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Living in the Kingdom
Mark 10:1-16
October 4, 2009

Yesterday at the craft fair, baby Iain came to greet me. Maybe you remember Iain, we baptized him last month, on his first birthday. When his mother stopped to say hello, I bent down to Iain as he sat in his stroller and a smile lit up his sweet little face. When he began to get restless, his mom unstrapped him from the stroller, and when I went to lift him to his feet, much to my surprise, he grabbed on to my neck and pulled himself up, and I had a happy little boy in my arms. We giggled and smiled at each other, and to anybody watching, it was a coin toss as to who was happier. That, for me, was a kingdom moment. In that moment, Iain didn't care if I cheat on my taxes or drive too fast; Iain didn't care who I voted for in the last presidential election. In that moment, Iain found love and welcome in my face and he grabbed a hold of it. And when he grabbed me, I didn't care if he spit out his peas or hid his toys in the DVD player, he was love pure and simple, and I embraced him. This is what God's kingdom is like, love without limits. No rules, no requirements, no boundaries, just children of God embracing one another.

Have you ever seen a toddler react to someone crying? They come and stroke your hair and pat your back. They don't care about who's right and who's wrong, or if you simply got what you had coming, they just see someone hurting and they reach out. Sometimes they will even cry with you, just sit right down beside you and cry, with no idea why other than the fact that someone else is sad.

Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." This would be a wonderful, feel good Bible story if it wasn't for all that messy stuff about marriage and divorce. Surely these are two unrelated stories that have the misfortune of being placed side by side in Mark's gospel. Personally, I've never been one to really embrace the messier side of the gospel, and would love to simply preach on the second half and ignore the first half, as if I accidentally started reading in the wrong spot. But the gospel writer had a reason for putting these two stories together.

In today's context, where 50% of marriages end in divorce, and a large percentage of those who divorce remarry, this passage produces a lot of guilt and shame. But the truth is this passage isn't about marriage and divorce, it's about grace.

The Pharisees picked the hot topic of the day to try and trap Jesus. They could have chosen any subject, today they probably would have pick gay ordination, or abortion, or Biblical inerrancy, any topic that polarizes people. The Pharisees wanted to force Jesus to take a side, but Jesus wasn't interested in playing their games. Instead of discussing the legalities and loopholes of the law, Jesus spoke to the will of God. God's will is that all marriages would last forever, and that all marriages would reflect God's love, knitting two separate beings into one body. The truth is

that no marriage, even a happy, fulfilling, lifelong marriage fully lives up to God's desire for us. The truth is that we are human and we love with imperfect love, and that sometimes, many times, we make mistakes, and that if we think that just because we have a perfectly legal divorce or that we have managed to keep a marriage together then we are any more deserving of the kingdom of heaven than we are simply fooling ourselves.

Sometimes I get an image in my head of the Pharisees lining up people at the entrance into heaven along some kind of continuum. The most deserving are at the front of the line, and the least deserving at the rear. In my mind, I can see them creating all kinds of criterion, like the health department deciding who should get our limited number of swine flu vaccines. Let's see, you've been divorced, but you gave a regular tithe to the church, yes, you go in front of the one who only came to church for Christmas and Easter, but you are behind the stay-at-home mom/professional volunteer. Okay, you taught Sunday School for two years, but at the same time you were experimenting with recreational drugs, should you go in front of white collar crime, or behind? It is as if only the top half gets into heaven and you are safe only as long as you are above the curve, and so we are always looking for other's faults, justifying ourselves because we are not as bad as someone else. But God's love, God's kingdom is not limited. It is not for those who deserve it, but for those whom God loves.

It seems to me that the Pharisees and, the truth be told, many of us, spend too much time judging people and stamping them either "worthy" or "unworthy," and in doing, not only are they missing the point, but more importantly they are missing the opportunity to live kingdom moments in the here and now. Jesus refused to get into the legal discussion because he would rather spend his time sharing God's love, living God love, enjoying God's love. We are called not to decide who is worthy of the kingdom of heaven, but to live in that kingdom, embracing one another with unconditional love.

I cannot help but wonder as Jesus welcomed those children if there wasn't a baby Iain in that crowd, a toddler in a stroller who looked into Jesus' face and reached out to him with a smile. And perhaps, when Jesus bent down to bless that child, the toddler wrapped his arms around Jesus' neck and pulled himself up into Jesus' arms. And as Jesus held the giggling infant he said to his disciples, "Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as this little child will never enter it."