

Don't Act Your Age
Mark 10:13-16
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I love doing baby dedications. It's probably one of my favorite things about being a minister. And this congregation has thankfully given me plenty of opportunities! I have now done 30 baby dedications in my ministry, the first being Maggie Rose Buffo on Oct. 1, 2000, in Columbus, IN. We actually had dinner with the Buffos on Friday, and Maggie is growing into a phenomenal young woman. I love baby dedications, not only because they are such a celebration of life, but because when I have the honor of holding that child in my hands, I'm keenly aware that they have their whole lives before them, this empty book just waiting for them to fill it with stories of what they will become.

And who knows what that will be, right? The future is wide open. They may become scientists or slackers; doctors, dentists or deadbeats; minister or malcontents. Who knows what our children will become, and what our role will be in that development? Three different times this week I found myself in conversations about children. In one, I was meeting with a parent who was concerned about the negative influences surrounding her child and how she could best counteract them. In the second one, the parent was expressing thanks that her child felt valued because, in a local sports league, even though her child isn't on the best team, all the players get trophies. And in the third conversation, a group of people were lamenting that way we coddle our kids today, citing the example that all kids get trophies, not just the winners. Yes, children can be a complex thing, can't they?

Today we mark the celebration of the Children's Sabbath as a way of honoring the presence of children in our congregation. The Children's Sabbath was started in 1992 by the Children's Defense Fund as a way to educate people about the urgent needs of our country's youngest and most vulnerable citizens and celebrate the gift of the presence of children in our lives. We give thanks for all that our children have and we remain keenly aware of all that other children don't have. Children can be a complex thing.

We see that complexity in our story today. The presence of children creates quite a conundrum for the disciples and quite a teaching moment for Jesus. He is in the middle of speaking to a crowd of people when a group of parents bring their children forward for a blessing. It was customary in Jewish society for the rabbi to bless a newborn child as a way of accepting the child into society. Jesus' actions – touched, took in his arms, blessed, laid hands on – are the official actions of a rabbinical blessing.

But this blessing almost didn't happen because of Jesus' "helpers," the disciples. As the parents get close to Jesus, the disciples step in, acting like truculent bouncers in charge of giving or denying access. "These people shouldn't be bothering Jesus. They have kids with them! And you know what kind of behavior that means: demanding, short-tempered, sulky, stubborn, thankless, selfish. And that's just the parents! We don't need that kind of childish behavior around Jesus."

We may bristle at what appears to be the disciples' insensitivity, but it was accepted behavior back in those days because children weren't valued. Well, I take that back. Boys were valued, especially first-born boys. But all children were treated almost like property. Children added nothing to the family's economy or honor and did not count. In the Greco-Roman world one could literally throw children away by exposing them at birth. Exploiters

would gather them and raise them to be used as gladiators or beggars or worse for the females. It was easy to ignore children or bar their access because there was no one who really cared or would fight for them.

Except Jesus. Immediately after the disciples do their best W.C. Fields imitation and say, “Go away kid, ya bother me!” Mark tells us Jesus is – I love this word! – indignant. He’s not just perturbed or ticked off or annoyed; he’s indignant. He recognizes an injustice has been done, a power play has been perpetrated against the powerless. And he turns the disciples’ sense of authority against them. Gathering the children like a mother hen, Jesus says to his followers, “You all are so concerned about entering the Kingdom of God? Here’s how. Look at these kids. Be like them.” What does Jesus mean by this?

I think he means we need to stop acting our age. As we mature beyond our childhood years, we begin to lose the qualities that make us more open and accepting of God’s presence in our lives. As we get saddled with more responsibilities and take on more worries, we forget what it’s like to see things through the eyes of a child. I’m thankful for celebrations like the Children’s Sabbath that remind us of the need to get down on our knees, because from there we have a better chance of seeing things from a child’s perspective. Author Michael Elliott writes, “We spend too much time trying to be on top of things rather than trying to see things from below. We should remember that the only time Jesus saw things from the top was when he hung on the cross.” So if we seek to follow Jesus’ topsy-turvy proclamation, which of the child-like qualities should we strive to emulate?

The first, I believe, is trust. Children are trusting. Unlike us, they have not yet learned to be suspicious of the world. We see a stranger, someone different than us, and we immediately go on the defensive. A child sees a stranger as a friend they haven’t met yet, which is why we as adults have to be diligent in protecting them. But think of the level of trust they exhibit, especially in those of us whom they love. When my daughter Molly is coming down the stairs, if I’m standing at the bottom, she’ll take off flying from the middle of the steps so that I can catch her. I haven’t dropped her yet! That’s the trust Jesus is talking about here, being willing to take a leap of faith, believing that we will be safe in God’s arms.

As adults, we want to question, examine, dissect, pull apart. We sometimes come at our faith like forensic investigators, putting God under a microscope to try and discover why things happen and if God is really listening to our prayers. But children seem to have this instinctive understanding of God’s presence. Sometimes we ask a lot of “if” questions about God – if God is real, if God loves me, if God is listening. Children may ask “how” and “why” questions about God, but for them, God isn’t an “if”. That’s trust.

Another quality I believe Jesus calls us to exhibit is humility. Children are vulnerable. They’re little. In our story, their littleness contrasts sharply with the overbearing disciples, who try to assert their influence. Children don’t try to act like someone they’re not; they’re not conscious of the image they are trying to project. They are uniquely, fully themselves, sometimes to our chagrin. We all have stories of a child or grandchild or niece or nephew who has blurted out an inappropriate statement in the middle of Target. I would share some personal stories here, but they’re not fit for the pulpit. But that’s kids! They don’t have a socialization filter in their brains; they don’t worry that other people won’t like their artwork. They simply want to share what they have, be it curious questions or dinosaur drawings.

This leads to another child-like quality that I think almost all adults are seriously lacking, and that is a sense of wonder. When a child discovers something new, it immediately becomes the coolest thing in the history of the universe and they just have to tell you about it! Do we

remember what it's like to feel that sense of wonder? Or think about a baby discovering her hands for the first time. She'll look at them like they are some sort of alien tentacle that's waving in front of their face, and then she'll suddenly realize that she can control this tentacle, she can actually make it do things like pick up that stale cheerio and put it in her mouth. A whole new world has opened up! I wonder what it would be like if we re-discovered God like a baby discovering her hands?

Are we too jaded for that? Is it too late to stop acting our age? Or can we somehow find our way back to a child's perspective, receiving Jesus as he was meant to be received, as a gift? I love that children are so open to receiving gifts. They are much better at that than us adults. Adults worry about etiquette and reciprocity. "Oh, I didn't get him anything! What if I don't like this? Should I open it now or wait?" But kids? No way! They shred the pretty wrapping paper, tear out the tissue and then when they discover the gift, they usually have to be reminded to say thank you because they are so excited. We if we greeted God each morning like *that*?

All of these qualities – trust, humility, a sense of wonder – are smaller parts of a bigger quality I believe Jesus is highlighting here. On our tax forms, what are our children called? They are dependents. In other words, they depend on us, their providers, for their well-being. I believe Jesus is encouraging dependence in his followers. That's ironic, because isn't one of the qualities we try to nurture in our children a sense of independence? Be your own person, don't follow the crowd. And yet the more we try to set ourselves apart from others, the farther we get from our connection with them, our sense of community, our tether to the image of God in other people. Jesus reminds us here that to have a child-like faith means acknowledging that we are ultimately dependent on the One who created us, nurtured us, gave us roots and wings. We adults tend to separate life into two categories: the big stuff that I need God for and the other stuff I can handle myself. But kids bring it all to God. They pray to God for their dead goldfish and their friends' skinned knee and their mommy's tummyache, not out of obligation, but because they believe God actually cares about those things. An adult might say God doesn't care about those things, but that's not the God I believe in.

"Let the little children come to me," Jesus says. Adults can find all kinds of reasons to reject this invitation – too busy, not good enough, not enough faith. But not kids. They receive this gift with trust, with humility, with a sense of wonder, fully dependent on the One who calls them to his side. What a place to spend your time! May God grant us all the wisdom NOT to act our age.