

19 July 2015

Bring Me the Children
Mark 10-11; Isaiah 11:1-9

Back in the Jewish territory of Galilee, Jesus and his friends set off on their own, trying to stay incognito. Jesus wants some time away from the crowds to teach his closest followers, and one of the things he most wants them to understand is that the Christ comes to earth to take the pain of humanity, not to fight humanity's battles with each other. "The Son of Man is going to be betrayed and killed," he says. "Then he will rise after three days."

His friends say nothing. They have nothing to say, on account of not understanding a word of it. Instead they get into a private discussion in low voices, so Jesus can't hear. At the end of the day, though, while staying at the home of a family in Capernaum, Jesus says, "So what were you talking about so eagerly while we walked?" No one answers. See, what they had been talking about was which one of them was the best disciple. Something tells them he won't be impressed. But Jesus knows. He says, "Come here. Do you want to know which of you is the greatest? It's the one who is the servant of everyone else." He looks over his shoulder and sees the family they're staying with and calls one of the children over to him. "See this child. You need to be like this. Listen. Don't put yourself forward. Don't think too much of yourself. The new kingdom that is coming will be made up of children. So learn from children, and take care of them. I mean that: *Take care of children*. Every time you welcome a child, every time you give one a cup of cold water, you're doing it to me. And if you hurt a child, if you drive a child away from me, it would be better for you to have a boulder hung around your neck and to be thrown into the sea."

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Now Jesus and his friends head south, skirting the region of Judea, where Jerusalem is. Some of the official Jerusalem teachers hear he's there and they send a delegation to ask him a question. They hope to stump him with difficult or controversial questions and make him look stupid or, even better from their perspective, make him say something unpopular, that would alienate the crowds. So they ask, "So what do you think about divorce? Is it all right?"

Jesus says, "You're scholars. What does it say in scripture?"

"Well, Moses says a man can write out an official certificate of dismissal and divorce his wife."

Jesus nods. "That's what it says, all right. And you know why it says that? Because humans are blockheads and no matter what good gift God gives people, they *will* find a way to ruin it. Marriage is a gift of God, where two people become one person. Because we do it badly, the law makes concessions, but one person shouldn't be cut in two."

Back in the house in Capernaum that evening, a crowd gathers to hear Jesus teach. One mother brings her child to him and says, "Jesus! Jesus! Will you bless my baby?" Jesus takes the child on his lap and murmurs quietly to the child. Suddenly other parents start pushing through,

“My child next!” “Do mine, too!” Jesus reaches out for them, but before the kids can get through, some of his friends step in front of him.

“Come on now, parents,” they say. “This isn’t a nursery. Jesus is here to teach, and all these people are here to listen. Take your precious little darlings home, all right?”

“What are you doing?” Jesus asks.

“Um, crowd control?”

“Get out of the children’s way. Now! Bring me the children. Didn’t you hear me tell you? These are what the kingdom of God is made of.” And he took the children in his arms and blessed them. For as long as it took.

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One day, Jesus and his friends are just starting out on their day’s journey when a man in nice clothes races up, calling out, “Good Teacher! I’m glad I caught you! I have a question for you!”

Jesus pauses from tying on his sandals and asks mildly, “Why do you call me good? No one’s good but God, don’t you think?”

The man hesitates. “Well, I . . . but some people are *pretty* good, aren’t they?”

“You think? Hm. Well, never mind that. What’s your question?”

“What do I have to do to inherit eternal life?”

“Well,” Jesus says. “I’m guessing you know the commandments: don’t kill, don’t commit adultery, don’t bear false witness, don’t cheat people. Honor your parents.”

The man sighs with relief. “That’s what *I* thought. And I’ve done all that since I was a boy.”

Jesus looks at him and loves him. “You should be good, then,” he says. “Just one more thing. Go sell everything you have, give the money to the poor, and then come follow me.”

The man stares. “What?” Jesus smiles. “You mean *everything*?” Jesus waits. The man swallows. “I can’t . . . but you don’t understand. It’s not so easy for me. Because I own a *lot*.” Jesus just waits. Finally, the man turns and walks sadly away.

Jesus watches him go. “I know how much you own,” he says softly. “That’s why I asked that.” He turns sadly to his friends. “It’s so hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom,” he says. “Easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle.”

His friends stare at him. “But that’s impossible!”

Jesus nods. "Yes, it is. To us. But nothing's impossible to God. That's your hope."

"Well," Simon Peter says, "the rich man thing isn't a problem for us, at least. We've given up everything to follow you."

Jesus smiles. "Yes you have, my friend. And you will be rewarded for it, both in this life and the next. Not with wealth. Not with power. You'll still be persecuted and hated in this life. But it will be worth it. And after this life, it will be more than worth it. This life is like a testing ground, but backwards. The ones who are last in this life will first in the next one. And the ones who are first in this life, will be last."

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So Jesus decides to go to Jerusalem. His friends aren't sure it's a good idea, since all the people who seem to hate him the most are there, but they set off anyway. As they walk, Jesus tries again, now a third time: "I need you to understand something. When we get to Jerusalem, the Son of Man will be handed over to the teachers there, who will hand him over to the Romans. He'll be spat on, beaten, reviled, and finally killed. But he will rise."

Again the friends say nothing. Their minds appear to be elsewhere. And sure enough, a minute later the brothers, James and John, take him aside. "Teacher? Will you give us something? One thing? If we ask?"

"What do you want?"

"When you're on the throne of Israel, can one of us sit on your right hand and the other on your left?"

Jesus stops. For a moment he looks old. "You think you can drink the cup I'm about to drink?"

"Yes, master."

"Well, you will. And may God help you. Listen to me, all of you! You know that the rulers in this world are all about power, position, authority. But how many times do I have to say this? It's not supposed to be like that with you. You want to be great in God's kingdom? Be a servant! It's why I'm here: to be a servant."

They come to Jericho, the last town of any size before Jerusalem, and the crowds are thick in the streets. Over the noise of the throng, though, one voice calls out, "Jesus! Son of David! Have mercy on me!" The voice is loud and repetitive and insistent, and some of Jesus' friends go over to see. It's a blind beggar, calling out over and over again.

"Hush!" they say. "Stop being a nuisance! We're on a schedule!"

“*What are you doing? Why* do my friends always seem to feel that their job is keep people away? Have I ever asked you to keep certain types away from me? Bring him to me.” Chastened, his friends lead the blind man to Jesus. “What do you want from me?” Jesus asks.

“Sir, I want to see.”

“Then see. Your faith has saved you.”

And the blind man – his name was Bartimaeus – saw. His eyes opened, and the first thing he saw was Jesus’ face. “I’m going with you,” he said.

“Come, then.”

Up the long, steep road from Jericho, and there it is. Jerusalem. The Holy City. The seat of the temple, the center of the Jews’ faith. Some of Jesus’ friends go ahead and find a donkey for Jesus to ride as he enters. A mighty warhorse would be better, or an elephant, but at least he isn’t walking. The people of the city have heard that the great healer from Galilee was coming, and they’re lining the streets, shouting. Some of them are waving palm branches. Someone starts singing a psalm – the one that says “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!” – and then everyone’s shouting it. “Oh Lord, save us!” they yell – in Hebrew *Hosheana!* – and then everyone’s shouting that. Jesus’ friends look at each other and grin. This was what they’d been waiting for. Look at those adoring crowds! *Hosheana!* They arrive at the temple itself, the shouting crowds stirring up the worshippers. “It’s Jesus! The Galilean! The one who comes in the name of the Lord! *Hosheana!*” Cows moo, pigeons coo, lambs bleat from the tables where the merchants sell sacrificial animals. They shout from table to table, bargaining, offering special deals. *Baa! Baa! Moo! Hosheana!*

Jesus just stares. He looks old again. “Now what, master?” asks Simon Peter. “Now what do we do?”

Jesus doesn’t answer for a long time, then says, “Let’s get out of here.”

His friends stare. He’s just going to leave? Now? In the middle of the rally? But Jesus only turns and starts walking back out of town. As he leaves the temple, though, he stops and looks over his shoulder.

“I’ll deal with you tomorrow,” he says.