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Christian perspectives: Let them come

Jesus said, ?Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.? The Little Children and Jesus People were also bringing babies to Jesus to have him touch them. When the disciples saw this, they rebuked them. But Jesus called the children to him and said, ?Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.? (Luke 18:15-17, NIV)

Have you ever been in such a place that you knew you had made a commitment, then a family matter comes up and you are now in a place of conflict. Now the need to be released from the commitment becomes a trial. Just a little story of how the voice and faith of a child can open your eyes to the truth, and set you free. My beautiful granddaughter looked up at me and said, love you Nana, you coming right. Then the big hug.

She showed me that day, love is stronger than conflict, and like she had the faith I would make the right decision, I then knew I needed to put faith into action and ask my friend for forgiveness. When I went to see my friend, we talked, shared and forgave. And all this happened because of the child-like trust of Nana. For us, we have a Heavenly Father who is far more powerful than a Nana and He tells us that ?anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a child will never enter it.?

The popular image that comes to mind is of Jesus who is ?meek and mild.? Jesus the compassionate one who opens His arms and blesses children. Jesus who is gentle, loving and welcoming.

Jesus is all of those things in this story, but His statement is also radical, and surprising. It surprises the disciples ? even though they know Jesus and his teaching. It challenges their preconceptions about who's important, who Jesus' message is for. Their own response (turning the children away) earns them a strong rebuke from Jesus. We can conclude that it must hold some vital insights for us if it caused the Lord to correct those closest to Him.

The story tells us about the radical Kingdom of God, as it is intended to be lived here on earth (as well as in heaven). As Jesus welcomes children to him and declares the Kingdom belongs to them, we learn what this Kingdom is like, who it's for, and what its values are. The Kingdom of God is at hand ?and it begins with children like these. It begins as we welcome and we reach out to children that are forgotten, neglected, held back; the children bullied , the children of poverty.

Let's look at this in more depth. Though this incident occurs in all three gospels (Matthew 19:13-15, Mark 10:13-16) we are reading it in Luke. For Luke, the keynote of Jesus' ministry is the gospel of salvation ? the good news of the Kingdom that is for all. Over and again, Luke records how Jesus brings good news to the needy, the oppressed, the less privileged ? women and children, Samaritans as well as Jews.

Of all the gospel writers, Luke has a particular concern for the poor ? and for Jesus' message of salvation for the poor. There are echoes of the Old Testament themes of God heart for the widow, the fatherless, and the outcast. And it is Luke who opens his account of Jesus' ministry with the story of Jesus at the synagogue, quoting from Isaiah 61: ?The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.? (Luke 4:18-19/ Isaiah 61:1-2, NIV)

It is against this backdrop that Luke describes the scene of Jesus and the children. But there is another context to consider too. Provided by two other stories Luke tells, before and after this one. Luke 17 sees the disciples asking Jesus about the ?coming of the Kingdom.? Jesus goes on to tell the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector ? a parable that finishes with the words ?For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.?

And, after the story of the children is told, Matthew, Mark, and Luke go straight on to tell the story of the Rich Young Ruler. It cannot be an accident, and the contrast is clear: the Kingdom of God belongs to little children such as these ? but for the young man with all his knowledge, law-keeping, piety, and riches ? ?How hard it is for the rich to get into the Kingdom of God!? I wonder if the rich young man had been present as those children were brought to Jesus. Did he perhaps resent their access to the Lord? Did he wonder why those that were weak and helpless found themselves closer to Jesus than one with position and power? Do we sometimes feel that others seem to have more of the Lord's attention, despite our efforts?

When Jesus says that the Kingdom of God belongs to those who are ?like children,? He means his Kingdom begins with a child ? and child-like-ness.

The Rich Young Ruler has status. He's obeyed the law since he was a child. But he hasn't kept his child-like-ness. He wears his achievements and his riches like an honor. He comes with all the trappings of wealth and walks away sad because he cannot leave these things to come empty-handed to follow Jesus. He did not realize that the Kingdom begins where people are. It does not wait for children to grow up. So today, if children are found in poverty, in shacks, hungry, sick, at risk ? the Kingdom does not forget or

hinder them ? it begins with them, where they are. And invites us to welcome them, to use our comparative riches to improve their opportunities and to fulfill their potential, and to live out something of the Kingdom in the process. In doing so it is not only the children that experience God's Kingdom ? we also touch something of what it means to live Kingdom-centered lives. What can we learn, then, from these children that Jesus welcomed?

They came to the Lord empty-handed ? because that is how all children come. Of all the gospel writers, Luke is the only one who is at pains to portray how very young these children are that the disciples turn away. The word he uses is ?infants,? ?babes.? Jewish tradition tells us that children were brought to be blessed by a Rabbi at their first birthday. Perhaps that's what Luke is telling us is happening here. Parents are bringing their very young children ? their babies ? to be ?touched,? blessed by Jesus. We usually think of this passage as demonstrating how we must come to Jesus (and come into the Kingdom) as trusting, as simply, as humbly as a child. Those things are true. But as we think of babies, perhaps it's truer still to say that we come empty-handed. We come with nothing of our own to bring.

We come with a faith that is both unformed and yet fully-formed ? trusting, open, receptive to Jesus as he opens his arms in welcome and blessing. In the economy of Jesus' Kingdom, that is the only requirement for salvation. It turns our preconceptions about honor and merit and our own contribution on their head. And it reminds us that we have as much to learn from the poor children of the world as we have to give.

Why did the disciples want to stop the children coming to Jesus? Were they trying to protect his time and space? Were they simply wanting to keep it all to themselves? We don't have an explanation for why Jesus' disciples turn the children away, except that they tell them ?not to bother him.? Perhaps they think Jesus' message is too important for children; a serious message for serious people; too precious to be wasted on parents bringing babies to the rabbi as some kind of religious ritual for happiness and prosperity.

But they miss the point that Jesus' message is for all. And it's not just for the childlike ? it's for children. Children who, in Jesus' society, were not given value or status. Children who were largely ignored as unimportant until they came of age as adults. In the upside-down values of Jesus' Kingdom ? the gospel is good news first for the poor, for the ignored, for the disenfranchised. As Jesus welcomes children he gives them status, he notices them, He tells them the greatest honor of all ? the Kingdom ? is theirs. ?The proud will be humbled, but the humble will be honored.? ?The Lord has appointed me to preach good news to the poor,? ?The Lord has taken princes from their thrones and exalted the lowly. He has satisfied the hungry with good things and sent the rich away with empty hands.? (Luke 1:52-53, NLT)

This is an extraordinary picture of a Kingdom where the last are first, where the least are given identity and value. What have we learned about what God's Kingdom is like, who it's for, and what its values are? Do we come empty handed, trusting, open and receptive? Do we come without honor or merit, except that Jesus says his Kingdom is good news for all?

The disciples here seemed unwilling, or unable, or unprepared to share the Kingdom. How do we extend His welcome to everyone who will come? It's an interesting aside that children (perhaps older than the babies Luke tells us about admittedly!) have an uncanny knack for simplicity ? for recognizing injustice or unfairness when they see it. We can make our faith very complex. Yet the Kingdom is also very simple. It takes faith as small as a mustard seed; it is a treasure, a pearl of great price; it is always good news for the poor, the oppressed, for the last who shall become first.

At its simplest level, this story tells us that Jesus loves and welcomes and blesses children ? and so should we. We cannot divorce this story from the point at which we started ? Luke's overarching story of the coming-in of the Kingdom. If the gospel is good news at all, it must be good news for the poor. And wherever there is poverty, children are the most vulnerable, the most abused, and the most at risk. Child soldiers. Child prostitutes. Child labor. Child-headed households. Child-trafficking. It's a tragic fact that about one third of the world's children live in extreme poverty today. 30,000 children will die in (and from) poverty today. Just like yesterday. Just like tomorrow. 1 child dies every three seconds, largely from preventable causes, rooted in poverty and its effects. Approximately 15 million children under 18 have lost one or both parents to AIDS.

Contrast this terrible onslaught on childhood with the Bible's affirmation of the young ? David, Gideon, Moses. The Bible declares ?The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them.? Isaiah 11:6 (NIV). This powerful image suggests to us that something new starts with this child, something hopeful. God does not give up on young people. He raises them up, empowers them, and gives them a future in Him. God placed the very salvation of the world in the open arms of a baby born in an oppressed land.

If we are serious that the Kingdom is Good news to the poor ? then it must be Good news in a very real and tangible way. Jesus touched. Jesus blessed. Jesus acted out the Kingdom healing the blind, the lame, touching the untouchable. Jesus loves the little children, this week let us try and reflect on the children.

?Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the Kingdom.
Blessings, Your's in Christ
Crossroads Community Church