

“The Kin-dom of God”
a sermon by Kyndall Rae Rothaus
concerning Mark 10:13-16
for Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco
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Twice in this short story, Jesus mentions the kingdom of God, and since he said it in the presence of children, I’m imagining all the discussions on the way home. “Mom, what’s a kingdom?” Or “Dad, Jesus said the kingdom of God belongs to me! Why did he say that? When will I get it? Is it hiding? How do I find it? Are we almost home? I need to pee!”

I imagine parents attempting to answer these complicated questions, not really knowing if they understood Jesus themselves. “Well, darling, you know how Herod is the king? Jesus is saying that one day God will be king and God will be better and kinder than Herod . . . at least, I think that’s what he means . . . but don’t tell anyone I said that because it might be treason.”

“What’s treason? Why isn’t God king now? Couldn’t God just make Herod be nice? Will God’s kingdom have any queens? If the kingdom belongs to me, and I’m just a kid, does that mean kids will be in charge? And could kids make the laws and force everyone to eat dessert for dinner?”

“Oh my goodness, child. Mark my words: this is the last time we take you to see Jesus.”

How would you answer a child who wanted to understand the kingdom of God? What would you say? Do you even know for yourself what Jesus means?

The truth of it is that when Jesus would say “kingdom of God,” he was making a very political statement. He was challenging the earthly authorities and proclaiming a heavenly authority, a new world order, a different system, but he didn’t just mean theocracy. He literally meant a whole new way of being and relating to one another.

Modern theologians have challenged whether “kingdom” is even the best translation for what Jesus intended because “kingdom” implies hierarchy and patriarchy. “Kingdom,” after all, is just an imperfect translation of the Greek word *basileia*, so there is nothing particularly sacred about the word “kingdom.” If, like children, we are willing to use our imaginations, then we are free to imagine newer, more interesting words that better capture the essence of Jesus’ message.

Dr. Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, the mother of *mujerista* theology, made popular the term “kin-dom” as an alternative to kingdom, as in, “we are all kin to one another.” If, like children, we are willing to use our imaginations, we might use words like “kin-dom” to describe Christ’s reign in which we imagine one world family united by the love of Christ, in which we are siblings to one another, in which we joined together by an unbreakable bond. In a kin-dom nothing depends on the oppression of anyone else. Oppression is no more.

And if we use words like “kin-dom” to describe Christ’s reign, then we might understand that everyone in the family matters, from the youngest to the oldest, from the richest to the poorest.

We might begin to see every person we encounter as a child of God, worthy of a place at the table. We might better understand Christ the King, who did not consider equality with God something to be grasped but emptied himself. We might even get a better sense of what Jesus meant when he said the kin-dom of God belongs to people who are like children, that we must welcome God's kin-dom as a child or we will never enter it.

Back in 2015 I wrote this story that for me captures the essence of Jesus' message in these four short verses. I playfully imagined a longer story that took me to the heart of Jesus' vision. Some of you have heard this story before, but I want to retell it, because it's my favorite way to exegete this passage. It's a passage that begs us to use the imagination, don't you think? Here's how I imagine it:

There's this loooong line snaking through the desert, and half the line is made up of people less than four feet tall. It's like waiting for Santa Claus in the mall at Christmas only there were no malls back then, no Santa, no Christmas . . .

It's just a line of kids waiting for Jesus—when Jesus says, “Let the little children come,” they come alright, which, frankly, kinda bothers the disciples . . . these crazy kids are sucking away time from Jesus' work. The disciples huddle together to discuss what to do.

Peter is the first to speak, bursting with passion, but as usual his ideas sink nearly as soon they're spoken. James and John argue for a points-based system to determine which children are most deserving of face time with Jesus. Thomas doubts this will work.

Judas suggests they start charging money for each visit; Matthew says, “That would mean tax implications.” Jesus interrupts. “Hey, can one of you busybodies come get this girl a glass of water? She's thirsty.”

Naturally, the disciples turn to Thaddeus, the low man on the totem pole, the disciple who is usually responsible for making the coffee. Reluctantly he fetches the water, mumbling under his breath, “Always the errand boy.”

The other eleven return to their animated discussion of the problem, which is how no one at all notices what happens to Thaddeus as he grumpily, begrudgingly, squats down to hand this tiny girl in tattered clothing a cup of water. She reaches for the water, her eyes huge eyes and takes long, loud, obnoxious gulps. Thaddeus waits.

She finally hands him the empty cup and he stands to get up, has just turned his back to her when he feels tiny thin arms sling themselves around his legs so that he cannot walk.

He looks down and she is grinning goofily up at him, a few leftover drops of water dangling from her chin. He tries gently to pry her arms away from his legs, but she only giggles and hugs him harder. Thaddeus blinks and smiles a fake smile. He looks up at the other disciples whose huddle is just breaking up to get to work, and once again he is about to miss all the action.

She is laughing out loud now, which catches the attention of other children who all come racing over. In a panic, Thaddeus tries to get away, but alas he is chained to his new companion, and

before he can stop it from happening, he tumbles to the ground in a heap to the delight of all the children.

Parents are smiling down at him as if he has charmed their children on purpose, which somehow makes the whole thing more humiliating. Out of the corner of his eye, he can see James and John drawing up a viewing schedule based on age. Peter is off on his own, building a tent, presumably for Jesus to hide in between showings. Meanwhile someone has called in Martha for backup, and she is frantically putting together snacks. Judas is making up tickets, and Matthew is creating a ledger for record-keeping. Thaddeus sighs. As usual, it is all being solved without him.

He lets his head fall backwards into the sand, and he sighs as the little bodies yank on his limbs and tug on his beard and climb over his belly as if he were a jungle gym. He closes his eyes and tries to endure.

When he opens them again, there she is. The little girl he had given the water to, staring right at him, her nose an inch from his nose, her eyes squinting in a serious way. "I love you!" she says and kisses him right on the forehead.

To his own alarm, Thaddeus feels his heart melting and his insides getting squishy. He stops watching the scurrying disciples and looks instead for Jesus, who, as it turns out, is sitting on the ground much like him with children climbing everywhere, only Jesus has his head thrown back, laughing loudly. His eyes are dancing the way Thaddeus' heart is starting to move around inside his body, and Jesus' whole face is lit up with joy.

"The kingdom of heaven," Jesus is gasping between laughs, "the kingdom of heaven is here."

Thaddeus wants to holler at the clamoring disciples, "Knock it off! Come and watch!" but he knows his voice will go unheeded as usual. So he simply takes off his sandals, wriggles his toes into the ground like a kid on the beach, and worships.

Friends, in the midst of all the chaos, can you pause for a moment from all the organizing, arranging, planning, and controlling, and can you simply observe? Observe a child. Observe a hummingbird. Observe an act of kindness. You cannot force God's kingdom to arrive, but you can open your heart to receive it. You can open your eyes to see where God is already at work.

After a week like this one, you may feel very ready for a new kingdom, a new authority, a new government. You may be desperate for a new kingdom, a godly kingdom, a righteous kingdom, a kingdom in which all voices are heard and not just the voices of the powerful. And so we pray, we beg: God's kingdom come, God's will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

But be careful what you pray for, because God's kin-dom may be as jolting as it is comforting. God's kin-dom on earth will include all sorts of people, including the people you don't like. God's kin-dom will be bigger than your comfort level. God's kin-dom will belong to outcasts and nobodies and immigrants and children. God's kin-dom will bowl you over with its generosity and surprise you with the fierceness of its love. God's kin-dom will embrace the world. Thy kin-dom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.