

Sermon 11-13-22

Paul Purdue preaching

We stood there in front of Big Thunder Mountain Railroad at Disney World, listening to our youngest pleading for a chance to ride a real roller coaster.. We had ridden Goofy's Barnstormer 70X7 times. The sign declared, "You must be this tall to ride this ride." Even cheating up on his heels, Caleb stood an inch short, but his pleading won out and we risked an emotional derailment falling into the 22 minute line. Near the loading shoot, a smiling young cowpoke greeted us with a measuring rod in her hand. Caleb turned on the charm, stretched upward towards the mark, as we braced for disaster. The cowpoke slid one of Caleb's long floppy curls between her fingers and stretched it over the 40-inch line and with a smile waved us onto the ride. How beautiful it is to be included, and if you need a little extra grace to get in, well that makes the welcome feel richer, deeper, and holier.

So, what were the disciples thinking when they tried to turn back parents bringing their children to Jesus for a blessing? Unlike our generous cowpoke, Mark tells us the disciples scolded the parents. Did the disciples think Jesus was too busy or important to hold a baby or chat with a toddler? Would the children not sit quietly in the pews? It is odd how comfortable we disciples get speaking for God, when the Holy Spirit has a way of flipping over tables, altering our agendas, and rewriting well-rehearsed scripts.

Unsurprisingly, the disciples avoid directly confronting Jesus, instead choosing triangulation to work around Jesus and use their borrowed power to exert control over less powerful people. Seeing the disciples excluding children, Jesus grew angry, or indignant, and rebuked the disciples. We preachers often gloss over an angry Jesus because Jesus mostly gets mad at church leaders and politicians like us. Mark's Jesus gets mad at people, systems, and churches that place forms, formulas, and formalities over people who are vulnerable, excluded, or in need. Jesus' rebuke is a cautionary tale for all church doorkeepers.

Jesus does not dwell long in indignation. Mark does not even mention Jesus' specific rebuke lest we make a rule about that one kind of infraction and ignore the inhospitable motives lurking within our hearts. Jesus quickly refocuses us on the vulnerable, *"Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, because God's kingdom belongs to people like these children."*

And then before returning to chatting with toddlers, Jesus tosses us a zinger, *"I assure you that whoever doesn't welcome God's kingdom like a child, will never enter it."*

Jesus gives us a playful riddle or puzzling parable. *What does it mean to welcome God's kingdom as a child?* It is kind of odd that Jesus gives us a word puzzle as an entrance requirement for heaven or God's kin-dom on earth. Jesus' entrance exam does not feature theological fill-in-the-blanks or specific magical words, it reads more like those vexing open-ended college admission essay questions, "How do you welcome God's kin-dom like a child?"

Scholars, poets, and preachers have many ideas about what it means to welcome the kingdom of God like a little child. Some speak of the powerlessness and vulnerability of children in Jesus' and our day. Good answer! Jesus tells us whenever we feed, shelter, or welcome people, we welcome Jesus. Maybe we must be vulnerable to ride with Jesus. Others think welcoming God's Kin-dom like a child means tapping into that sense of God-given creativity, possibility, and imagination. Others unpack this entrance exam riddle by turning to children's playfulness and their ability to be present in the moment. When our children were little, we went to the beach

each summer. Invariably Caleb slipped into what we called “Caleb World;” he would sit on the edge of waves running wet sand through his fingers and if you listened carefully, you could hear Caleb in a sing-song conversation with the sea. Lewis and I built castles, played catch, and organized other fun, while Connie read her book. However, no one could get into Caleb World but Caleb. If you came and sat by Caleb’s watery cathedral, Caleb would move his aquatic tabernacle a few feet and resume communion with the sea. If you asked, “what are you doing?” Caleb smiled with happy bewilderment that made you wonder what mysteries you were missing. After an hour or two, Caleb would jump and run to our blanket smiling as if he had opened heaven’s cookie jar and was now ready to rejoin planet earth. Maybe we only enter God’s kin-dom when we lose ourselves in the ocean, the universe, the moment, the music, the mission, the work, the welcoming of strangers, feeding hungry people or offering forgiveness. Jesus tells us we must deny ourselves, lose our idols, and die to everything but love to truly find life. (Mark 8) To be content in a moment and connected to God may be the way we know we have entered God’s kin-dom. (Philippians 4)

Perhaps, the defining characteristic of childhood is growth. Our bodies and minds begin developing before birth and continue growing until about age 25. A baby’s brain doubles in the first year. A two-year old makes complex neural connections that link emotions and experiences into what will become thought and language. A group of kindergarteners might commandeer a 64 pack of toilet paper and create a winter wonderland in your parsonage basement complete with a foot of papery snow, only to raid the main floor’s pleasant conversations like hobbits deftly dodging any hands that might end their fun and zapping unseen enemies. Such play seems simple, but million-dollar robots struggle to traverse a cocktail party, much less learning to distinguish safe smiles from game-ending scowls or creating a complex role-playing game with lint-roller magic wands. In early adolescence, biological changes in the body begin to release new neurochemicals that cause our brains to rewire- yes, rewire- and move past simple concrete thinking into greater abstraction. God-given chemical changes around ages 15-17 naturally foster risky behavior and identity formation. Should we not offer the most grace to these young people? If we gaze upon it: human development evokes praise, wonder, and humility!

Like childhood, faith is a time of growing: a between times space. We live in the in-between of heaven and earth, We rejoice that Christ is with us right now- but we know we have not become all that love can make us. We trust in God’s love, but we believe one day Perfect Love will set all things right. (1 Corinthians 13) Maybe we enter God’s kin-dom when we place ourselves in the grip of a Love bigger than ourselves. Maybe to enter God’s kingdom, we must open our bodies, minds, and souls to growing, changing, and learning? Growth is necessary in childhood and Christlikeness.

Jesus grew up in a Jewish faith tradition that marked the movement into adult moral and ethical responsibility around the age of 12 with a kind of bat-bar mitzvah. Our confirmation mirrors that time-line. Jesus was 12 when he went to the Jerusalem temple, amazing the teachers with his insights and knowledge, but then getting lost in the moment and sending Mary and Joseph into a panic. These bat and bar mitzvah celebrations not only marked one’s obligation to observe the commandments carried but the expectation that the child would fully participate in the community’s rituals as full members. Jesus was likely thinking of children under the age of 12 when he says, “I assure you that whoever doesn’t welcome God’s kingdom like a child will never enter it.”

If you ask children who are concrete thinkers what is a scientist, they will answer someone who does science or knows their way around a telescope or microscope! What makes someone a

doctor? A person who helps sick people. What is a Christian? Someone who acts like Christ. How do we enter the kingdom of God? Act like Jesus! Live like Jesus! Shine God's light into the world with good works! How do you enter God's kin-dom? Try acting like Jesus, read what Jesus taught and did and then engage in a little divine imagination- try some Christ-like role playing. If Thanksgiving with the in-laws or grandkids gets a little ugly, pause and imagine Jesus: what might Jesus say, not say, do, or not do? It's complicated so be careful before flipping over any tables- Jesus did that once! Be inventive, imaginative, creative, love your enemies, pray for your persecutors, welcome prodigals, be generous with sinners, tell the truth...it's complicated- but with playful reimagining you may find new ways to bring peace, justice and healing. Let your light shine- dress up and act like Jesus!

"We can only enter God's kingdom like a child" How do you understand Jesus' entrance riddle? Are we present in the moment, vulnerable, ready to grow, open to love, asking questions and dwelling in wonder? Jesus' riddle is pretty open ended. It resists formulas, but I am pretty sure no matter what it takes to begin your journey into Christ's Kin-dom, being a Christian involves acting like Christ. So let us come as children and with some divine imagination dream up a more Christlike world. Amen.