

October 3, 2021

Nineteenth Sunday After Pentecost

“Called to be His Children”

Mark 10:2-16

At first glance our Gospel lesson is a rather odd pairing of two very different episodes in Jesus’ ministry. In the first the people coming to Jesus are Pharisees, experts in Judaism and the Torah and they are attempting to test Jesus with a technical question about divorce. The second group are helpless children, babies really, being brought to Jesus to receive a blessing.

The first group really gets spanked by Jesus. He responds right at them, “*Because of your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment.*” It’s pretty clear the Pharisees haven’t incurred the favor of God. Jesus correctly points out that divorce is a result of mankind’s fallen corruption, yet these Pharisees had been trying to use those decrees to justify their righteousness as if divorce were a noble and right deed.

The second group is praised, or at least they are spoken well of by Jesus with words that place them under God’s favor. “*Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.*”

I’ve always understood these words of Jesus to highlight the way we should come before our God; as a helpless child. This is absolutely spot-on correct. We’re Lutherans for crying out loud! One thing that we get absolutely right that a lot of our brothers and sisters in Christ of different denominations get wrong is that there is not a single blessed thing that we can do in order to gain salvation. The right way to come before a gracious, loving and merciful God is indeed crying like a baby, begging for that which you need and only the Father can provide—reconciliation and forgiveness. This the Father gives in abundance through the Christ speaking these words.

So that is absolutely true, and wonderful I might add.

But when I see Jesus’ words about the little children paired with His interaction with the Pharisees over the issue of divorce, it sheds some light on the same truth but with a different aspect.

In my limited experience with little children I have noticed one thing—they know when they’ve done wrong. They’ll lie about it; but they know it was wrong. Why does the little child with chocolate and crumbs all over his face deny taking a cookie from the cookie jar? Because the rule is the rule—no taking cookies without permission! There is no rationalization or attempts to justify the action. They know they’re wrong, so they either admit it or lie about it. They sin boldly, and they know it.

But what happens as we get older; grow out of being the little children Jesus speaks so well of? We get clever...like the Pharisees thought they were clever. We start coming up with excuses, justification and outright arguments right in the face of God’s clear Word.

Our Creator’s design stands pretty clear—“*Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.*” Not a lot of ambiguity there. “One flesh” is not that difficult of a metaphor to understand, and given the physicality of the marital relationship it goes way beyond just a metaphor. This union often produces a little ball of one-flesh joy! A child-like understanding would take God at His word and say “That’s that. One flesh and done. No messing around.”

But the Pharisees are like, “Aha! We got this stuff Moses said in Deuteronomy! It says we can give a certificate of divorce!” Never mind that the verses they’re talking about don’t say, “Go ahead and divorce” but put limitations on what divorced men can do and may have served even to discourage divorce; but these Pharisees know their Holy Scriptures in which God says very clearly through the prophet Malachi “I hate divorce.” Yet here they stand, testing the very Son of God Himself, attempting to twist things so they can justify their own disobedience.

In light of this pairing in our reading today perhaps we would do well to examine how we receive God’s Word according to Christ’s comment, *“Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.”*

Do we accept God’s Word on it’s face, or are we clever to find reasons for exceptions, alterations and adjustments, you know, like grown-ups do? Think along the lines of the Ten Commandments. Is there some sexual sin or covetousness excused by saying, “It’s only natural”? Is greed and even theft justified as “just doing business”? Are lies acceptable because the truth would be awkward or embarrassing? Is anger and unforgiveness left to stand because “They don’t deserve it”? Where a child would recognize a behavior as just wrong and against the rules, are you justifying it because you’ve got a grown-up reason?

And I didn’t even touch on the First Table of the Commandments that speak of your relationship with God! Grown up excuses for not being in church—how many are out there? And I’ve never heard a decent reason why, but somehow we tell our kids not to curse or swear, but once you grow up—go ahead, take God’s name in vein all you want!

But just look at the greatest two Commandments—Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and love your neighbor as yourself. Any child would simply take these at face value and know it’s wrong not to love. But as adults, do we not on a regular basis find reasons not to? Don’t we, like the Pharisee in Jesus’ parable find reasons to step to the other side of the road and pass by when an opportunity to show love is challenging, means sacrifice or is simply inconvenient? We do.

Knowing that, Jesus’ words are a little bit more foreboding: *“Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.”*

So don’t be so adult. In my very limited experience with children, even when they lie about doing wrong once you make plain that they’re busted, they admit what they did. They admit the wrong and say, “I’m sorry.” They repent. Ultimately, this is what Jesus calls for. To His children admitting their sin, making no excuses, He gives full forgiveness in Holy Baptism, in the Supper, in His Word of grace. As children, we receive those and the kingdom of God therein.

If you fail to repent...we just think of it this way: How will it go for you on judgment day if you have a very clever, very adult argument to put before God to justify your sin? Odds of success—zero! But if doing so is your practice in this life, you don’t get the option of changing your tune once the King returns in glory.

That’s pretty heavy, but hear what Jesus says in full. *“Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God.”* Jesus calls for the children to come! This is good news because in that Baptism, in that Supper, in the Gospel, the Holy Spirit works to make you indeed the little children of God. The kingdom belongs to you! Recognize the simple steadfast love of your Heavenly Father that accomplishes this for you in Christ. Recognizing how blessed you are to now be His child, don’t do the oh so silly adult thing of cleverly reasoning your way out of His grace and into the world’s sin. Be the child that knows

simple right from wrong, repent, be forgiven, receive the kingdom your loving Father gives to you, His child..
Amen.