

## A Place at the Table

Wayne Waibel – 10/03/2021

Why does Jesus keep coming back to the children? Is it because they are among the most vulnerable? Or perhaps they approach the kingdom of God with a simplicity and innocence lacking in adults who have let the world smack those capacities right out of them.

When the Pharisees pose the question to Jesus – they are looking for a response that can be used to fuel their strategy to put Him in the cross hairs of their oppressors – the Roman Empire.

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The fact that Jesus knows what they are up to is not surprising, and again, He beats them at their own game by shifting the focus from the law to God's design. The Mosaic Law they site was put into play initially to protect the women and children of divorce from utter devastation.

In the first century, if you were a woman without a husband or a child – you were alone and extremely vulnerable. You became a member of the marginalized. Now as then, the universe does NOT run on the principle of reward and punishment. Some, perhaps even most suffering is undeserved.

What Jesus reminded the Pharisees of, was God's intent that man and woman be in relationship. That we all are created in God's image and that image is meant for relationship. The part that becomes problematic in divorce is human interest. If you are divorcing a mate because you found someone more attractive – well now – that's adultery and you don't get to use divorce as a loophole to overcome that sin.

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Unlike times of old – we have a deeper understanding of what God wills for us. Part of that understanding includes an abiding sense of purpose. Jesus does not care about our status with regard to power or possessions. He is not experienced in power but in weakness.

Entering God's dominion is not a way to become first or great. In fact, approaching the kingdom of God must be done with the wonder, joy and innocence of a child who is utterly dependent upon the love of a parent.

The good news is that is what God intended from the very beginning. He formed us in His likeness and led us to build relationships. To love one another. To live out our days in peace. To have a place at the table.

There are a hundred different reasons for us to embrace the innocence of a child. But we seldom nurture that tiny seed in deference to adult priorities. It's not very practical to cherish a childlike simplicity when all of your influences are hammering you with serious challenges that beg to be dealt with on an adult level. The human factor in all of this beckons us away from that inner child.

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Mark's theology is impressive and generally pretty clear. His take on the way has a solid foundation in the Old Testament, but encourages forward thinking interpretations to justify and fulfill the prophets. As Jesus and the disciples move closer and closer to Jerusalem, we can start to see how the Master's path is unfolding. This is an exciting and dramatic time in the arch of history.

While the disciples continue to demonstrate their lack of depth when it comes to understanding – Jesus continues to drive the hard lessons home. Clearly, He is less concerned about what is allowed and more concerned about what is intended in the kingdom of God.

The Pharisees continue to operate from the fearful perspective that they have another John the Baptist on their hands who needs to be eliminated, and now they've got the Roman Empire on their side to do all the dirty work. But the more they try to steer Jesus toward a confrontation with that Empire, the inept they become. In the final analysis, He practically has to do it for them.

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Jesus teaches us that those on the edge of humanity – the marginalized, the women and children – any outsider will have a place at the table in the kingdom of God. While it is true that God doesn't owe us anything, our communal act of thanksgiving has its grounding in knowing from what God has delivered us.

Things are not always as simple as we may want to believe. The uniqueness of the Christian life is the radical way we are called to embrace paradox: Grace & Truth – Life & Death – Darkness & Light – Duty & Delight.

This doesn't have to be a struggle between our will and God's or our sinfulness versus God's design. We can argue and struggle and refuse and refute, but the truth remains that God is right here among us.

And one of His absolute favorite things is children. Whether it is because they are the most vulnerable or most innocent – it matters only in the sense that His desire is to be in relationship with us. We are His people. We are His children.

You want to get in touch with your inner child? Watch how a puppy delights in everything – if only for a second. They can go from zero to spastic in a heartbeat. Over and over and over again.

When I went before the Presbytery to be examined as the final requirement in becoming your pastor – one of the commissioners asked me about my childhood. I answered by saying I had a wonderful childhood – that continues to this day. The innocence of a child can, and perhaps should be maintained throughout one's life.

On the one hand – we are adults, and the world requires us to be seasoned and mature and responsible. On the other hand, we don't want to look back on our life and realize that we peaked in kindergarten.

We want to be able to say that we were able to recapture an attitude from that time in our life and translate it to a working relationship with our God that transcended levels of maturity and provided a foundation of faith and trust that held the innocence of a child in higher esteem than a lifetime of achievement, thereby securing for ourselves - a place at the table. Amen.