

The 19th Sunday after Pentecost
October 3, 2021
Proper 22

The Lessons: Genesis 2:18-25
 Psalm 128
 Hebrews 2:1-13
 Mark 10:2-16

The Hymns: # 869 *With the Lord Begin Your Task*
 # 863 *Our Father, by Whose Name*
 # 725 *Children of the Heavenly Father*

The Collect: Merciful Father, Your patience and loving-kindness toward us have no end. Grant that by Your Holy Spirit we may always think and do those things that are pleasing in Your sight; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Sermon:
 Children and the Kingdom of God
 Mark 10:2-16

“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.”

Dear Friends in Christ Jesus,

For each of the past three weeks you have heard in the Gospel lessons the care and concern that Jesus has for little children. You have heard what a place of honor Jesus affords to little children. You have heard that one who receives a little one in Jesus’ name receives Jesus. You have also heard the warning against leading a little one astray, both through false teaching and failure to teach. And our Lord takes it one step further with regard to the prominence of children in our text this morning.

Jesus declared in last week’s Gospel reading that little ones can, in fact, believe in him. This should come as a stern warning to anyone who would deny to a child God’s saving gift of Baptism, or who would not teach their children about.

Today we see that people are bringing their children to Jesus, probably mothers, so that he might touch them. No doubt they had heard of Jesus’ miracles, and may have witnessed some of them personally. They desired the spiritual blessing associated with Jesus laying his hands upon them, to receive his benediction. And these are not only young children who can already tell you that Jesus loves them. St. Luke’s account of this story indicates specifically that the people were bringing infants—their newborn babes—to receive Jesus’ blessing.

And when the disciples, for some unknown reason, rebuke the people, Jesus grows indignant against them and says let the children come to me, do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of

God. The disciples must have thought that Jesus didn't have time for the little ones who couldn't listen to his teaching. Perhaps they thought the parents were looking for some empty and outward magical effect from Jesus' touch. Whatever the case, they were wrong and Jesus let them know it. In fact, our text says quite strongly that he "rebuked" them.

The Kingdom of God belongs to little children, including infants. When you put this knowledge together with other teachings of the New Testament, such as "whoever believes and is baptized shall be saved", and "by grace you are saved through faith, and that not of yourselves—it is the gift of God; not by works, lest any man should boast", you get a powerful proclamation of God's Kingdom that goes against the conventional wisdom of mankind.

The conventional wisdom of man goes according to the Law that is written on his heart. From that law, man concludes that salvation is contingent upon one's works and deeds in this life. If you want to go to heaven, the sinful heart says, you do these certain things.

You jump through all the hoops. You do good works to get a reward. But while Jesus does speak of the necessity of good works and bearing good fruit, nowhere does he ascribe one's salvation to works. His blessing of the infants here in Mark 10 is undeniable proof of this. What works are infants performing toward their salvation? What good deeds are they doing in order to gain God's favor? None.

And lest anyone here respond with the notion that little children are exempt from God's Law and they are not responsible for sin until reaching an age of discretion or accountability (which, by the way, are very popular teachings in modern American Christianity), the Scriptures clearly declare that all have sinned, and fallen short of the glory of God. King David lamented in the 51st Psalm: "behold, I was shapen in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me". St. Paul says without question that "the wages of sin is death". So, while an infant may indeed appear innocent and pure to us, the child still has the original sin that infects our entire race. And this original sin is **the** terminal illness.

Knowing, therefore, that little children need the forgiveness of sins and the blessings of God's grace, we understand the gravity of Jesus' command not to hinder the children.

But you might wonder why should we dwell on this when we have so few children in our congregation – where the average age of our members is 70? 75? Well, the truth is, we also learn an important lesson about our own Christian lives as people who have grown up and confessed our Faith. If a little child receives the forgiveness of sins and the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit—that is, receives saving faith and the promise of eternal life, it is even more appropriate for us to recognize how God works to save his people.

If a little child is promised heaven through God's work in the washing of the water and the Word, it doesn't speak well for our man-made opinions regarding faith and good works. For we brought nothing into this world and we will take nothing with us. It is our sinful nature seeks to glory in our own works and behavior, as if we were scoring points with God and earning a seat at the eternal feast in heaven. Our sinful heart says to us, I am a good person, or at least better than many. I give to my church. I love my children. I don't drink, smoke or watch pornography. I do my best to love my neighbor, and when I sin, it's not really a big deal because it's nothing really bad or serious. I am a good Christian, and that is why God will save me.

But dear friends, if God looked at your own works and deeds, as you do in this instance, and considered you righteous because of them, then Christ Jesus died in vain. If you could save yourself, you wouldn't need a savior at all!

So, I call upon you, as did Jesus and John the Baptist before him: repent of all of the self-righteousness that continually creeps into your heart from your Old Adam. For although your Old Adam has been drowned in your Baptism, he's still a good swimmer. The depravity of the human race manifests itself not just in the awful things people do to one another—in their sins against another, but also in the hardness of our hearts toward the mercy and forgiveness of God himself.

The sinful heart does not want to believe that the work of salvation is complete already, and that all people are in need of it. This is the sin the disciples committed when they hindered the children from being brought to Jesus.

And the children had to be brought. They could not bring themselves. In the same way, you must be brought into the Kingdom of God—you cannot bring yourself. You cannot trust in your works to bring you there because your works in and of themselves are nothing but filthy rags in the eyes of the Lord. They might look good to you and your fellow man, but they earn nothing with God.

Whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God like a little child will not enter it. The faith of a little child is faith that trusts in Jesus. It is the purest and strongest of all. If you ask a little one who believes in Jesus why they get to go to heaven, they'll tell you it's because Jesus died on the cross to take away their sins. But the child will grow up, and as an adult becomes dissatisfied with the child-like answer, and looks for a more educated answer to the question. And eventually the concept of being a good person sneaks in. Even one who answers with "I am going to heaven because I believe in God and I believe in Jesus" has already taken the merit of Christ and replaced it with one's own belief. They have turned the gift of faith into their own work. Remember, whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God like a little child will not enter it.

Children receive the kingdom of God because God gives them faith in their Savior Jesus and he regenerates them in their Baptism. Adults receive the Kingdom of God only when they despair of their own works and righteousness, and possess a childlike faith. A little child does not add to the Word of the Lord and supplement God's work with his own. A little child does not tell others that he is going to heaven because he's a good kid. A little child receives God's blessing and the promise of eternal life before he can even speak, because God attaches this powerful promise to his chosen means of Baptism. It is his work, not the child's.

Dear baptized friends, the promise of the forgiveness of sin and eternal life is yours as well only because of God's continued work in your earthly pilgrimage. For you have been justified by the faith which God himself has given you, and which he feeds and sustains.

He has declared you righteous in his sight, and draws you continually to his house. Here he strengthens you and equips you to continually drown your Old Adam through repentance of sin, and trust in Christ Jesus to forgive you.

When the people were bringing their children to Jesus, they didn't just want him to speak a blessing. They wanted their little ones to receive Jesus' touch. For he was no mere priest of the temple or an eccentric preacher. He was God in the flesh, who himself had become a little child. Listen to how the epistle to the Hebrews explains it in the verses that immediately follow this morning's epistle reading: "Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same nature, that through death he might destroy him who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong bondage. He had to be made like his brethren in every respect, so that he might become a merciful high priest in the service of God, to make expiation for the sins of the people."

The Savior had to become like his people in every respect, and indeed he was even tempted as we are, yet without sin. The eternal Son of God became incarnate to suffer and die in order to atone for the sins of the whole world. Thus he, too, had to be an infant. He was made for a time lower than the angels, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone. He was conceived by the Holy Spirit in the virgin's womb and was born a child so that he might redeem all children from sin and the power of death by his own death.

Christ Jesus' death and resurrection conquered the devil, hell, and all their power, opening the gates of heaven to all who would believe in him. This includes little children and in fact places them at the front of the line. Theirs is a simple, trusting faith that receives God's grace and doesn't try to replace it with something else. Theirs is a faith that is in the Incarnate Lord Jesus, who promised to be with his people unto the end of the age.

Therefore, do not hinder the little children. Bring them to the Lord Jesus and encourage others to do the same. Teach your children and grandchildren about their Savior, and instruct them in the Christian Faith, that they may examine themselves and confess their faith publicly. In so doing, they are prepared to present themselves to be admitted to their Lord's altar, where the same Jesus who touched the children to bless them now touches the lips and mouths of the faithful with his body and blood for the forgiveness of sins.

And approach the altar of your Lord today in repentance and childlike faith, despairing of your own works of righteousness, and trusting in the love and mercy of Christ alone, in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.