My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. Our God of our hearts, minds, spirits, and souls, God of our dreams and hopes and possibilities for justice, peace, compassion, and mercy, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, our strength and our redeemer, Amen.

Jesus has a thing for seeing little kids. Back in biblical times, people tended to ignore those who were below knee-cap level. But Jesus knew what they saw, and how dangerous things were in a world where they were not recognized. Toddlers would hang onto their parents’ tunics, barely avoiding the wagon wheels of the narrow streets of Jerusalem, and the hungry stray dogs that stared them down at eye-level. Keeping up with grown-ups wasn’t easy, getting pulled along by tall people with one big step for every four or five of yours.

Children had no status. They were not the main focus of hardly anything. Yet then, as now, they were considered gifts from God—just gifts that would be useful later in life to look after parents, hold down jobs, and have children of THEIR own. But meanwhile, these hungry little caterpillars were years away from their butterfly beauty.

Yet somehow Jesus liked them just as they were, says our text. Then, as now, this is pretty unusual for a bachelor, but Jesus knew what to do. He put a hand behind their head to support them when he took a baby in his arms. He knew how to pass them back and forth gently and lovingly, and the Bible doesn’t say that he ever objected to getting a little blurp up on his own tunic.

Even toddlers seemed okay with our guy JC. He never asks parents to take them to the nursery when they’re getting a little hyper or hangry. In fact, when the disciples try and tell people to get the kids out of church, Jesus wasn’t just angry, he was “indignant”, says our Bible. The Kingdom belongs to such as these, he says, making them the models of God’s peaceable kingdom, full-fledged members right here, right now, just as they are.

But kids while kids are innocent, playful, honest, vulnerable, and loving, if we’re around them for more than about ½ hour then we also experience them a little differently. They can be noisy, clingy, self-centered, and a little bit destructive when they sense we’re no longer attendant to their needs. A famous author once famously quipped, “I love children, especially when they cry, because then someone comes and takes them away”.

But Jesus isn’t here to hold kids up to us as moral examples, is he? He doesn’t say that we should imitate them, that would be disastrous. All he says is that when we welcome them in his name, we welcome him. And that when we welcome him, we welcome God. A little math lesson today, that God is found in transitive properties in creation, and this time with little kids.

We have to reclaim our playful selves to understand God. Because spending time with someone who is here in the moment, laughing with us at our dumb ‘dad’ jokes and drawing everything in pink and purple crayon reminds us that we should not be in such a terrible hurry in our terribly hurried lives. If you don’t have a child nearby, watch the movie “Hook”, made in 1991 and starring Robin Williams and Peter Pan and Dustin Hoffman as Captain Hook. It will take you to a place of joyfulness and mirth that will make you cry.

I’m spending time here to help us understand that sometimes the best thing we can do is spend time doing things with no payback. Doing things with and for people without status, or money, or the ability to fix stuff, or being able to reciprocate giving gifts. People with nothing—no income, status, influence—are great in God’s eyes. The ones we pass by are the ones we should be spending time with, because the more we do that, the more God grows in our heart of flesh, transformed out of the world where our hearts of stone worry about all the status markers.

Jesus is giving us the keys to the Kingdom of nonsense, ones which shock our sensiblities. How can this be, that now that I can wield all these levers of power and influence I am farther from, not closer to, God?

Remember the middle part of our scripture today. This lesson is told to us because the disciples are playing the “who’s the greatest” game amongst themselves.

When he asks them just a simple question, “what were you arguing about?” they were too embarrassed to answer, knowing that they were wrong to do so. But Peter, James and John were the first to be called and seemed the favorites, asked to go up to the mountain and other places with Jesus the others didn’t get to go. Peter was the first to say Jesus was Messiah. But then again Jesus called him Satan, too.

Here's the heart of the problem when we talk about the Kingdom of God. They’re arguing about who’s the greatest because they couldn’t handle the hard teachings of drinking blood, eating bodies, and Jesus being killed. So rather than ask, they start fighting instead. We’ve all been there. When something scares us, just ignore it; don’t ask, act like nothing’s wrong; change the subject. Let’s talk about something else that’s happy, or makes us feel safe and strong.

So that’s what this lesson is about. Jesus gives them a gentle rebuke right then and there. “Whoever wants to be first must be last and servant of all.” Want to know who’s the greatest? Jesus shows them. Someone less than two feet tall, with limited vocabulary, unemployed, no physical strength, no social network. In biblical times, remember, this is a nobody in real world terms.

And yet, this is God’s agent of grace. The last, the least, is what God wants to build the Kingdom.

I’ll leave with these final thoughts.

We worry a lot about our church’s future these days in 2025. None of us have a lot of great answers, but we have to stop getting into arguments of who’s more right than another. It seems kind of crazy to turn the church or business or society over to those with the least to offer, but we have right in front of us God saying that our values aren’t God’s values, and as long as we keep putting ourselves first, things will look out of sorts, because humility and God aren’t first in line.

If we want to welcome God, we have to start getting out of the way, looking at the world of the unlikely, below our kneecaps, the ones who seem to have little to offer in the way of skills and such. And start to play with them. Imagine things with them without wondering why we’re doing so.

If we want to enter God’s grace and kingdom, then let’s go out and put our arms around those who we don’t see. And in doing so, as we say hello to God, we might be surprised by what happens next.

Thanks be to God,

Amen.