is not sufficient for all of the basic necessities of life. Combining low-income and below-poverty line children together, over 52% of our children fall into that category, making children the largest group of poor people in this country.

If we took those statistics with the seriousness they deserve to be taken, we would be as shocked by Jesus' statement as the disciples were. *"Let the little ones come to me, 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 like a child can never enter it."*

No, I don't think Jesus is talking about the cuteness and innocence and liveliness of children, appealing as these qualities may be to our modern sensibilities. Rather, he's speaking of the vulnerability, the powerlessness, and the trusting dependence of children as the very qualities that characterize human relationships as God intends them to be— what Mark calls the Kingdom of God. And that is a radically shocking statement, because it tells us at least as much about God as it does about children. If the kingdom of God, or to put it another way, the realm in which God's will governs all human relationships, is not the inheritance of the proudly self-sufficient or the rich and powerful, the movers and shakers of this world, or even the self-satisfied and comfortably insulated middle class, but is the inheritance of those who are of no account, no value, no power, no accomplishments, then the world is turned upside down and topsy-turvy.

A Jesus who only urged people to be

more spontaneous, more trusting, more open like children would not have been a threat to anyone? Who could possibly be threatened by that? But a Jesus who takes the side of the powerless, a Jesus who preaches interdependence rather than independent self-sufficiency, a Jesus who tells people that unless they are willing to stop playing the world's power games, they will never see the kingdom of God, that Jesus is a dangerous maniac who has to be stopped.

Power. That's what makes the world go round, is it not? Getting power and using it is the name of the game. That's why we're always hustling to get more money, not because we can't live without a driving a Hummer or building a 7000 square foot house, but because money represents power. The more money we have the more we feel we are in control of our own lives, or at least feed the illusion that we're in control. And attempting to control our own lives usually involves manipulating or controlling other people too.

Nor is it only money that reveals our obsession with power. It's all the other stuff too— like the politics that goes on in the university over faculty ranking and tenure, the politics in the church that sets one pastor against another in the quest for a bigger and more prestigious appointment, the smile-on-the-face, knife-in-the-back games that go on in every company as people climb the ladder. It's all about power. Those who get it, use it. Those who don't get it, get used.

That's what this episode with Jesus and the children is all about— it's a recipe for finding our way out of the deadly spiral of abusive power and violence and exploitation in which we are always getting ourselves trapped by our need to be in control, to try to secure ourselves against the vicissitudes and hazards of life.

To the powerful—to those who have power and use it to control others, Jesus' call to discipleship is a hard call, but one which offers freedom. To the powerful, he says, *"Whoever*

wants to enter the kingdom of God must become like a child.” One of my most respected colleagues said that in the church today, we ask people when they're baptized or confirmed if they “believe” in Jesus, and we don't ask them if they're willing to “follow” Jesus. And that's really the primary question. Anyone can believe, but if the belief is to be more than mere intellectual assent, it has to get down into our motives and commitments. It has to reveal itself in our following of Jesus. What does it mean to follow Jesus. Simply that we go where he goes. And where is he going?

Carlo Caretto, in his book *I, Francis*, a wonderful, imaginative re-telling of the story of St. Francis of Assisi, lays it out for us. He has Francis speak in the first person of his own “embrace of the madness, the saving madness of the Gospel.” And then he goes on to describe what that “saving madness” is:

The struggle against injustices and outrages, especially those committed against the poor and defenseless, is basic Christianity, and Christians are not permitted to be silent, to withdraw, to refuse to get involved. If they understood, really understood, they would volunteer to die for justice. That is what Jesus did.

The way out of the power game is to take the side of the powerless, to enter into their struggles, and by doing so, find freedom for ourselves.

But while using money or status or position to control others is a temptation for all of us, there are many others of us who don't feel particularly powerful; we already feel like those powerless children who are of no social value except as we serve the agendas of those with more power.

Every one of us has, at one time or another, been the victim of abusive power. It may very well have been a childhood experience of sexual or physical abuse. It may be the experience of being a battered spouse or partner.

It may be the experience of economic poverty, where no matter how hard we work, we just can't seem to get out of the hole we're in, and we feel worthless. It may be the experience of having been fired from a job and the feelings of insecurity and loss of self-esteem that accompany that experience. It may be any number of things. The experience of being powerless is one that virtually every person has had or will have at one time or another. Jesus says it's to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs--not to the abusers of power, but to the abused. And Jesus himself has identified with us in our powerlessness, even to the point of sharing our human experience of death. Jesus himself, in his total identification with us, is the very speaking voice of God. That's what our epistle writer is getting at when he says, “*In these latter days, God has spoken to us by a Son.*” He goes on to say that this child, Jesus, “*is the reflection of God's glory, the exact imprint of God's nature,*” and that his powerful word sustains the whole creation. But in the next breath, he defines the shape of that power a bit differently. Christ is “*crowned with glory and honor,*” not because of his role in creation, but “*because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.*” That's a rather different image of power and glory than the one we normally envision, isn't it? It is because of Jesus' laying aside of claims on power, because of his willingness to identify with the powerless of this world, the victims of power, the poor, the children, that God has vindicated him by raising him from the dead and giving him glory, and that therefore, he is “*not ashamed to call us his brothers and sisters.*” Those who suffer from abusive power may find it a great source of comfort and hope to know that Jesus is not ashamed to call them his brothers and sisters.

On this World Communion Sunday, we remember that we are part of a worldwide family of people who are in training, learning that God's way with the world is not the way of the powerful, the mighty, the arrogant, or the violent.

God's way is the way of the child— the way of powerlessness, vulnerability, trusting dependence, and humility. And as we gather around the family table we call ourselves and all those whom we name brothers and sisters, to a more faithful following of the One who "*tasted death for us all,*" and who now calls us to follow him on that path of self-giving service to others.