

Broken and Blessed
Rev. Cindy Maddox
October 3, 2021

Mark 10:13-16

One of my favorite childhood memories of my father took place
after I had fallen asleep in the back seat of the car
while he drove the family home one night.
I don't know how old I was, but I was afraid I was too big for my dad to carry me
to my room like he did when I was little.
And I desperately wanted that feeling again.
So even though I woke up as soon as the car stopped, I pretended to be asleep
to see if my dad would pick me up and carry me to my bed.
He did, so I kept my eyes closed,
afraid that if he knew I was faking, he'd put me down.
At one point I eased one eye open just a tiny bit to look up at him,
and he winked at me, telling me without words
that he knew exactly what I was doing, and he didn't mind.

Our daughter had a similar experience,
but as Jackie was carrying her to bed, Amelia sighed and said,
"This is what it feels like to be a kid."

This is what it feels like to be a kid—or at least what it should feel like,
though we are painfully aware that this is not always the case
in our contemporary world.
Not all children experience safety.

And in the ancient world, "safety" is not the word one would choose at all.
The writers of the *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*
call childhood in antiquity "a time of terror."¹
They write, "Children were the weakest, most vulnerable members of society.
Infant mortality rates sometimes reached 30 percent.
Another 30 percent of live births were dead by age six,
and 60 percent were gone by age sixteen."
With odds like that, it's no wonder parents were bringing their children to Jesus.
Maybe his blessing, or even just his touch, would protect them.

¹ Malina and Rohrbaugh, p. 336.

Or maybe the ones being brought to him were already sick.
 When it says that people were bringing little children to Jesus
 “in order that he might touch them”—the word translated as touch
 is translated as “heal” in every other occurrence in Mark’s Gospel.

This ambiguity makes it difficult for me to envision the scene.
 Was it a line of patient parents, just looking for a simple blessing?
 Or were these parents terrified, desperate for healing for their children,
 and so they were mobbing Jesus?
 Do I imagine the children as too weak to put up much of a fuss,
 or were they rambunctious and noisy and full of energy?
 The paintings of this biblical scene don’t help.
 Many of them are insipid, with a light-skinned Jesus bearing a kind smile,
 and the children behaving perfectly,
 wearing clean clothes and vacuous expressions.
 I want a painting of “Jesus with the children” where two of them are fighting,
 one of them is throwing a tantrum,
 and another is picking their nose.
 As a parent, I could believe that scene.
 Or maybe we need a picture of Jesus welcoming not only the children,
 but their desperate parents.
 I could believe that image, too.
 Either way, I want to rewrite the story so that it’s more clear.

And while I’m at it, I want to rewrite the part where Jesus is quoted as saying,
 “Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.”
 I want to change it to “whoever does not welcome the child will never enter it”
 (like he did in the previous chapter)
 because welcoming the child is so much easier
 than being willing to be like one.

What does that even mean?
 Some scholars say that we must be innocent like children, have a simple faith,
 but we’re good UCC-ers, and we are experts at complication!
 Some scholars claim that it means we must be absolutely dependent upon God,
 the way young children are dependent upon their parents for survival.
 This doesn’t work for many of us—
 not only because we don’t like being dependent,
 but because that doesn’t fit with our concept of God.
 If you have given up the idea that God is an all-powerful being,

then it doesn't make sense to give your power away.

If Jesus said these words about children, he clearly meant children in his time,
and the key word for them was vulnerable.

We, too, are vulnerable, though we are loathe to admit it.

Our bodies are vulnerable to physical harm,
as anyone who has been ill or been in a bad accident can attest.

Our spirits are vulnerable to emotional harm.

Unkind words can damage us and lie to us for years to come.

Our minds are vulnerable to harm as well,
and any of us can struggle with depression or anxiety.

We are vulnerable. And we hate it.

This is not what our society, our culture, has taught us to value.

Even when we are hurting, many of us will polish and perfect

our "Fine-thanks-and-you" response ,

not wanting anyone to know we're struggling,

not wanting to admit—perhaps not even to ourselves—
that we are not okay.

Many of us are not okay, and that is okay.

We are vulnerable, and Christ welcomes us.

We are wounded, and Christ welcomes us.

In fact, "This is what the church was originally about – a place for
all those who had been broken by life or rejected by the powerful
and who came to experience God through the crucified Jesus

as the One who met them precisely in their vulnerability,
not to make them impervious to harm

but rather open to the brokenness and need of those around them."²

The further we get from that truth,

the further we get from our mission as the church.

And if we can't be honest about our own not-okay-ness,

then how will we ever be able to help others?

Admitting our difficulties is not a popular view in our society,
and the church as a broken vessel is not popular either.

Beginning in the 15th century the words "church triumphant" referred to

"members of the church who have died and are regarded as enjoying
eternal happiness through union with God."

² Lose, David. "Communities of the Broken and Blessed." www.DavidLose.net.

But that definition has far too often given way to Christian triumphalism,
 which proclaims that our religion must triumph over all others,
 that our religion is the only way,
 and that everyone else must live by our rules.
 This always has and always will lead us into dangerous territory
 and disastrous decisions,
 like our religious predecessors establishing colonies
 where Catholic priests could be shot on sight;
 like stealing indigenous children from their families
 and putting them into institutions to “save their souls.”
 A religion that claims to trump all others will fail to make room
 for people of other faiths in schools and in the public square.
 A religion that claims to trump all others teaches that it should decide
 who gets to love and who gets to marry and who has rights
 and who has control over women’s bodies.
 That is not only the church triumphant. That is the church dominant.
 And that is not the message of Jesus Christ.

That is not the message of this meal we share,
 especially not on this World Communion Sunday,
 when we are supposed to be aware of our unity and solidarity
 with Christians around the world,
 a world filled with division and pain and brokenness.

Preacher and scholar David Lose points out that
 “To be broken is, in fact, to be human.
 And to be human is to be loved by God and drawn together into relationship
 with all the others that God loves. . . .
 The church is a community of those who know their need
 and seek to be in relationship with each other
 because they have learned that by being in honest relationship with each other
 they are in relationship with God,
 the very one who created them for each other in the first place.
 Which means that our gatherings on Sundays are local gatherings
 of the broken and loved, of those who are hurting but also healing,
 of those who are lost but have also been found.”³

³ Lose, David.

This is what it feels like to be a kid in the presence of Jesus—
coming with our brokenness, our scars, our runny noses,
and being welcomed and embraced just as we are.

And with all our imperfections, together we are the church, the body of Christ—
broken and blessed, blessed and broken,
meant to feed the world.

May it be so.