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October 7, 2018

Psalm 8

Mark 10:13-16

Abington Presbyterian Church

World Communion

## RECEIVING

There used to be a television show called “Allie McBeal.” It was about some lawyers in a Boston firm who had some strange cases and some stranger personalities. The show was noted for vivid sight and sound gags that were almost cartoonish. If a character got mad, his or her face would turn a deep exaggerated red that could outshine Rudolph’s nose. When there was a major change in direction in a conversation, the audience might hear the loud sound of a record player stylus skipping across an album with a screech. The show’s main character, Allie, had great angst about whether she would find a mate with whom to have children before her biological clock went off. At the same time she was apprehensive about the prospect of being a mother. Following the eccentric sight-gag style of the show, anxious Allie would occasionally have a hallucination of a little child running through her office or a courtroom or a room in her house. It was an odd-looking computer-generated kid that vividly illustrated the possibility that her life could be very different. <sup>1</sup>

If we were to insert the “Allie McBeal” style of storytelling into the Gospel of Mark, think of some of the points of emphasis that would highlight what is happening in the part of its story we just heard. Parents were bringing children seeking Jesus’ blessing, but his followers were trying to be gatekeepers who kept the children away from him. When Jesus realizes what his followers are doing, he is indignant. It’s not real often that Jesus is described as getting mad – but this is one of those times. Imagine his face glowing bright red. He demands that his disciples stop blocking the children and he tells them that it is to such as these children that God’s reign belongs. What’s more, those who don’t receive God’s rule in the way that children can, won’t be able to be followers of God. As we see the puzzled looks on the faces of the disciples, I can imagine the sound of a record stylus screeching across an album. This time, there is no computer-generated child

to run through the scene; instead Jesus begins to take the real children up into his arms to lay his hands on them to bless them.

In the ancient Middle East, children were among the most vulnerable members of society, with no real standing or status. When Jesus focuses on the children, if it is an object lesson, it is because he is objecting to their exclusion, proclaiming that they are not to be treated as objects. The disciples were trying to play the role of gatekeepers, determining who gets in and who stays out. They were focused on what they might receive out of the situation. They figured that children could not financially support their ministry, so they saw no reason to give them access to Jesus. But Jesus looks at what the children could receive and he doesn't want to miss the opportunity to be a blessing to them. They get touched, blessed by One who keeps God's love from just being an abstract idea. At the same time, Jesus shows his followers that their movement wouldn't be worth supporting if it doesn't convey the loving welcome of God.

There is an African proverb that says it takes a village to raise a child.<sup>2</sup> It does take more than just the immediate family. When we baptize children into our congregation, it is not just the parents who take vows to show and tell the child about the love of God – the whole congregation takes those vows. It takes a whole church to raise a child. But what Jesus seems to be indicating here is also the reverse – it takes a child or others who are vulnerable to raise a church. In our society, children are the age group who by far are most likely to be living in poverty.<sup>3</sup> But there are also others who are quite vulnerable who also need a demonstration of God's blessing. Those who have suffered abuse do not need to be attacked, denigrated or ignored – they need to be shown the love of God. We have heard this day about people of faith rising to the challenge of being a blessing to refugees of war. At a time when the number of people displaced by war is very high, at a time when our unemployment rates are at record lows, our country is allowing shockingly low numbers of refugees to find refuge here. We who are followers of Jesus Christ might be called upon to challenge the gatekeeping that is going on.

Jesus talks about the ability to receive the reign of God. He says it has to be received in a similar way in which a little child receives such a gift. Entrance to the reign of God can't be purchased or earned, and of course, these can be the primary ways that adults would normally gain access to something. Jesus wants the children to be with him at the center of this community of faith in part so that all can be reminded of a state of utter dependence. Those of us who have reached adulthood do not like the thought of being less than fully independent. But we are in reality utterly dependent upon God's good gifts. Take a deep breath right now. We are in no way self-sufficient. Every minute of our lives, we utterly rely on the oxygen God has placed all around us and we rely upon so much else. We can't buy or earn the goodness and love of God. The good news is that we don't have to do what we can't do. The reign of God comes and invites us in.

Children can't be in charge of their own lives. They cannot meet their own needs. And their presence can remind us how much we are like them, not fully in charge, not totally able to meet our own needs. In such a situation, there is One who seeks to overcome the obstacles to our being blessed by God – even when the primary obstacle is us! Our good, but misplaced intentions sometimes get in the way. Our sense that God's blessings are for some, but not for others is an obstacle God wants to surmount.

Today is World Communion Sunday, a day when Christians all around the world are united in the One who gives of himself fully on our behalf. By invitation, we come to the Lord's Table as those who recognize our own need and as those who turn to the appropriate Source for that need to be met. Entrance to the reign of God is provided to those who can receive it as a gift. As children of God, let us relish the blessing so freely given!

So this day, we can give thanks when children crawl or run across our path. When we see children or others who are particularly vulnerable, and imagine them held in Jesus' arms, perhaps we'll look at our calendars or our arguments, and feel the flow of blood rushing to our faces, leaving them reddened. As we compare our priorities with those of our Lord's, something within us may hear the skipping sound of a needle going over the face of a record causing us to look again at that

person we just wrote off. Let's take that extra look, let's open up our arms and our hearts to welcome God's beloved. By so doing, we might just be opening our hearts to receive the very reign of God.

<sup>1</sup> Ally McBeal, created by David E. Kelley, aired on Fox from 1997 to 2002.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2016/07/30/487925796/it-takes-a-village-to-determine-the-origins-of-an-african-proverb>

<sup>3</sup> <http://kff.org/other/state-indicator/poverty-rate-by-age/> - children 19%; adults 19-64: 11%; adults 65 or greater: 9% in a study using 2016 data.