

“Children”

Mark 10:13-16

A sermon preached by the Rev. Douglas M. Donley

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It’s mother’s day. It’s a day to celebrate and to honor those who have brought us into this world. I can’t help but think of people like Char Follett who birthed two wonderful daughters and who helped so many grow into the free and wise people God had intended them to be. Mother’s Day can be poignant when our mothers are in our memories.

I think of other mothers whom some of us are just starting to visit in person once again. There’s a mutual aching for the intimacy that we shared once with those who have given us birth. It’s a day for expectant parents to imagine what they will be like as parents.

It’s a complicated day for those who cannot or choose not have children. Is motherhood all hallmark?

Did your family life resemble Norman Rockwell or Norman Bates?

It’s also a complicated day if there are strained relationships with those who birthed us or raised us.

For those who have endured the awfulness of outliving your children, a day like this is downright excruciating. For we are not only mourning their loss, but also the loss of identity as a parent of the child who has died.

And so we bring all of these emotions to this day.

The fifth commandment says that we are to honor our parents, which leads me to think there are those who did not honor them at Moses’ time. It probably had less to do with obedience to their opinions and more to do with taking care of them as they get older. The role of child and parent gets reversed as parents get older. And all of a sudden, adult children tend to be more forgiving of their parents’ mistakes. Families can be complicated.

I think the common denominator is not so much about parents, but the fact that we were all children once. Some of us are still children. Bill Schaffer was fond of saying that growing old is required, but growing up is optional. I might modify it to say that growing out is inevitable.

How do we nurture the child within us? How do we honor those parts of us that long to be nurtured? How do we support those who are at their wits end while trying to raise these children?

I have enjoyed reading over Liz Weinfurter’s Facebook feed. It used to hold transcripts of daily conversations between her and her daughters. As they have gotten older, now Liz imagines the thought patterns of the new family dog who thinks everything is a tasty meal and who has a sense of “this is the best day ever!”

Mark’s Gospel has Jesus lecturing the disciples about the children among them. They are coming up to Jesus and touching him. The disciples, in the annoying self-imposed role of the purity police, object to this. They know that if the child is unclean, that would make Jesus unclean. I’m not talking about dirty hands and feet or drippy noses. I’m talking about being part of a family that has done something which made them forbidden to be a part of the community of faith.

Maybe they had a debt.

Maybe they had sinned.

Maybe they had a blemish.

Maybe the mother was in her cycle.

There was a reason to keep children away, they can be super-spreaders of uncleanness.

So, the disciples probably criticized the parents for keeping the children out of control, which makes me think that the disciples didn't have children of their own. They certainly did not have to juggle homeschooling, work, child care and elder care. Or maybe they had left their wives to take care of all of that, making them even more clueless.

O how we wish we could have children around us right now. I remember when our children were younger and we brought them to church. They would be passed around from one to another. Church was a place where they could be embraced with all of their enthusiasm and rambunctiousness. We all remember sermons where one or both of my daughters would hold on to my legs, sometimes hiding under my robe.

Jesus admonished the disciples and told the children to come to him. I remember an old painting of Jesus with a big smile on his face and children of all races in and around him. Some were paying attention, others were lost in their own games. I remember the old song:

Jesus loves the little children, all the little children of the world. Red and yellow black and white they are precious in his sight Jesus loves the little children of the world.

He put their sticky and drippy and squirmy selves in his lap and told the disciples, to remember their younger selves.

Remember their sense of wonder.

Remember their vulnerability.

Remember the potential that they hold.

Remember how fragile they are and how quick they are to heal.

Remember how dependent they are, even though they try to be independent.

Remember that there is a part of you that is in them.

Remember that they learn every day by the way we treat them and ignore them.

They are like a mirror.

When Jesus said the last shall be first, what better object could he use than a squirmy child. Pay attention to them and you will be on your way to knowing what God's community is supposed to be like.

This week, children are being reunited that were ripped away from their parents at the border during the last administration. Detailed records were not kept and the parents still live in fear, compounding the challenges of finding the parents. News came of four young people being reunited with their parents, and there was much rejoicing. But so many more still live in fear and sadness. Let the children come and do not hinder them for they point the way to the kin-dom of God, what Wendell Berry calls the Great Economy.

Ched Myers in his book, *Say to this Mountain* wrote: "Mark's gospel holds a vision of society, church, and family that is based on access and acceptance. To become like a child is to acknowledge the place and condition of the most vulnerable ones in our midst—our children. To be in compassionate solidarity with children is to confront the roots of violence in our society. This includes speaking out against the patriarchal mindset that promotes male privilege and legitimizes an abuse of power which often leads to violence against women and children. To construct a truly nonviolent life, we must weed out the structures and practices of violence at their roots in the most basic levels of human community. As parents, families, or communities of faith, we must rededicate ourselves to the struggle to convey God's blessing of children, so that children may have the life that they deserve" (*Say to This Mountain* 1997:122)

I think of Kahlil Gibran's famous poem entitled "On Children". It has been set to music by Sweet Honey in the Rock and so many others. It contains ancient wisdom about holding on and letting go.

On Children

Kahlil Gibran

Your children are not your children.

They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself.

They come through you but not from you,

And though they are with you yet they belong not to you.

You may give them your love but not your thoughts,

For they have their own thoughts.

You may house their bodies but not their souls,

For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow,

Which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams.

You may strive to be like them,

But seek not to make them like you.

For life goes not backward nor tarries with yesterday.

You are the bows from which your children

As living arrows are sent forth.

The archer sees the mark upon the path of the infinite,

And He bends you with His might

That His arrows may go swift and far.

Let your bending in the archer's hand be for gladness;

For even as He loves the arrow that flies,

So He loves also the bow that is stable.

That last verse about children being the arrow and we are the pliable bow is often left out of musical settings. I resonate with the imagery of children point us in a different direction. For children ultimately go where they will. We can create for them the roots from which they will grow, but eventually they will fly off like an arrow, like a seedling caught on a breeze. And we stand in wonder. Have we done right by them? If so, we tearfully rejoice at their freedom and wave goodbye as they chart their course. If we have not done right by them, we wonder how to repair the breaches. Through it all we remember that we are all part of the tissue of humanity where God is the creator, redeemer and sustainer of us all. And the Beloved Community, the Great Economy, the Kin-dom of God is the target.

So on this Mother's Day, contemplate the people who made an impact on your life. Think about those who bent the bow and sent you on your way. And think about those for whom you bend your bow. Let us give thanks and recommit ourselves to be stewards of the lives God has entrusted to us.

Let me close with a song by my friend Tom Burkett, written for the dedication of his daughter Sarah thirty something years ago.

C G C
 In the Garden Eden God spoke to the man
 C G C
 And the woman back before the world began
 F dm
 "pain will come with girl and boy
 F dm
 But every life will bring you joy
 F G
 in living and in all the things you plan."

C G C
 Many years ago a little boy was born
 C G C
 Strangers looked up at the sky upon that morn
 F dm
 When the boy became a man
 F dm
 a different kind of life began
 F G
 For us and we're still living it today.

Chorus:

 F G C C7
 These two little arms may lift a falling heart
 F G C C7
 These two bright eyes may see the answers clear
 F G C am
 This tiny voice may someday speak the words that make the storm clouds part
 F G
 And through your life the Lord will love you and we will hold you in our hearts

So we watch in wonder as the seasons spin
 Mothers feel the quickening of life within
 Then just as the lord hath spoke
 The promise of our joy and hope
 is right here in our hands to love and share.

(Chorus)

Will you stand with us to bless a child today
 Help him answer questions guide him on his way
 Will you give him love and care
 just when you think there's none to spare
 And will you laugh to see him run and play?

(Chorus)