**Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost**

**October 3, 2021
Text—Mark 10:2-16**

 Today’s Gospel text actually seems more like two different texts to me. I don’t know why the liturgical gurus did it this way, but they did, and so this is what we have. The first part of our text is Jesus’ teaching on divorce, and the second is the well-loved story of Jesus welcoming the little children to him. One of these topics is obviously much more difficult and controversial than the other. Now I’ve been preaching here for over ten years, so you all know that I’m not one to shy away from controversial texts and controversial topics. In fact, I usually seek those kinds of texts out, because people just tend to have a lot of questions about them that they want answers to. But today, I’m not going to do that. Maybe I’m just not feeling particularly controversial, or maybe it’s LWML Sunday and I want to give the ladies something more pleasant to think about. So today, we will focus on the second part of our text: Jesus and the little children. We can deal with the subject of divorce another day.

 Well, we all know well this account of Jesus and the children. It’s one of our favorite stories about Jesus, and it shows his love and compassion for every single person who believes in him, no matter how young they may be. Parents were bringing children to Jesus to have him touch them. Perhaps these children were sick, or maybe their parents just wanted Jesus to bless them or have some of his divine power “rub off” on them. But the disciples rebuked the parents who were bringing their children to Jesus. Children back in the ancient world were not seen as cute and precious as we view them today; rather, they were seen as burdens to be tolerated until they could contribute to their families. Children were just extra mouths to feed who could give nothing in return; it was only when they got older that they could actually be useful to society. So the disciples probably shared this attitude, and they didn’t want Jesus to have to waste his time with these insignificant, burdensome little kids. But as we all know, that’s not how Jesus saw it. He had been sent to save every single person who believed in him, regardless of age or ability to “contribute.” He would not turn away anybody who came to him in faith. So he was indignant with his disciples and rebuked them in turn, telling them, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God.” With these words, Jesus was making it clear: he had not come to save those who could do great things for the kingdom. Rather, he had come so that the kingdom could do great things for them. Little children could not do much to build and expand the kingdom, but that was exactly the point. Jesus was the one who was doing the work, not the members of the kingdom. He would die on the cross and rise again from the dead, not anybody else. And so children were just as welcome as adults into the kingdom of God, because the kingdom has come especially for people like them.

 As I’ve said a couple of times, Christians love this story. This is Jesus at his kindest, gentlest, and most accessible: the Jesus who welcomes the little children into his kingdom. As the old song goes, “Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world.” Jesus seeks out and welcomes the youngest, most helpless, and most vulnerable people among us and he tells them that they have a stake in his kingdom, that they too can receive salvation by trusting in him. And Jesus continues to do this today, doesn’t he? Most of us here this morning were probably baptized as babies or young children. We were brought into God’s kingdom and had our sins washed away by the waters of holy baptism, and through this wondrous Sacrament God claimed us as his own and placed his name upon us. Though we were born in original sin and deserving of hell, God had compassion on us and gave us his Holy Spirit through baptism, before we were old enough to even know what was going on. He did not discriminate against us because we were too little; rather, he welcomed us into his church and gave us a permanent place in his eternal kingdom. The kingdom of God did indeed belong to people such as us, and it continues to belong to such children today. That’s why it’s sad that many Christians don’t practice infant baptism, because they are depriving their children of the gifts of God in Jesus Christ. They are like the disciples in our text, who refuse to let the children come to Jesus because they’re not old enough, or smart enough, or capable enough. So Jesus’ rebuke toward his disciples in the text is directed at anybody today also who would refuse to allow children to come to him through baptism. He says, “Let the little children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God.” Jesus said it then, and he says it now too.

But hear what else Jesus says: “Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall never enter it.” Now, Jesus is not talking about the kids; he’s talking about the adults. He is saying that adults too must humble themselves and forget everything they think they know if they want to be welcomed into the kingdom of God. It was bad enough that Jesus was encouraging these burdensome, useless kids to come to him, but now he was telling the adults that they had to become like children themselves? Many people back then would have seen that as a great insult. And yet it is true all the same. In many ways, children have an advantage over adults when it comes to matters of faith. For the most part, they simply believe what they are told. They don’t question God’s existence, his rulership over the universe, or his love for them. They just take it on faith because someone they trust told them it was true.

Adults, on the other hand, have a much harder time. We are exposed to all kinds of contrary viewpoints to Christianity, and they often make us ask uncomfortable questions. We hear worldly teachings such as the theory of evolution, historical-critical interpretations of the Bible, and today’s “woke” orthodoxies, and they make us wonder if it’s really all true, if Jesus really is who he says he is or if the Bible really is the Word of God. Many adult Christians over the ages have been unable to reconcile the wisdom of the world with the teachings of the faith, and they have left the church as a result. When you’re a child, everything is so much simpler, but when you get older, that’s when all of the doubts start creeping in. I’m sure pretty much all of us who have remained believers have also questioned the faith at times. In response to this tendency of adults to waver in faith, Jesus tells us that we need to continue to receive the kingdom of God like little children. Kids, far from being a useless burden, are actually a model for us, in that they humbly accept what a trusted authority tells them. That’s the kind of faith that we adults should have as well. We don’t understand everything, but that’s okay. We recognize that God loves us and has sent Jesus to save us through his death and resurrection, so we trust what he says even when it doesn’t make sense to us. We humble ourselves before his Word, recognizing that his wisdom is infinitely greater than the wisdom of the world. We are willing to do this out of thanksgiving to our Lord who would sacrifice his only Son to win eternal life for us.

This is why in our baptismal liturgy, we read this text from Mark’s Gospel at the baptisms of both children and adults. It’s obvious why we do it at kids’ baptisms, because it reminds us that these young children are welcome in the kingdom of God, and nobody should try to keep them away from it. But we also do it at the baptism of adults, because it reminds us that adults too need to become like children in order to enter the kingdom of God. We need to put aside our own opinions, ideas, and doubts and humbly submit to God and his teachings. We need to leave the wisdom of the world behind and instead embrace the foolishness of God, which St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 1 reminds us is wiser than men. That’s not to say that we can’t ask questions or explore issues further, but it is to say that we need to remember who’s in charge, and who ultimately has a monopoly on the truth. It’s not us, and it’s not any other person, philosophy, or institution in this world. It is God our Father and his Son Jesus Christ who determine the truth, and we Christians bow ourselves before it and receive the kingdom of God like little children.

And we know what blessings we receive from God when we trust in his promises, don’t we? We receive forgiveness of sins, eternal life in God’s kingdom, and salvation from the power of the devil. We trust in our Lord Jesus, who willingly came down to earth, lived a perfect life, and was rejected by his people. We trust in him who submitted to mockery, abuse, suffering, and death on a cross to atone for our sins. We trust in him who rose again from the dead on the third day so that we believers also will rise on the last day. We trust in him who comes to us in baptism and washes our sins away, and continues to come to us through his Word and Holy Communion for our entire lives. And we trust in him who has promised to return and defeat sin, death, and devil forever, and give his people eternal life in his kingdom. That’s what it means to be a child of God: that you are an heir to every single one of these promises. It doesn’t matter if you’re a literal child or an adult with a childlike faith; all people who trust in Jesus are welcome. These blessings from God give us all the motivation we’ll ever need to embrace the childlike faith that Jesus grants to us. It may be difficult to believe sometimes, but we know that in the end, it will be more than worth it.

So yes, Jesus loves all the little children of the world. He loves the babies that are brought to his house for baptism and to be brought into his kingdom. He loves the children who come to Sunday School to learn about the Bible, and who come to midweek to learn about the doctrines of the church and be confirmed into full membership in the church. And he loves the children who come to Divine Service on Sunday mornings, attend adult Bible classes, sit on church committees, volunteer at events, and even stand up and preach in the pulpit. To him, we are all his children, and he loves us all equally. He loves us because of what his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, did to save us. On the last day, he will return and raise us up to eternal life, and then we will enter his kingdom and live with him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness. Even though some may argue that children don’t belong in the kingdom of God, we would argue differently, and more importantly, so would Jesus. If he did not love children and want them in his kingdom, none of us, regardless of our age, would ever get there. Thus, we will rejoice in his love for all of the children of the world, knowing that in him, we who have a childlike faith in his promises will receive all of the blessings of the kingdom of God. Amen.