

The Rev. Dennis J. Reid

A Sermon for the Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B (Stewardship Sunday) | Mark 10:2-16

St. Alban's Church, Sinking Spring, PA

October 7th 2018

In the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

I've always thought it odd that in today's Gospel reading, those who put the lectionary together decided that we would get both Jesus' words on divorce and then what seems to be a completely separate scene with a child and some words about God's kingdom. Certainly these things *could* have happened at the same time, that Jesus would be having a serious conversation about divorce one minute and then have a crowd of folks bringing their children to him the next. But even though marriage often leads to having children, these topics seem so unrelated -- the talk about divorce being difficult and leaving the Pharisees scratching their heads while the blessing of the little children would have been joyful and charming.

But as always, perhaps we can look to Mark's Gospel and see Jesus connecting themes that we normally wouldn't, themes that might show up elsewhere in our lives, like using childlike joy to help us understand something deeper about the truth of God -- that to see what God intends for our relationships, for our marriages, and how we relate to one another, the best way to see that in our world is in children; that they are often friendly, trusting, and ready to give a smile. When they are at play or with those they love, their hearts are unencumbered by any weight or any worry, and it isn't hard to see their joy and energy transform their faces. There's really nothing that matches it. So when Jesus introduces a young child into the proceedings today and says "whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it," I imagine he's asking his audience to be just like that, to be childlike, carefree, and joyful in order to know what God's kingdom is like and especially what relationships in God's kingdom are meant to be like.

This kind of joy, this childlike lens into the world, is a quality that Jesus calls us to, and you could see why! Little children must see the world so differently than we do as adults -- there's no worrying about status, or jobs, or money, or politics, or anything else like that. Each day brings new questions, new opportunities, new life -- 'what will I play with today?' or 'where can I go explore today?' or 'who can I wave to today?' And yet, I'm not sure Jesus brings the example of children into his teaching only for the sake of the fun stuff. Because no matter who we are, we will grow up, and we grow up into life's little joys in other ways. New responsibilities. New experiences. Maturing into new emotions. It's amazing to watch young people wonder, inquire, to find purpose in new experiences, and to grow into the people God is calling them to be because they are like tiny windows into God's kingdom: living without fear, playing without worry, loving without doubt.

There's something else about children that I can't help but notice as a new father. The hearts of children very typically are ready and willing to give -- whenever Lydia is eating, she'll offer me some of her own food with absolutely no regard for herself or if she's still hungry. Her cousin Declan is the same way -- when we visit with him he doesn't just go off on his own to play with his own things, he invites us in, shows us what he's doing, and wants us to join in, wants us to enjoy what is his, giving us a chance to do it with him, to share in his joy.

The hearts of the children of God are no different, or at least that is what Jesus would show us about life in his kingdom -- that's how Jesus transforms our thinking into seeing generosity in a new way. As Christians, we believe that it is the power of God to transform us, to shape things, to make and create things, and to help things be formed anew. In Ezekiel, God had to do this with the people of Israel, that like the Pharisees in Mark's Gospel, their hearts had been hardened, unable to feel as they once had. So long ago, God transformed them; God told the people of Israel that instead of hearts of stone, God would give the people new hearts, hearts of flesh, hearts to feel, hearts to remember what it was like to feel childlike emotion by our love for one another, by pity for those who were in need, by giving without fear.

To be like children is such a good reminder for us all as we begin our Stewardship month of "*Transforming Generosity*" because it doesn't take much for our hearts to be hardened, or for events of our world to make us believe there is no way forward. Jesus knew this, I believe -- knew that we needed to be reminded of what life in his kingdom was really all about. Because otherwise, our responsibilities turn into burdens without joy. The energy that our work can give us when it's fulfilling instead makes us tired and weary when it lacks purpose. And giving in a way that is generous seems impossible when we start from a place of fear and scarcity.

Instead, we will consider what it means for us to be good stewards, and thinking on God's kingdom as children is a good place to begin. You may have seen the pictures on our facebook page -- I've been spending more time in our Learning Center lately, mostly playing some songs with them and reading some Bible stories -- it's been a lot of fun, but it's their reactions that really make me smile. They are so willing to give of themselves -- to help me tell the stories, eager to tell me what happens next or how they can tell others the words of the songs. I can't help but wonder how I would give were I like them -- if I had the same energy they did to try something new, to go out on a limb for the sake of something good, to dedicate their efforts to helping others. These are all things that I've seen happen here at St. Alban's, too -- that so often people come to me with great energy and new ideas for how we can reach out to our communities, to put our faith into action for those who are in need, to fund an innovative idea for the sake of our mission. These are things children would do joyfully, and I believe that God moves through us like we were children when we do the same.

We'll talk much more about all of this in the coming weeks, but for now I'll leave you with a request for your prayers. I ask you today to pray this month -- everyday, even -- about how God might be calling you to be childlike in your giving. When we were children, we approached everything with energy, excitement, curiosity, and imagination -- and for the sake of God's kingdom and the mission of the Church, I ask you to consider how your giving to St. Alban's can reflect those same values. How can we give of our energy to empower new outreach? How can we spread excitement by giving of our time to invite others into our ministries? How might God be planting a seed in you about how you give here, perhaps making you curious about what giving could look like in your life? And what new things can we imagine, together, when we allow for God to transform the ways in which we are generous?

Thank you for starting this journey with us. I encourage your prayers everyday about how God could be calling you to give financially with a pledge, to give of your time and try a new ministry, to give of your talent and show us the gifts God has generously given to you. And in all of this, let us never forget to be childlike, to give freely and happily for the sake of others and to have hearts that are wide open, ready to seek joy in God's kingdom.

Amen.