

Like Children

Mark 9:33-37; Mark 10:13-16

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First Presbyterian, Luling

Sometimes it takes us a little longer to learn a lesson than would be ideal. I remember several years ago, that I put a bunch of potato peels and carrot peels down the disposal. It clogged things up. I plunged it, to little success. I ended up having to crawl under the sink and take things apart and pull out the potato and carrot peels along with all the other gunk in the drain pipes. Then I couldn't get it back together and had to call in reinforcements. You might think I learned the lesson not to put potato and carrot peels down the disposal. I did not.

It's so convenient, you see. Several months later. Potato peels and carrot peels in the sink. I'm in a hurry. I shove them down the garbage disposal a little too fast. I think to myself, "Well, it seems to be working this time. Then I feel water on my foot. I have no idea what happened inside that garbage disposal, but water was coming out the bottom of the motor part, where water is not even supposed to be. We had to get a new garbage disposal. All because I didn't learn anything the first time, which was probably not even the first time. I seem to remember this lesson happening over and over and over again.

And that was a lesson with real, immediate, negative consequences. Think how much slower learners we tend to be with lessons that have longer term consequences.

Thank goodness, we are not the first slow learners. The disciples weren't too swift themselves. They are famous in the Gospel of Mark for not understanding that Jesus was the Messiah. But that's not all they didn't understand.

Today's two passages from Mark are a good example. They are about 25 verses apart, and yet the disciples have not understood, or not heeded, or not learned, the lesson Jesus teaches them in the first.

Jesus is pretty clear in the verses from chapter 9. The disciples are arguing about who is the greatest. They're embarrassed about it and don't to tell Jesus that's what they've been talking about, but he knows anyway. He says whoever wants to be first must be the last of all and the servant of all. And then he demonstrates what he means using a child. A child had the least status of anyone in the ancient world. Children had no rights and no status. They were loved by their families, of course, but children couldn't do anything for anyone, couldn't help advance anyone in their standing, and so they weren't valued or honored. So Jesus takes the person of least social status there could possibly be and says: "whoever welcomes a child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me." It's pretty clear. Welcoming children is what Jesus does, and it's what Jesus's followers are supposed to do. And more than just supposed to do, but it's supposed to be an honor and a mark of discipleship, to welcome children, to welcome those who are considered unimportant.

Twenty five verses later. People were bringing little children to Jesus. It is clear that Jesus welcomes children. Jesus made it clear, it was a lesson, it was not confusing in any way, that Jesus expected his disciples to welcome children. But they didn't. They were speaking sternly, to get rid of the children. They didn't learn the lesson. They put the potato peels down the disposal again. Jesus loses his temper a little bit—he is "indignant," a bit put out. He says virtually the same thing he just said to them, in the hopes they'll get it the second time around: "Let the little children come to me. Do not stop them, for it is to such as these that the kingdom belongs."

"Such as these." I don't think he means just children. I think he means those that are judged as worthless and of little value by the culture around them. The kingdom of God is an upside down place, he's already told the disciples, where whoever wants to be first will have to be last and be a servant of

all. Those who are last and servants are judged as worthless and of little value. But it is to “such as these” that the kingdom belongs.

And then we come to this verse: Jesus continues on to say “Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” We almost always read that to say “whoever does not receive the kingdom as a little child would receive it will never enter it.” So we then end up with sermons about childlike faith and becoming like children to enter the kingdom. That’s all probably good news for us to hear, and helpful for us to follow.

But in my reading this week of people smarter with Greek than I am, I learned that it is equally plausible to read it differently: “whoever does not receive the kingdom as they would receive a child will never enter it.” So the emphasis is not on the child’s actions or attitudes, but on the person receiving the child, which is exactly what Jesus has been talking about up to this point, both in chapter 9 and in chapter 10: how his disciples—and us—are supposed to receive children, are supposed to receive those who are considered worthless. We’re supposed to welcome them even though they can’t help us get ahead in the world, even though it might cost us some social status or street cred to do so. Because this has been Jesus’s consistent instruction to the slow learner disciples over these two passages, I think it is good for us to read it this way. That we are to receive the kingdom as we would receive a child—without reservation, without expectation that we’ll get something out of it, in fact with the expectation that it might cost us something.

That is precisely the way God in Jesus Christ welcomes us: without reservation, without the need or expectation that God will gain something out of the relationship, with the expectation that we’ll end up costing God something, which we do. It’s the way of the kingdom, the way of grace. And so it’s clear that welcoming the kingdom in the same way, in the way of grace, that welcoming the children of God with that same grace, is the way of the kingdom, too. That’s a lesson we learn over and over, with both awe at a daunting task and gratitude for having been welcomed.