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Let the Children Dawdle
Mark 10: 13-16

“Let the children come to me,” Jesus says. “Do not prevent them, for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.” What a beautiful sentiment - and when we repeat these words we use the lilt of a sing-song. “Let the children come to me.” But if Jesus did say these words - and if he said them in the context that Mark sets these words, it seems more likely to me that the words were said in frustration. It’s more like this: “Let the *children* come to me.” It’s more of a - for God’s sakes - cry of exasperation.

Jesus has been dealing with adults all day. The blessing of the children comes in the middle of a long series of teachings. In fact when he turns to the children he has just finished a discourse on that most adult matter of divorce. And no sooner have the children gone away than he counsels a rich man on financial planning. In the midst of these weighty concerns of adulthood, it’s easy to imagine Jesus receiving the children as a delight and a relief.

Of course the blessing of the children in the midst of these serious lectures is also a means of instruction. Jesus pauses his teaching to direct the gaze of the crowd to the children. In giving his attention to the little ones, he invites the attention of everyone to the children. We all understand that no adult holding a little child can keep the attention of the crowd. Everyone is looking at the peaceful sleeping baby. All eyes are on the squirmy toddler. So by inviting the children forward, Jesus takes himself out of the center of the action and puts the children in the place of priority. This is a pedagogical strategy. When Anitra leads a children’s sermon, who do we really think Anitra is teaching? Is she instructing the children? Or is she speaking to us? This is the artful ambiguity now facing the pharisees and the scribes. How are they to understand Jesus’s treatment of the children? Do they wait for it to end - impatiently and condescendingly? Or do they recognize that the children are preaching to them?

The truth is that children are always the authors of the best sermons. Maybe you’ve heard the old adage attributed to St. Francis of Assisi - “Preach the Gospel at all times. When necessary, use words.” Children have the gift to preach wordlessly. To be in the presence of a child is to receive the Good News: there is new life! The Covenant has been renewed. In children we see the Empty Tomb. We perceive in children the resurrection because they point us toward a future beyond our own lives. When we are gone, there is another generation; God is faithful to Creation beyond our own limited experience of it.

Speaking of climate change, incivility in our politics, regressive authoritarianism, Marilynne Robinson has suggested that these qualities point to our failure to look to the children. In an interview for her most famous novel *Gilead*, Robinson said, “The loss of seriousness seems to me to be, in effect, a loss of hope. I think that the thing that made people rise to real ambition,

real gravity, was the sense of posterity, for example. People actually wanted to make the world good for people in generations that they would never see. I'm really disturbed by the degree to which I don't hear people saying, 'Are we leaving the world better than we found it? I think we are a generation that perhaps could not answer in the affirmative, and it is the evasion of the larger responsibility of being only one generation in what one hopes will be an infinite series of fruitful generations. There is a selfishness in refusing to understand that we are passing through; others will come, and they deserve certain courtesies and certain considerations from us.'

Speaking less theologically, we all know what a joy it is to be in the presence of a child - how it opens up chambers in our hearts once closed, how it reveals new dimensions of life not previously experienced. One book I've read recently is a memoir of fatherhood. The author, Keith Gessen, is from a family of Russian exiles to the United States. His parents were Soviet Jews who sought a brighter future for their literary children. Gessen and his sibling, Masha, are both highly accomplished writers of fiction and nonfiction. They have become leading interpreters of the war in Ukraine. All of Gessen's more important writing projects were put on hold when his son, Raphael, was born. Between the sleepless nights and the tireless daytime babysitting, Gessen says the only thing he could find time to write were short reflections on his experience as a parent. Those hilarious and horrifying essays are now published as *Raising Raffi: The First Five Years*.

Keith Gessen writes that he expected most of the ordinary joys and challenges of parenthood. But in some ways his son completely reshaped his life. "We never really knew our neighborhood until Raffi came along," he says, for example. "We were strangers there. The locals ignored us and we ignored them." Gessen says he avoided the guys who loitered at the barbershop down the street. He never spoke to the young man always sitting on the stoop just next door. In years of living in that neighborhood, he never even walked into the community garden just down the street. "And then came Raffi. Suddenly the neighborhood opened up to us." The guy who sat on the stoop had a name. The men who loitered by the barbershop had a little boombox, and Raffi insisted on dancing for them. "And the very first time we left the house with Raffi, when he was just a few days old, we walked into the gate of the community garden. In the next four years, we probably spent more time there than at any other place on earth."

A traditional interpretation of Jesus's blessing of the children is that it admonishes us to embrace a more childlike spirit. Certainly, set between such serious discourses on divorce and wealth, Jesus is lifting up the children as an example of wonder and faithfulness that is at the heart of Christian life. I would add to this only that the children are such a potent symbol of grace. Grace meaning a gift unbidden and a treasure undeserved. "Let the children come," Jesus says, suggesting that with grace we can never stand its way nor hurry it along.

Keith Gessen writes that one of the hardest parts of parenthood was waiting around on his son all the time. In the mornings, when Gessen was trying to get Raffi dressed and fed and out the door to start his day, Raffi would be dawdling aimlessly. "Not active resistance, not sabotage, but dawdling!" Gessen thought this might mean some kind of problem for Raffi. Maybe he was

dawdling all the time because he was somehow different from other children. Maybe he should get Raffi checked out. In fact he read lots of books on parenting advice, and he found that other fathers were really frustrated with their children dawdling too. It turns out that dawdling is a perfectly normal attribute of childhood. All children are dawdlers, and it seems, all parents are sometimes annoyed by their dawdling.

When Jesus says “Let the children come,” he means that we accept the children as they are and that we look to their example. Receive the gifts of the world with the unpretentious wonder of a child. Enjoy the treasures of the world with playful curiosity. Dawdle in the promise of a new day with faith in what has been provided. To look to the children is not to escape the responsibilities of adulthood, as Jesus spoke to the divorce lawyers and the financial planners, but to put more trust in God’s power and to embrace with hope the resurrection. To look to the children means that we remember God’s faithfulness to future generations, grounding us in our responsibilities as stewards of our communities and our world. To love the children is a tremendous act of faith - walking with hope into an unknowable future, embracing the gifts of the resurrection, learning to receive by grace what we cannot provide for ourselves. Let the children come, that we may perceive the presence of God, and take a break from these adults.