

Today and next week we are going to look into the 10th chapter of the gospel of Mark. There are 4 gospels at the beginning of the New Testament that share stories and teachings during the life of Jesus on earth.

Mark is the shortest of the four and is considered to be the first one that was recorded. In fact, most scholars believe that the gospel writers Matthew and Luke borrowed stories from Mark and then added ones that they knew.

The focus of the beginning of chapter 10 of Mark is relationships. The first few verses focus on marriage relationships and then the relationships between adults and children.

The words in Mark about marriage may be difficult words to hear coming from the mouth of Jesus. Words about what God joins together no one should separate and more specific words about divorce.

But we must remember that these words about marriage and the words we are about to read about children are focused on one very important goal. And the goal of marriage and the goal of adults interacting with children is about maintaining and preserving healthy relationships and companionship. God does not desire for us to be alone.

We pick up the reading where people are beginning to bring little children to Jesus.

Read Mark 10:13-16

Church consultant Carey Nieuwhof says that there are 3 things that Christians do that non-Christians despise. The first thing that non-Christians despise of Christians is that we judge.

Nieuwhof says that if we are judging someone else then we are not loving them. Imagine if we focused our attention on loving our neighbor instead of judging our neighbor. I think Jesus had something to say about the importance of loving your neighbor.

The second thing that Nieuwhof says that non-Christians despise about Christians is that we are hypocrites. We pretend to be something that we are not and then we judge others for not living up to the standards that we place upon them.

When we pretend to be something that we are not that is called hypocrisy. Wearing a cross, putting a biblical verse bumper sticker on your car, or posting scriptures on social media while we trash people with our words or online and care little about our neighbor is hypocrisy. And non-Christians pay attention.

The third thing that Nieuwhof says that non-Christians despise about Christians is that we only develop friendships with other Christians. We stay in our echo chamber where we only here the same message and then cast dispersions upon anyone outside of our Christian friendships.

We make assumptions about others instead of developing authentic relationships with non-Christians or people who may be different from us in some way.

But in our text today, Jesus focuses on the importance of relationships with people that we may be choosing to overlook. In the biblical story, little children are being brought to Jesus in order that he might touch them. The disciples sternly order the parents to stop.

But then Jesus responds and says to the parents, “Let the little children come to me. Do not stop them. For it is for children that the kingdom of God belongs. Whoever welcomes a child experiences the kingdom of God on earth.”

The culture around Jesus did not value children. They had no rights whatsoever. But in a scene that would remind me of an episode of Mr. Roger’s Neighborhood, Jesus sees the children.

Jesus sees who they are and what they are. And Jesus shows them by his words of support and by his actions of touch that the children are important to him and must not be discarded.

How many examples do we see where the thoughts and needs and opinions of children are not seen or heard? How many times are children placed in dangerous situations by the selfish actions of adults? How many times are children told to be quiet or parents are scolded for not keeping their children quiet?

I think about the selfish decisions that adults make that put their children and the lives of other children in harms way? In a time of Covid, should we be so concerned about our convenience or should we be more concerned about what is best for the vulnerable children around us?

When we pursue adulterous relationships, do we ever consider the impact that this might have upon our children no matter their age? When we make business decisions, do we ever consider the impact that our actions may have upon vulnerable children?

When we give a stare at a parent who can’t “control their child” because we are made uncomfortable in some way, do we ever consider what we are saying about the importance of children?

When the followers of Jesus try to keep children in their place and away from Jesus, Jesus responds by saying the children are welcome. Jesus then says that welcoming children is welcoming God’s kingdom.

So lets think about some of the children in our midst who may be feeling excluded right now. Let’s think about the children that are vulnerable. Are we going to judge them

from afar? Are we going to silence them? Are we going to set up systems that exclude them even more?

Or are we going to do what we can to advocate for them? Are we going to do what we can to let their voices be heard? Are we going to go out of our way to make them feel welcomed by making their parents feel welcomed?

Include or exclude? Judge or love? Protect them or potentially harm them?

There is a simple act that I am going to invite us to try to do this week. And that is to bless a child or some children. And there is a simple act that I am going to invite you to do.

Pay attention to the next child that you see. Don't only look for the children that you think look like you or come from families that you think are like yours. Pay special attention to children that you think are different from you in some way. Racially, culturally, economically, or whatever.

I invite you to reach out to that child and do a very simple act that, depending upon the situation, you may need to adapt.

I invite you to make a sign of a cross upon a child's forehead and say to the child, "You are blessed and loved." You may have to air bless by not actually touching the child.

You may have to make the form of a heart and say "You are blessed and loved." You may or may not choose to add "by God" to the words you say. So you can say to the child, "You are blessed and loved" or you could say, "You are blessed and loved by God." Don't force something that makes anyone uncomfortable.

What is important is that we follow the guidance of Jesus to pay attention to the children around us. To see them as people of value in God's eyes. To see them the way that God sees them. And God sees children as a blessing who need to receive a blessing.

Today is Worldwide Communion Sunday. We join with Christians around the world in celebrating communion.

I love the fact that in the Presbyterian Church we welcome all children to the table. No one is excluded by age.

As we come to the table, we can remember and celebrate the children around us.

As we welcome children, we welcome the kingdom of God. AMEN.

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-Given: Oct. 3, 2021 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)