Let the children come

Sermon by the Rev. Bernadette Hartsough

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Before I go into the main theme of my sermon, I want to say a few words on divorce. Men in the first century could write a writ of divorce for almost any reason. The divorced woman would be shamed and left with no resources and no protection. In Jesus’s description here of divorce, Jesus is giving women rights to divorce. He is overturning the established institution of marriage by giving mutual rights and respect to both spouses. Moses allowed it because of our flawed humanity. Sometimes marriages are abusive and sometimes deadly. They can prevent a person from living. The standard is to stay married but NOT to risk your life. If your spouse is abusive to you or your children, you seek safety. Divorce was as prevalent in the first century as it is now. Jesus’s description is the vision of marriage in kingdom life. Jesus expands this vision of kingdom life by using children.

Two weeks ago, I preached about children. I preached about Jesus’s command to welcome children. Children represented those that are vulnerable with little power. This week’s sermon is about taking on the demeanor of children.

“Let the children come to me; do not stop them; for it us to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it”.

The children come to Jesus. They have no inhabitations, no fear. They sense that he wants to be in their presence. Jesus likes them. He sees them and appreciates what they can teach us. In the Episcopal Church we see all baptized persons, children and adults as full members of the church. That’s why children can receive communion. Seeing a child means that we respect them, and we preserve their dignity. We were all children. It took adult church members to welcome us and to teach us about the church. Now we do the same as we make a way for today’s children come to Jesus.

The second part of Jesus’s words about children in today’s gospel say,

“Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it”.

This section is about how we receive the Kingdom of God. We think of the Kingdom of God as beginning now. We see it and experience it through actions. So how do children receive the Kingdom of God?

First, they trust adults because children are dependent on us. I remember being a child and wanting to do things, but I couldn’t because I was a child. Children depend on adults. We depend on God to sustain the earth that gives us life. Jesus ushers in the kingdom by overturning our human systems and laws that oppress and strip respect and dignity. Jesus reinforced the mutuality of marriage and divorce as a sign of Gods reign. Jesus overturns the established systems and elevates those at the bottom of the social ladder.

Children receive gifts with excitement, enthusiasm, and with open eyes. So much of what they experience is brand new with open eyes. They see and name injustices and evil for what it is. I had a kindergarten student in Gary that struggled with the talk about slavery during African American history month. Up until that point, the children did not notice my color as an issue. They saw me as their teacher. When we started to talk about the differences in skin color, the children had many questions for me. After class was over and one boy was waiting for his mom to pick him up, he asked me this question, “Did I own slaves?” I was shocked. He thought that all white people owned slaves. I told him that I did not own slaves. We got into a big discussion of how it happened a long time ago and that I did not believe in owning slaves. I share this story as an example of how young children see the world. They see it with fresh eyes and can sense injustice. I also share it as an example of the trust that young children have in adults. Once this student realized that I was white, he needed to know that I was still a safe person. He felt safe enough to ask me and have the discussion.

We come to God the same way. We see the kingdom with fresh eyes where we call out evil and injustice. We receive the kingdom with trust and gratitude. We let the children come to Jesus and we follow.