

Lectionary 27 B 2021

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

October 3, 2021

Mark 10:2-16

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

The first decades of the 19th century were kind of a golden age of culture and learning in Germany, especially in the capital city of Berlin. It was the age of Beethoven and Felix Mendelssohn, and the age of Schiller and Goethe. It was the age of the philosopher Hegel—Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. And in that great age of science and letters and philosophy and music, there also lived the man whom many consider to be the greatest theologian of the century, the greatest Protestant thinker of the age: Friedrich Schleiermacher.

Schleiermacher is considered great because he considered the truth of Christianity to NOT be reason, to NOT be creeds, to NOT be doctrines. He considered the truth of Christianity to be a matter of the heart, a matter of feeling. And the basic religious feeling that every human being has, he asserted, is a feeling of absolute dependence. A feeling of absolute dependence. When we are honest with ourselves, when we face our deepest feelings, we realize how dependent we are, how vulnerable, how reliant. Christians can ultimately come to know how dependent we are upon God. And we can learn to rely— perhaps decide to rely— upon God.

“Protect me, O God, for in you I take refuge,” David says in Psalm 16. *“You are my Lord; I have no good apart from you.”* Absolute dependence. It’s the truth of human existence. Schleiermacher felt that it was the truth of religion, of the Christian religion. (If you can spell Schleiermacher correctly, I’ll buy you a cup of coffee.)

So Schleiermacher was living in Germany, in this golden age with Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel. And when Hegel heard about what Schleiermacher was saying, that the truth of religion is a sense of absolute dependence, then Hegel responded with sarcasm. Hegel said, “Then a dog would be the best Christian, because a dog has a feeling of absolute dependence in the highest degree and lives mainly in this feeling.” Dogs do exhibit trust and loyalty and faithfulness and humility and service. But I am a dog lover. Perhaps Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel was a cat lover. But Hegel was saying essentially that if Schleiermacher were correct, then dumb animals would be better Christians than human beings. One of my very favorite lines in the Bible is the opening words of Isaiah: *The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master’s crib; but Israel does not know, my people do not understand.* The ox and the ass know how they depend on their master. Why do people have such a hard time?

I think of Hegel’s sarcasm when I read Jesus’ words today: *Whoever does not receive the*

kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it. Are toddlers the best Christians? Does godliness end at puberty? Is a six year old closer to God than a sixty year-old? What does this mean? And what about these glorious words of the Apostle Paul? *When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.* The Apostle Paul is speaking of a spiritual maturing. Paul does not seek to be a spiritual child, but rather a spiritual adult. So what does it mean when Jesus says, *“Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it”*?

Those of you who have been paying close attention to the sermons this summer know that I call this section of Mark’s gospel “Disciples acting badly.” The disciples have realized that Jesus is in some sense the Messiah. But they think that means glory and riches. For Jesus; for his kingdom; and especially for them, the twelve chosen disciples of the Messiah. So they are viewing life in the wrong frame. In the words of Jesus, they are setting their minds on human things, and not on divine things. In the human view of their time, children are not worth much. *“People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them.”* Get those kids away from Jesus! He is a very important person! Many good sermons today are being preached on what kind of people are trivialized and overlooked in our own society. Are children seen as marginal and less important in our society today? Or might we say that of the elderly and the disabled? What about people with bodies that don’t look like the celebrities and athletes that our society esteems— I daresay, worships? As Christians, are we also being bad disciples, and overlooking divine things in our obsession with human notions? Jesus of Nazareth— whatever you want to say about him— saw the people on the margins, and valued the people on the margins. The lepers, the prostitutes, the tax collectors. The women, the children, the disabled, the poor. In his own words, “the least of these” in the eyes of the world. His brothers and sisters in his own eyes.

If we are humble before God, then we must be modest with our fellow human beings. Where God is concerned, “no one may boast,” Paul wrote. Where God is concerned, no one may boast. And guess what? God is always concerned, and everywhere concerned. So we need to stand with those on the margins, to see ourselves as no better than “the least of these,” and in that sense, to *receive the kingdom as a little child*. If you can get that, congratulations, you are very much on the right path. Humility with our God *necessitates* modesty with our fellow human beings. *What does the Lord require of you, O mortal, but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?*

“Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” One thing Jesus means can be detected from the context. Disciples acting badly. Disciples not being modest with regard to those around them. The second meaning that I find in Jesus’ words is about how precarious we human beings are, how vulnerable we are. We have a *mortal* precariousness, and we have a *moral* precariousness. We are precarious *mortals* because our health, our wealth, and our very lives can vanish in a matter of seconds. As the expression goes, I can get hit by a truck later today. Martin Luther liked to use the expression “worm food.” We can be in the ground tomorrow, feeding the worms. Or we can be in a wheelchair, or homeless, or hungry, or blind.

We are precarious in our mortality.

We are also *morally* precarious. Most of us have done enough wrong in our lives to be in bad standing with God. Most Lutherans acknowledge that we have done enough wrong in the last week to be in bad standing with God. *In thought, word, and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone. We have not loved God with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.* We don't have a firm footing upon which we can presume God's favor. We are morally precarious.

So this *mortal* precariousness and this *moral* precariousness is part of what I think Schleiermacher meant when he spoke of our sense of absolute dependence. Children, of course, are more transparently dependent on adults. For protection, for food, for affirmation, for love. Children seem very needy, because they are very needy. But adults are just as needy. We're just better at masking it. But this is the reality that Schleiermacher was hinting at. And it is what people mean when they say, "There but for the grace of God go I." It's a confession of vulnerability, of *mortal* precariousness and *moral* precariousness. A sense of absolute dependence upon the goodness of God. "*Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.*"

In the gospels, the concept of the "kingdom of God" or the "kingdom of heaven" is mentioned approximately one hundred times. Christians debate exactly what this expression means. With good reason. Jesus often uses parables to talk about it, so his own descriptions often employ metaphors, and are not infrequently mysterious. In today's gospel, Jesus uses two different verbs. *Receive* the kingdom of God. And *enter* the kingdom of God. Sometimes Christians are so obsessed with *entering* the kingdom of God— which they think means heaven— that they sometimes fail to think about *receiving* the kingdom of God. And when Christians do that, we may be making the same mistake as the disciples. *Entering* the kingdom is something that I do. I'm active. I take the journey, I cross the bridge, I enter the gate, I reach my destination. But to *receive* the kingdom— that is passive. And I think that is part of what Jesus means when he says "*as a child.*" We receive the kingdom first. And later we enter the kingdom. Jesus used both verbs. We would be mistaken to take one without the other.

"And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them." He hugged, he touched, and he blessed. The disciples spoke sternly to them. But he hugged and blessed them. Sometimes churches and Christians need to do a little less stern speaking. And a little more hugging and blessing. Amen.