

Carol M. Strickland
 First Presbyterian Church of Athens, Georgia
 4th Sunday of Easter, Weekday School 50th Anniversary Sunday, May 7, 2017
 Text: Mark 10:13-16

Such As These

At a former church of mine in the children's Sunday school wing, there's an oil painting of this scene by one of the members. Jesus, with a smile wide enough for a toothpaste ad, is surrounded by kids. Red, brown, yellow, black and white, precious in his sight, they are in his lap, embraced by his encompassing arms, nestled at his feet.

But if the painter had captured the scene just a few minutes before Jesus would have been standing arms akimbo, eyebrows knit, and sparks flying from his steely eyes. He was mad! Yes, Jesus gets angry.ⁱ He's indignant that his disciples were preventing children from coming to him.

Jesus valued children in an age when they were not valued. In Greco-Roman society children were nobodies. Paul in the letter to the Galatians says they are no better than slaves.ⁱⁱ But Jesus took them seriously. Fortunately, we've learned that lesson, or mostly learned it. There is still much work to be done to improve children's welfare in our world. But I'm proud to say that the Presbyterian Church has a fine tradition of educating children, as well as all kinds of programs to help poor, sick, at-risk, disabled, and abused children. Today we celebrate our Weekday School's 50th anniversary—a wonderful ministry to the children of this community for generations, as we've heard. As a congregation we support many other ministries that nurture children and youth. We do value children.

It angered Jesus to see his disciples putting a roadblock in the way of children. Just a chapter before when he was with the twelve he called a child into their midst. Taking the child in his arms he told them, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name, welcomes me."ⁱⁱⁱ Not long after he said, "If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea!"^{iv}

Yet there they were, these slow-witted disciples that never seem to catch on, barring the children from Jesus. Especially in the Gospel of Mark they are, as one wag dubbed them, the "duh-sciples." There they were speaking sternly and turning away the little ones whose parents were bringing them to Jesus for a blessing.

Kids get turned away from enough as it is:

Sorry, you're not tall enough to ride the roller coaster.

Sorry, you didn't make the baseball team.

Sorry, you weren't invited to the party.

We all have that inner child who can remember being excluded. We all have that inner child who is vulnerable and easily hurt. Even when you're sixty years old and your mother dies, you cry.

We also all have that inner disciple who speaks sternly to our inner child:

You're not smart enough.

You're not attractive enough.

You're not experienced, qualified, faithful, worthy enough.

Our inner disciple draws lines, determining who's in and who's out, setting limits on God's grace. Our inner disciple is the resident "husher" as one tyke called the man at the church door with the bulletins. "Shhh! Don't make a fuss. Don't bother Jesus. He's too busy tending to important folks who need him more, understand him better, and follow him more closely than you."

To this inner disciple who has the false idea that somehow you have to achieve your way into God's favor, that your worth is equal to your bank account, and that your listing (or not) in *Who's Who* makes a difference, Jesus says, "Quit judging. Quit excluding. Quit playing God. It's my party and I'm inviting everyone. Bring on the children, for it's to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs." He goes on to say, "Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it."

So we need to be childlike. To participate in the reality Jesus came to proclaim, we need to be childlike. We need to be as totally dependent on God as a child is totally dependent on grownups. What could be a better picture of such trust than a nursing baby or a toddler asleep in his dad's lap? We need to be as humble in the world's eyes as a kindergartener who neither holds down a job, drives a car, or has diplomas on her wall. Jesus intends us to be as receptive as a wide-eyed kid soaking up a fairy tale, as eager as another with a brush and jar of orange paint, as thrilled as a six-year-old finding a shiny red bicycle under the Christmas tree. Whoever isn't childlike hasn't got a clue about life as God means it to be.

On the other hand, children are not only childlike but childish. My family has been taking an annual beach trip for the last 35 years or so. There are, of course, the obligatory photographs. My favorite is the one of the then eight grandchildren. They are lined up on a bench on the deck. From the twelve year boy down the line to the seven month old baby, to a kid, they are all crying. These three had just been fighting over a boogie board. This one needed a nap. Another was hungry. Another sunburned. One wanted to sit in a different spot. And one just hollered because that's what all the others were doing. Red faces, hot tears, selfish, needy, emotionally honest, vulnerable--that's what it is to be a child--childish as well as childlike--even a child of God, especially a child of God. Innocent as an angel or pitching fits--there's nothing we can do to make God love us or not love us. Realizing this is the key to the kingdom. We simply belong to God, like a child simply belongs to a family. God's world is our home; we are not outsiders or second class citizens, not barred from the door, but welcomed in.

As you've noticed, today is a Communion Sunday. On Maundy Thursday our session formally welcomed our first and second graders to the Lord's Table. They have been reading a book about Communion with their parents and are beginning to understand that it's not just a tea party but a sacrament where we meet God in the bread and wine. Granted, they don't understand it all. But *I* don't understand it all. It's a holy mystery. And one of the beauties of it is that it's not an intellectual concept but an experience—you taste and see, smell and touch the elements. And children can certainly do that, and may even be better at it than those of us inured after so many years. Children here are welcome at this Table, at Jesus' Table.

But it wasn't always so. I know it wasn't when I was growing up. You couldn't take Communion until you had gone through Communicants' Class when you were fourteen and joined the church. Nowadays we've got it straight. You join the church when you are baptized and declared part of the family and therefore take part in our family meals, i.e. the Lord's Supper.

Anyway, Mardee Rightmyer, who led our women's retreat two weeks ago, grew up in the same era as I. Her father was a pastor and her mother sang in the choir, so she was permitted to sit in church with anyone she chose. She always chose an older couple whom she adored named

Gates. They sat on the left side a few pews from the front. The husband was a genial ob gyn and clerk of session (for life in those days). The wife was soft and warm. On Communion Sundays Mrs. Gates would pull out a stick of Wrigley's gum. After unwrapping it, she would take the shiny rectangle of foil and wrap it around her little finger, making a tiny cylinder. Then she would, half way down, put a twist in the cylinder and splay out one end into a disc, thus making a perfect little silver chalice. She would hand this, together with the beige stick of gum to Mardee, bread and cup, so she could pretend to take Communion.

Mardee went on to tell us that years later, in her twenties, she was wrestling with identity issues. She wanted to get as far as possible from home to sort things out with God. So she went to Korea as a missionary. When she got there she was terribly homesick. She didn't speak the language. She knew no one. She felt totally out of place. So she went to church. She sat on the left side a few pews from the front. It was a Communion Sunday. When the pastor began the Communion liturgy she looked down the pew and, lo and behold, there was a Korean mother wrapping a piece of foil from a stick of chewing gum around her little finger, making a little silver chalice for her daughter. And Mardee thought, "I am home. I do belong. I am God's child, even here."

You, too, are a child of God. You are welcomed, loved, and blessed. Trust this and you have the keys to the kingdom. To God be the glory!

ⁱ In Mark already we've seen Jesus exasperated at the Pharisees' reaction to his healing a man's withered hand on the sabbath. Later we will see him in the temple overturn the tables of the moneychangers who were turning a place of worship into a commercial enterprise

ⁱⁱ Gal. 4:1

ⁱⁱⁱ Mark 9:37

^{iv} Mark 9:42