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Here for the Chaos
Isaiah 43:1-3(a) | Mark 10:13-16

Lucy needs to wear shoes to church, she told me.

I remember that day.

I felt like I was lucky that all of my children were at church wearing underpants with some additional items of clothing covering various other parts of their body. Lucy, the youngest of 3, had been ushered into the van by older siblings and quite frankly, no one noticed the lack of shoes until we were walking into church. I did have her emergency shot, the one that has to accompany her everywhere, and a sippy cup and a container of cheerios. And I literally did not have one more... care... to give about getting little wiggly bodies physically to church.

So when this person, concerned with decorum and rules, said this to me it was so hard to maintain my resting polite face.

“Let the children come to me!” Jesus told his disciples.

“Let the children come to me!”

And thus began an entire industry of depicting Jesus as a bearded gentle giant, surrounded by laughing and delightful children.

You have seen these pictures. Aren't they precious? They haunt bookmarks, children's Bibles, and all sorts of inspirational posters.

The disciples did not want those precious, precocious children to bother Jesus, but Jesus welcomed them and their cute little grins and twinkling eyes.

And the church delights in the idea that these well-mannered, cute, precocious, precious children are out there for us to welcome. Perhaps we also delight in the idea that, like them, in their delighted innocence, without a care in the world, we might enter the kingdom of heaven - that with childlike wonder we might draw near to the divine.

And so we make an accidental idol of precious innocence.

And if that is what this passage is about we can simply sing Jesus Loves the Little Children and get out of here a little early.

That's not all this passage is about.

First of all, depicting children as symbols of precious innocence is a problem.

Parenting is devastatingly hard sometimes - for some folx it is devastatingly hard all day and all night all the time. Raising kids whose life forces and way of being takes up all of the space in your family system is hard. Raising kids who are

differently abled, who are neuro-diverse, who have big emotions and lots of self doubt, who use their bodies to express anger and say things that cut through our hearts - all of this is hard. Raising kids in a society that values some of them more than others - because of how they look, or how their brains work, or how their bodies work...is hard.

And on top of that, pretending that the Bible's emphasis is celebrating children for their sweet preciousness is soul-crushing to those who long for children of their own, but have faced infertility, or miscarriage, or the death of a child.

And so, setting aside this accidental idol of precious innocence, let's see if we can't get at what Mark is actually doing with this passage by looking at the stories that surround it.

In the gospel of Mark, this passage, let the children come to me, follows a series of stories where Jesus takes care of folk whom others were likely to ignore. He cast out a demon. He healed a bleeding woman and raised the temple leader's daughter. He healed the sick in Gennesaret, he tended to the Syrophenician' woman's daughter, he cured a deaf man, he cured a blind man, and he healed a boy of an unclean spirit. These were the people who, because of rules, decorum, and tradition, were considered to be untouchable , chaotic - worth very little.

Let them all come to me, Jesus says. Let me touch them. Let me heal them.

And after all of this, Jesus finds the disciples arguing over who is the greatest. Mark is really creating tension in this telling. There are so many people who need healing and help but, by all means, Jesus' board of disciples, let's spend energy arguing amongst yourselves.

And do you remember what Jesus tells them - the disciples arguing over who is the greatest? "Whoever wants to be first shall be last." "Whoever welcomes the child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

Why are children the hook in this response to an argument about greatness?

Who is the greatest?

Let me tell you something - the first shall be last. If you welcome children you welcome me.

Jesus is operating in a world where the children are last. Where the children are least. Welcoming children! **This is an exclamation point on a long list of scandalous encounters! It's like we have finally reached the final stop in the race for the bottom.** And Jesus' disciples are so scandalized that they - promptly forget this teaching.

We find the passage for today separated from this "first shall be last" passage by only by an exorcism and a diatribe about divorce, so that it is shocking when the disciples shoo the

children away from Jesus. And let's be clear, these aren't children frolicking through a park with lollipops. That the parents want Jesus to touch their children tells us something - they are desperately seeking healing or blessing, or the holy mystery of the healing that comes with blessing. Do you know how hard it is to get children packed up and to Jesus? It's hard. It makes adults cry. And the disciples were all like - oh no, we can't be bothered with this worthless, chaotic nonsense.

And Jesus is indignant, according to Mark. Indignant. I imagine him being like - stop it. Stop it. Sit down. Now listen to me - this is not how it's going to be. It's the last and the least that this whole thing that we are doing together is about.

This reading is bolstered by the very next passage in Mark - the story of the rich man who asks what must I do to inherit eternal life. This was a man who had kept all the commandments, who understood the rules perfectly well, but who lacked empathy and comradery with those whose lives were struggle. And Jesus called him on it - you have to give up this stuff that insulates you from struggle. And the man declined to do so.

We can see that Jesus' instruction to let the children come to him is about a way of being that is significantly more expansive than making space for cute kids. It's about being here for the chaos of hard lives, of hard living, of living that is made harder by the trappings of our bodies and our brains

and our feelings and our hunger and our exhaustion and our ... pretentious. .

I've been thinking a lot about church, about the institutional church, and the decorum and rules that are often used to keep institutions in tact - and how churches that value all sorts of different ways of being and all sorts of different life experiences might have to behave a little less like institutions to be true to their calling.

Far from being precious and comforting, this passage is kind of devastating. It's like Jesus is telling us to stop it with the gatekeeping. And to figure out how to become one with the chaos so that we might enter the kingdom of heaven.

It's ok to sit with this devastation. It's ok for scripture to poke and prod us.

But that's not all there is. We follow a risen Lord. We follow Jesus who is redeeming us, even now. And we carry with us promises like the one found in Isaiah 43:

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;

I have called you by name, you are mine.

²When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;

and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;

when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,

and the flame shall not consume you.

This is a promise for you, for me, for the children at the border, for the refugees who have come into our city, for those who

are burdened and surviving and living with all sorts of brokenness and marginalizing and othering - Child of God, the Holy One calls you by name. In the deepest waters and the hottest fires, God is with you.

It is in the chaos of our disordered lives, not despite it, that we draw near to the kingdom of God. It is by racing for the bottom, or the margins, or away from precious order that we draw near to the kingdom of God. I am here for the chaos. Won't you join me?