

THE UPSIDE-DOWN KINGDOM: Where the Children Are Blessed

Mark 10:13-16

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Rev. Melissa Hatfield, First Baptist Church, Jefferson City, MO

WATCH/LISTEN: www.fbcjc.org/sermon/the-upside-down-kingdom-where-the-children-are-blessed/

I.

Those of you who know my story know I am a PK. When I say PK, some of you may have immediately thought of Chiefs' placekicker, Harrison Butker, and were rightfully confused to think I, too, could kick a 52-yard field goal. I'm not sure I could kick a five or even a 2-yard field goal. I'll leave that to Harrison or our own Ryan Kormann, an outstanding placekicker with the Jefferson City Jays in high school a few years ago.

In addition to placekicker, PK also stands for "Preacher's Kid." These are the children of pastors and church ministers, kids who grew up with a parent on staff in a local church. There are a few of us PKs in this room or watching online. I've often heard, and perhaps you have, that there are two stereotypes of the preacher's kid: one, they are angelic role models. On the other, they are less than angelic role models. As is often the case, the reality is often somewhere between the extremes and is no different than kids who grew up in Christian homes.

But life as a PK is different in other ways. It comes with a unique set of experiences and challenges. PKs are often held to higher standards, with people expecting them to act in ways that reflect their parents' faith. This can create pressure to be a "model child" in behavior and faith, even though they are just kids, still growing and making mistakes. Preachers' kids live in a fishbowl. Since everyone in the congregation knows their family, PKs may feel they have little privacy or space to make mistakes without judgment. Ministry can be all-consuming for preachers, sometimes leading to PKs feeling that the church takes priority over family time.

For some, being a PK is a positive experience; for others, it may feel like a pressure-filled role. A lot of that depends on the parents and the congregations, too.

II.

I loved being a preacher's kid. I loved the people and all the things our church did. We often had people over to the house in the evenings for Bible studies and fellowship. I even tried to shake down members for more money for the Lottie Moon Christmas offering until my parents found out. We should have known I was called to be a pastor.

When I was in upper elementary school, our family helped launch a new church, and for a while, the church offices were in the basement of our house. I couldn't get away from church. On Friday nights, my family ordered pizza, watched TV, and folded church bulletins.

I loved being a PK. But there was also significant church hurt along the way; some my parents protected my sister and me from, and some we witnessed and experienced first-hand. The ways churches can hurt their own is never far from my mind. There is another uglier side to

church work most people don't see, but pastors and their families know all too well. I didn't come into this role with rose-colored glasses. I came because of a deep love for God's church and an unshakeable belief in the power of the local church to lead people into life-giving relationships with Christ and each other.

As a PK, my parents gave me an inspiring and joyful picture of what pastoral ministry can be. I've been blessed to be raised and nurtured by congregations filled with faithful and loving people who were and are like extended family. I'm grateful that the earliest memories of my life include the church as a place where I felt comfort, acceptance, and love.

What breaks my heart is that this is not true for everyone. I have heard stories from people whose experience with the church has been far different from mine. Those for whom the church has been a place of deep pain, cruel judgment, or rejection. In my ministry and friendships near and far, I've met countless individuals who have not lost their faith in God but whose trust in the institution has been stretched or even shattered by their experience in it.

III.

For several years, I've been part of a community called Ragamuffins. A "ragamuffin" is typically thought of as a dirty person who wears tattered clothes. In 1990, the Franciscan priest Brennan Manning used this term to describe our broken, spiritual state before God. Manning depicted the gospel as Jesus coming to earth and coming to each person with undeserved and unmerited grace. God loves and accepts us in our broken, tattered lives—just as we are not as we should be.

St. Francis, Brennan Manning, and Manning's book, *The Ragamuffin Gospel*, had a deep impact on Christian recording artist Rich Mullins, who named his band the Ragamuffin Band. And people drawn to the words of radical grace and hospitality found in Christ that Mullins sang and spoke of often call themselves Ragamuffins.

A community of Ragamuffins formed, gathering for retreats where they can be open and vulnerable, share life's tragedies and triumphs, and find renewal through worship and community. They focus on being a safe place for all people, people who are honest about their brokenness, people who know, as Manning said years ago, that we are all beggars at the door of God's mercy.

Many, if not most, of the participants are people who have been deeply hurt by the church. There are a few pastors among the group who have been beaten up and pushed out by their congregations. Some Ragamuffins want nothing to do with the church. Most ache for a church where they are truly loved and welcomed, a church that loves and welcomes as Jesus loves and welcomes, not a church of gatekeepers who say who is in and who is out. But they struggle to find such a church where they live, or the trauma from church pain is so severe they cannot bring themselves to risk cruel judgment or bitter rejection again.

I am part of their community because I am a Ragamuffin. I know my brokenness. I know I am a beggar at the door of God's mercy. But I am unique in that my experience with the church has been different than theirs, and it breaks my heart. It guts me to hear their stories about how the church I love so profoundly has deeply hurt them. I have listened to their pain through their sobs and, as a pastor, have expressed remorse on behalf of the Church. But as one dear man said to me with respect, vulnerability, and honest anger, "It isn't you whose apology we need to hear."

We cannot take back the pain the church has caused so many people. But we can acknowledge and confess it. We must grieve the wounds we inflict. The ways our words and actions fail to align. Too many people were fed messages of exclusion. Too many were taught only a theology of fear and shame. Too many were made to feel unloved or unwelcomed at the table of God's grace. And for this, we, the church, must repent. We must acknowledge that although the church is a gift of God, it is also a human institution. And so, the church can and does cause significant harm to others when we miss our call to be people of grace and not judgment, people of compassion and not condemnation, people of inclusion and not exclusion.

IV.

Today's scripture from chapter 10 of Mark offers a clear teaching from Jesus of these two distinct approaches. This scene is like one in Mark 9. Jesus is with his disciples in someone's home, and there are children involved. The disciples have been arguing over who is the greatest when Jesus sits down, takes a little child into his arms, and says to his disciples, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me." (Mark 9:36-37)

Jesus brings over a child to make his teaching point. In chapter 10, the neighbors bring their children to Jesus to receive a blessing.

In both texts, the disciples position themselves as gatekeepers. It isn't hard to imagine this scene: a growing presence of people wanting to get close to Jesus, including parents and caregivers bringing children to Jesus so he might touch them.

However, the disciples find this unacceptable, likely seeing it as a waste of Jesus's time and beneath him. The culture of the day said children were a nuisance, the lowest of society with little value, and the disciples believed it, even though Jesus had already said otherwise. So, yet again, they block the way to Jesus for those they deem unworthy and messy. But Jesus is at home in messy situations. He welcomes, embraces, and loves them. You can almost picture his smile. You can almost hear their laughter. The disciples might have disapproved of the children, but Jesus was more than disappointed in his disciples. Jesus was angry. Verse 14 says Jesus was indignant, which is anger about something wrong or unfair. He most likely used a tone of voice that stopped the disciples in their tracks. The culture may have said one thing about the value of children, but the kingdom of Jesus turns the kingdoms of this world upside down. If the disciples had really listened and understood what Jesus had been teaching them, they would have been more welcoming even though children held no perceivable value to them or Jesus's

movement. Time and time again, the people the disciples assumed were excluded were the people Jesus moved to the head of the line. The children are not to be overlooked, Jesus said. In the Kingdom of God, children belong.

I remember Doyle sharing about a funeral he attended where a 95-year-old woman was eulogized. Her pastor shared a story about taking a group of children to visit this lady to sing Christmas carols. After they had sung, she said to the pastor, "Now line them up. I want to hug them all." There were about twenty children. And she did. Hug them all.

Can't you just hear Jesus that day? "Now line them up. I want to hug them all." That's Jesus. "Line them up. I want to hug them all!" And guess what? You and I are in that line, too

Today, we are reminded that the kingdom of God is not about status, power, or greatness as the world defines it. It's about humility, trust, and the willingness to receive and give love. It's an upside-down Kingdom. The Bible doesn't uphold hierarchy, it subverts it.

There is no need to hoard love and grace or to gatekeep when we know how generous God has been with us. Receive and give. You belong. We belong. We're all beggars at the door of God's mercy. The kingdom of God belongs to us, especially the littlest and least powerful of us. So, line them up and join them in the line.

May we be a community where all children are blessed and all people are welcomed for the glory of God and the good of the world.

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All scripture quoted is from the NRSVUE unless otherwise noted.