



Roanoke, Virginia

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## ***“Reimagined: Inheritance”***

*Part VI of the Sermon Series, “Reimagined.”*

*Mark 10:13-16*

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### **Mark 10:13-16**

<sup>13</sup> People were bringing little children to [Jesus] in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. <sup>14</sup>But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, ‘Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. <sup>15</sup>Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.’ <sup>16</sup>And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

### **Sermon**

I can not begin to tell you how many photos and videos my husband Chris and I have of our daughter on our phones. We have saved nearly everything from clips of baby gurgles and first steps up to the most recent video of three-and-a-half-year-old Eleanor walking her baby doll and our patient-as-Job dog on a leash lap after lap around the inside of our house.

If you’re an aunt or an uncle, a grandparent or friend, no doubt you have received some unsolicited photos or videos via text or social media of children in your



circle doing both adorable and very mundane things. On behalf of parents everywhere, I apologize. (It's just so darn hard not to click share.)

Ours is a culture that says it values children. Our church has a preschool founded decades ago to nurture and teach young girls and boys. Our worship service has a special time for children, we have programs like Children, Worship, and Wonder, Sunday school, and Kids' Fellowship. Our nursery staff and children's ministry volunteers are carefully chosen, trained and background checked. We value these children as family, having vowed at their baptisms to help raise and care for them. They are an important part of our family of faith.

It is hard for us to imagine it now, but in the first century Hellenistic world, children were of little account. They were the property of their fathers. In fact, if a father didn't claim a child, that child was often left out in the elements. As a part of a household, children were seen as non-people. Certainly, there were parents who loved their children, but those children had no legal rights, no influence, no standing. They were utterly dependent, utterly powerless, utterly vulnerable.

Most reports about children in Mark's Gospel indicate to us that childhood was a treacherous stage of life. We hear about daughters who die (5:21), a child who is demon possessed (7:25), a son seized by a spirit (9:17), children who are servants (9:35), children who are rejected (10:13), left alone (10:29), and betrayed (13:12). History tells us that in ancient agrarian societies up to 50% of all children never reached the age of two. What a tenuous, dangerous stage of life.

In Mark 10, Jesus is on the road to Jerusalem with his disciples. People crowded around him wherever he went. At some point, he's entered a house to preach and teach. The crowds have grown so numerous that people are spilling out of the house and listening out in the sun through the open door and open windows. It's during this scene that someone, perhaps many, have the idea that they should bring their children to Jesus – maybe he would bless them. It was an unusual choice, really. And sadly, it's not too hard for us to imagine why the disciples would try to stop them. Jesus is busy doing and saying important things. Surely, it's their job to protect Jesus' time from these disruptive little people.

Just before we've come to our passage, Jesus has announced his intention to go to Jerusalem to die. In response, his disciples had argued about who was the greatest. Jesus in turn tells them that to be great is to serve, and the very heart of the kingdom is about welcoming the powerless, the vulnerable. In fact, he says that whenever you welcome and honor a child – one who had the least status and power in the ancient world – you are actually welcoming and honoring Jesus. Now, on the heels of this



conversation about the purpose of the law, here in Mark 10 some folks bring their children to be blessed and the disciples try to keep them away.

It's easy for us to judge those disciples. But it's also possible that we might have behaved quite similarly.

In my previous church, Second Presbyterian in Indianapolis, the worship services were large. The sanctuary seats 800, and on big church days like Easter, each service was packed. This particular Easter Sunday, the choir processed through the sanctuary and on up into the choir loft – which was a balcony at the rear of the sanctuary. The music was powerful – there were guest musicians, the choir voices swelled, and their Easter joy reached a crescendo.

Now there's something you should know about Second Indy. The formality of the space, the stone floors, the carefully choreographed worship services, could give off the undertone that children ought to be seen and not heard. Though the church really *is* warm and inviting, and actually *does* love children, at first glance, especially to a child, the place is austere and intimidating.

When the choir finished their opening anthem that Sunday, no one made a sound. You could have heard a pin drop. ...Until little Matthew started cheering.

Probably about 8 years old at the time, Matthew was autistic. He had hung on every motion of the choir's movement through the sanctuary, every note from the trumpets' tune. As the choir moved up into their balcony choir loft, Matthew moved in place with them, turning a full 180 degrees in his pew – never taking his eyes off them. His parents were thrilled to see him so engaged. But when the music stopped, and a deafening hush fell over the sanctuary, Matthew stood up in his pew, clapped as though his favorite team had just scored the winning goal, and cried up to the choir loft at the top of his lungs: THANK YOU!

For those of us who knew Matthew, that was a beautiful Easter – he surely was saying what we were all thinking. But for most adults in that full sanctuary – this child's behavior was way out of line. Heads jerked in the family's direction and Matthew's mother turned beet red as she tried to coax her exuberant son back down into the pew.

I can picture Mark's scene: the disciples and other curious folk gathered in close, listening intently to Jesus when a gaggle of children burst through the door. Boys and girls, loud, dusty, snotty-nosed, hair tangled and askew fall into the room pushed by parents seeking hope, seeking more, seeking a better life for their children through the touch of this man.



Jesus welcomed not just one such child, but many. He welcomed them. He laid his hands on their heads. And he blessed them.

Jesus made space – physical and instructional space – for children of all ages. Unlike his disciples, he doesn’t chase the children away so the adults can have important “adult” conversations. Instead, he hugs the children (for the Greek “to take up in one’s arms” means “to hug”<sup>1</sup>) and reminds the disciples that the kingdom of God is for them, too.

Six days out of seven, Eleanor and I make the trip from our house in Raleigh Court here to Mountain Avenue. We always take the same route down Memorial and pass the bright white steeple of Heights Community Church. Often, as we’re driving, the scene sparks a theological question from our daughter. “Mommy, where is God?” “Mommy, is God up there at the top of the church?” And she often offers strange little one-liners like, “Mommy, before I was born, I was with God.” And “Mommy, please be quiet so I can talk to God.”

Clearly, she knows how to get her pastor mother to turn off Morning Edition on the way to school. But maybe she makes those comments because to her, at every little moment she’s open to the possibility—the possibility that God’s kingdom is just within reach. Children have the incredible ability to be open to possibility. They don’t write things off as impossible because the world tells them that it’s so. They are wide open to the mystery.

To enter the kingdom of heaven, one must receive the kingdom like a child.

Jesus’ command to welcome children is not only about our children. Just ten days ago Children’s Trust hosted an event in the Roanoke City Market where the names of 15,277 victims of child abuse in SW Virginia were lifted up. These victims were from the past year alone —and it took over half a day to read their names aloud ...

*Jane Doe, Roanoke County, 15 years old*

*John Doe, Botetourt Country, 8 years old*

*Jane Doe, Roanoke City, 2 years old*

*John Doe, Roanoke City, 6 months old*

The names went on like this for hours. The numbers are overwhelming. It’s too many. As I stood and listened, I thought of our Gospel text. I hoped and prayed that these precious children, our children, might someday know the love and safety those children felt in Jesus arms.



Brothers and sisters, we have work to do. Our children need Jesus more than ever before. Our children need us more than ever before.

Each child— boy or girl, regardless of race or social or economic status—each child should grow up believing that they are loved, they are capable, and they belong. They have value because the God that created them in the very beginning is the God who welcomes them into his arms, who lays his hands upon their heads and blesses them. Our Lord Jesus says, “Let the little children come to me. Do not stop them.”

It is our job to do the same. To welcome those children, to welcome their questions and wonder, to protect them, to pray for them, to look to them as exemplars of joy, trust, and possibility.

We know that Jesus’ blessing is for each and every child—as it is for each and every one of us. I wonder, friends, when was the last time someone blessed you? It’s not a common practice in many of our circles—in fact, it’s a practice largely lost in most Protestant spheres. Today is Preschool Sunday, *so I feel like I could get away with asking you to stretch yourselves a smidge*. Take a breath with me. And then take your thumb and draw a cross on your forehead. If you’re sitting next to your child, do the same for him or her. And say the words with me: “Jesus loves me.”

Remember this blessing. Jesus loves you. Your pastor loves you. If you have a child at home, I encourage you to offer this blessing every morning when you and your child part. Make the sign of the cross, lay your hands upon their heads, and say these words to them, “Jesus loves you, and so do I.”

Jesus gave his blessing freely. Why shouldn’t we? The covenant is there for you, you inherit this grace.

Friends, Christ’s kingdom is wide. His welcome is for you. As a child, may you receive this gift with open arms.

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<sup>i</sup> Taylor Lewis Guthrie Hartman, “Ordinary 27, Year B: Mark 10:2-16” for By the Vine Preaching Group, February 2015.

