

The Stigma of Smallness
Mark 10:2-16
October 21, 2012

Some Pharisees came and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" "What did Moses command you?" he replied. They said, "Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away." "It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law," Jesus replied. "But at the beginning of creation God 'made them male and female.' 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate." When they were in the house again, the disciples asked Jesus about this. He answered, "Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her. And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery." People were bringing little children to Jesus to have him touch them, but the disciples rebuked them. When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, "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." And he took the children in his arms, put his hands on them and blessed them.

Grace, mercy, and peace from the One, who loves all the little children, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Imagine that you are the CEO of a company that performs some activity that is absolutely vital for the survival of the entire human race. Further imagine that the executives who work for you are the biggest bunch of numbskulls and blockheads around. They mess up one thing after another. It's like trying to work with Larry, Curly, Moe, Abbot, Costello, Beatle Bailey, Charlie Brown, and Ziggy.

Now, remember, your company does something that people cannot survive without. How frustrated would you be? How long would it take you to fire this motley crew of goof-ups and hire some competent people?

The situation I just described is exactly where Jesus found himself. But he wasn't working with Larry, Curly, Moe, and the gang. Jesus was working with Peter, Andrew, John, James, Philip, Nathanael, Matthew, Thaddaeus, James the Lessor, Simon the Zealot, Thomas, and Judas. Jesus had his own version of The Three Stooges four times over.

Murphy's Law seems to be the S.O.P (standard operation procedure) for the disciples. If it could be said wrong, they said it wrong. If it could be done wrong, that's what they did. Two weeks ago we heard the disciples saying the wrong things by arguing about which one was the most important. Last week we heard about the disciples doing the wrong thing when they tried to stop a man from doing good in the name of Christ just because he didn't belong to their exclusive group.

Instead of working to draw themselves closer to each other and to draw other believers

into their midst, they were building walls to separate themselves from each other and walls to keep out all but their own kind.

Today we see another example of what a disciple of Christ is not supposed to be doing. In today's Gospel, we hear the familiar story of how the disciples tried to keep parents with small children away from Jesus. We need to consider this story from four directions; the motives of the parents, the motives of the disciples, the reaction and teaching of Jesus, and what does this have to say to us.

The parents, especially the mothers, are innocent. According to the custom of the day, mothers made sure that their children were touched and blessed by a distinguished rabbi after their first birthday.

We need to stop here for a little Greek lesson so we can get the picture of exactly what was going on. While the word that Mark used for children, (*piadia*) "piadia" refers to children anywhere from one to twelve years old, the later reference to Jesus taking them up in his arms tells us these were very small children.

In telling the same story, Luke tells us: *People were also bringing babies to Jesus to have him touch them* (Lk 18:15a NIV). The word that Luke uses for babies is (*breph*) "brepha," which actually means, an infant, a babe in arms.

The other piece of Greek we need to know is the word Mark uses which the text translates as "brought." The tense of this Greek verb suggests that the parents didn't just make one effort to get to Jesus but that they tried and kept on trying.

Now let's put these two facts together so we can get a good picture of what this scene looked like. Anxious mothers with squirming, squealing babies were pushing and jostling to get a place in line to be sure Jesus would bless their children. And we don't want to look down on these parents. If Jesus were here right now, wouldn't you want him to touch and bless your children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren?

However, even though the parents' motives were pure, it must have created quite a bit of noise and commotion. It's also important to remember that when this happened Jesus was teaching on the sanctity to marriage – an important subject. So, we have Jesus teaching the people and well-meaning parents trying to have their children blessed. Now we can look at the reaction of the disciples.

The disciples undoubtedly felt some obligation to protect Jesus and to support his priorities. After all, they were his disciples. They loved and respected their master so they took swift and decisive action to remove the folks who were trying to hinder his teaching and impose on his time. I'm sure they felt that teaching and working miracles should be what occupied Jesus' time not touching the babies of overzealous mothers.

However, as pure as the motives of the disciples might have been, their true feelings were wrong. If we picture a teaching rabbi, nosey children, impatient mothers, and over-

protective disciples, I don't think it would be wrong to assume that the disciples weren't being as gentle as possible. "Come on, lady. Stay back and keep that kid quiet. Can't you see the people are trying to listen to Jesus?"

There was more than the disdain in the disciples' voices. Their words and actions displayed the low esteem they placed on the children. In those days, children, like women, were treated more like property than like human beings.

By this time these men had spent two years listening to Jesus preach, seeing him perform miracles, and watching how he interacted with and valued people, but they still hadn't gotten the message. Listen to the last part of the reading from two weeks ago: *[Jesus] took a little child and had him stand among them. Taking him in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me"* (Mark 9:36-37 NIV).

Even Jesus saying that caring for the helpless is a way of receiving both him and the Father, could not penetrate the disciples' arrogance. They not only had the idea that some people were more worthy of Jesus' time than others, they thought they had the right to decide just who was worthy.

Overanxious parents brought a negative response from the disciples which brought an angry response from Jesus. You can bet that Jesus didn't say, "Come on, boys. Don't be so harsh." The text says that Jesus was greatly displeased. His reaction was probably more like, "Hey, knock it off. Leave those people alone."

The disciples didn't think the children were important enough for Jesus, but Jesus elevated these children to the top of the scale of values by which a person enters the kingdom of God. Contrary to the usual interpretation of this passage, the qualities of humility, peace, and joy are not the things that earn a child the first place in the kingdom. If you've ever spent much time around children, you know that, in their own way, children can be the most arrogant, hostile, and sullen of all creatures.

The quality of children, that brings them to the forefront of kingdom thinking, is their lack of power and their need for help. A babe in arms has no positional power or personal power that they can fall back on. They have no influence or strength. The only thing a child can do is place his or her complete trust in the protection and nurturing of a loving parent.

This is the quality that Jesus says will move a person from damnation to salvation. Not money. Not social position. Not looks, brains, or charisma. The person who will be saved is the person, who like an infant, places himself or herself in the arms of God and trusts God alone for their well-being both for now and eternity.

Let's turn our attention to what this text has to say to us today. You see, there are only two choices for today's churches and today's Christians. We must take either the attitude of the disciples or the attitude of Jesus.

Unfortunately, too many churches and Christians fall in line with the disciples thinking. Some churches cater to the rich and powerful; as though money and status mean something to God. Other churches favor the stoic “holier than thou;” as though a person’s outward appearance was a sure predictor of their spiritual condition. But these are surface conditions and God always looks beyond the surface.

The heart that God is looking for is the heart of someone who recognizes their helpless condition. God loves nothing more than when someone says: *God, have mercy on me, a sinner* (Lk 18:13 NIV). That is the only attitude that will open the doors of heaven.

The people of Prince of Peace Lutheran Church are Jesus’ disciples in Farmington Hills. There plenty of helpless children and adults around us. How will we react? Will we be like the disciples who tried to pick and choose who was allowed to come to Jesus? Or will we throw the doors wide open, inviting anybody and everybody to come and enjoy the Lord? Will our attitude be like Jesus, who came to serve and not to be served?

As Christ’s disciples, our duty is to seek out the helpless, the lonely, the destitute, the poor, the emotionally wrecked, and the spiritually destroyed. Our Savior wants us to gather all these and bring them to him so he can put his hands on them and bless them. I pray that God will empower us to that end.