

CALM IN THE MIDST OF CONFLICT

Mark 10:13-16
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Corona del Mar Community Church, Congregational

Several years ago, while leading worship at a national church gathering, I looked out from the worship platform and saw a little boy sitting on the front row, engrossed in his handheld video game. I wasn't at all surprised to discover that the little boy was our preacher's 10-year-old son. I wasn't surprised because earlier that year, when that preacher, Elias Galvan, had asked me to be on the conference planning team, he had also invited me to bring my newborn son Michael to the meetings. "I took my son everywhere when he was a baby," Elias told me. "Children should be welcome in church meetings of all places." Elias, who served as a Methodist Bishop and a national interfaith leader, lived out the scripture we heard this morning. His son played video games on the front row when Elias preached to clergy he supervised or dignitaries he inspired; my baby fussed through meetings led by Elias; youth served as active members and leaders of Elias's national committees; and entire families of all shapes and sizes were always welcomed and encouraged to attend clergy gatherings he led, so that clergy didn't have to leave their families behind to attend retreats and training events. "Let the children come," Elias always said. But the disciples spoke otherwise. Clergy often complained that the bishop's son wasn't sitting quietly, listening to every word his father spoke when he preached a sermon or led a meeting. All too often, we pastors moaned or rolled our eyes when the youth brought new ideas that we weren't sure would succeed, but sure would mean more work for us. We spoke all too often just like those early disciples.

But Elias calmly sat in leadership, loving his game-playing son on the front row and welcoming the rabble rousing youth with their innovative ideas that forced us out of our comfort zones and into new ministries. In the national church, we had many troubles, and arguments

often broke out in unseemly ways during meetings. But even in the midst of those conflicts, Elias was a center of calm. He role modeled the calm in conflict that Jesus displays so often.

When the disciples are worried children will disturb Jesus or waste his time or maybe even stir up more trouble with the scribes and Pharisees, they try to brush the children aside. But Jesus just calmly teaches a lesson to the disciples even as he warmly welcomes the children. “Let the little children come to me; do not stop them, for it is to such as these that the realm of God belongs.”

Jesus role models for us a method of remaining calm in the midst of conflict. When faced with an adversary and a potential conflict, he stops before responding. Rather than jumping right in or starting an argument, Jesus pauses. That pause, that moment of stopping before responding, can transform even the most vehement of conflicts. Great peacemakers are famous for this movement. Stop, pause, and you give calm a chance to enter in. Re-read any of the gospels and take note of how often Jesus pauses before responding – he draws in the dirt when men are getting ready to stone a woman to death; he pauses in a crowd to find out who reached out for healing; he stops to listen to a blind beggar crying out for help; he stands silently when his accusers demand answers.

In the pause, Jesus makes room for Spirit to enter in. He disburses an angry crowd. He senses where healing is needed. He develops a question that will make his adversaries think or look inward. He reminds me of a professor I had in seminary, pausing to connect with Spirit, before answering any question or even starting any lecture. When we pause before responding, we allow room for the Spirit to influence our response. We can drop into Spirit and really connect our spirit with God’s Spirit. We make space in our head to actually recognize the Spirit’s guidance and hear what God might be trying to say to us or through us in conflicted situation.

After stopping to pause and dropping into Spirit to listen for guidance, Jesus rolls forward, moving forward calmly and confidently as God leads him to do. Sometimes that movement diffuses the conflict; sometimes the movement creates a new solution; sometimes the movement even causes a different conflict. For Jesus is no conflict avoider. He is, after all, a significant changemaker, so he caused as much conflict as he calmed. But when he caused conflict, it was intentional and purposeful, forwarding God's message and teaching lessons we all need to learn. Just as he does in this passage of scripture. "Let the children come," Jesus decides and begins gathering them around him to show clearly what he believes and how he lives what he believes. Jesus takes it a step further by lifting children up, not just as fully welcomed, but *honored* guests who have much to teach us.

"Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the realm of God as a little child will never enter it." Enter God's presence like a child. Not childish, mind you, but child-like.

Childish our world has plenty of. Child-like, not so much. Childishness we likely see every day in people of all ages... selfish, self-interested motives; bullying cruelty; jealousy and coveting what others have; cleverly crafted lies to get out of repercussions for our bad behaviors. Unfortunately, we adults teach our children well the childish behaviors God calls us to avoid in the ten commandments, in Jesus' teachings on selflessness and unconditional love, and even in Paul's letters to the early Christians. Jesus calls us to our best child-of-God selves--not to childishness, but to child-like attitudes. And child-like attitudes are the very vantage points to which the realm of God belongs... the attitudes that actually bring God's realm to this earth.

Think about how differently we behave when a child is in our midst. Perhaps we need to put more children in boardrooms and committee meetings and political debates, for we often

seem to instinctively behave better when a child is in our midst. Perhaps this is why Jesus welcomed the children and even at one point just lifted up a child as an example for all.

When our son Michael was little, he was often the calm in our family conflict. Any time B. J. and I started arguing, this little 3-year-old would sit down between us and either cover his ears or simply tell us to “stop it.” He was the calm one when we were in conflict.

Ask children about how to make the world a better place, and they’ll state the obvious: “People should be nicer to each other.” “Nobody should cause a war.” “You should love everybody.” In those innocent responses, there is great wisdom. With hopeful confidence, these child-like responses offer calm insight in the conflicts and troubles of the world.

Becoming like children also means opening to Spirit, opening our perspectives to new ideas or renewed faith in old ideas that we have given up after years of disappointment and cynicism. Children haven’t given up yet. They bring an openness and an awe to life and to God. Children bring a bright-eyed inquisitiveness, an earnest curiosity about life and spirituality. Children bring an innocence and an optimism that is all too often missing in our world today. If we let the children lead, the missing pieces will fall into place. Hear a child cry, and we re-discover compassion and empathy. Go on a journey of discovery with a child as she walks along the beach or he hikes a desert canyon, and God’s creation bursts forth with newness in our own lives. Listen carefully to a child’s innovative ideas, and we re-discover possibilities. Envision a child’s wildly imaginative stories, and you might just envision the loving kingdom of God.

When we re-discover the beauty of the world around us, when we re-claim our innocence and our optimism, when we act with compassion and empathy, we become childlike and we, too, can become calm in the midst of conflict, quiet in the midst of the storm, hope in the midst of

despair. When we re-engage as children of God’s kingdom and children of the Spirit, we are better able to enter into unity with the Spirit, our oneness with the Holy.

A few years ago, I received that blessing at a Confirmation service. I was attending worship where a young friend was being confirmed. In the congregation were several young adults, supporting their friends who were being confirmed. I noticed that a couple of young women were on their phones throughout the confirmation ceremony and wondered if I should say something. But then I remembered Elias and his son playing video games, and thought, “Let the children text.” That afternoon, when I opened up Facebook, I discovered they hadn’t been texting, but posting photos of the confirmation service on Facebook with words of joy and surprise: “Can you believe there’s a church where the teenagers get to wear jeans?!” A picture of the altar was posted along with these joyous words: “This church has a Buddhist prayer bowl, a Jewish menorah, and a Christian cross sitting side by side atop a rainbow cloth. I’ll be back.”

Childlike wonder, joyous surprise, and grateful words for a church much like ours – where inclusion and questions and children are welcome. With childlike wonder and open hearts, we gather today around the table that represents openness and welcome, the table of Holy Communion, a table we share with Christians throughout the world, who also celebrate this common sacrament, in many different ways from many different cultures. We celebrate our unity with Christians of all theologies and attitudes and labels, with the hope that one day we will all be one with each other and at one with God through the power of the Holy Spirit.

We gather at the table to receive the earth’s simple gifts of wheat and grapes, a reminder that it’s the basics that matter. Children know this, when they simply want a peanut butter & jelly sandwich or a glass of cold milk. The simple basics of bread and juice, signs of life and love, provide everything we need to start nourishing our child-like spirit. Christ’s simply abundant

gifts of forgiveness and new life, God's simple gifts of total acceptance and love, symbolized in the elements of Holy Communion are ours for the taking – just like a simple PB & J or a glass of cold milk from a loving parent to a hungry child .

So today, we have a special blessing in Holy Communion. We come to that table with children in our midst, reminding us of Jesus' teaching to welcome the children. As we welcome and include the children of our church, I encourage you to notice how different communion feels when children are with us. They'll bring noise and chaos for sure, but not any more than Barbara and I brought last month when we practically fell into the choir loft as we began serving communion with a mistake and a tripped step. The children will also bring their beautiful child-like selves, their calm confidence that God loves them no matter what, their optimistic hope that church and faith and love and joy are actually making the world a better place. Notice what your noticing as the children join us. And even if it feels uncomfortable or awkward, remember the lessons Jesus taught. Even as Jesus welcomed the children, we are called to welcome the children – the children of our church and the child who lives in each and every one of us.

Come to the table of welcome. Come to the table where all are welcome, old and young, black and white, sinner and saint, believer and doubter. Come to the table, that is the table of peace. Come to the table of God's love, for this table is a calm center in a world of conflict and trouble. Come to the table, for this table is grace in the midst of confusion and sorrow and sin. Come to the table, for this table is welcome for all.

Come to the table, where Christ's life and love are symbolized in the gifts of bread and juice. In these gifts, we are nourished to once again find those child-like attitudes that will bring us closer to God, closer to one another, and closer to God's realm on this earth. Come, let us receive these gifts and grow in God's grace as children once again.