

**Mark 10:13-16**  
***“When the Kingdom Goes to the Other People”***

November 8, 2020  
Rev. David Pierce

In the gospel of Mark, as in all the gospels, PDA—Public Displays of Affection—on the part of Jesus are generally welcomed. As the first gospel writer in the ancient world, Mark’s whole point in writing is to show that a world which has long been denied the kind of affection it needs is, with the arrival of Jesus on the scene, now going to receive a great many back payments.

When talking about affection, it’s as important to understand what we’re not talking about as it is to understand what we are talking about. We are not talking about the kind of affection that exists between two people who can’t seem to keep their hands off each other because they are so head-over-heels for each other. This is the kind of affection we often see going up and down the hallways at the mall—young love, puppy love. There is a beauty to it, but there is also an exclusivity to it. Two people who can’t see anyone else but each other. This is not the kind of affection Mark sets out to write about. Nor are we talking about a kind of generalized affection, the kind we feel for holidays, patriotism, church, and grandma’s apple pie recipe. We love them, we’ve always loved them, our heart swells a bit and we get misty eyed when we think about them, we just can’t always say why. This isn’t the kind of affection Mark is interested in documenting, either. The kind of affection Mark writes about is more specific than all this. It’s a kind of affection that sees very particularly and fully what it wants, and then moves with great deliberateness in whatever direction it must go to get it. This affection about which Mark writes is revolutionary in that it does not look to see what it will get in return before holding out its own hand to us. Even more astounding, this affection comes our way, stands at our door, knocks to be let in so it can show us our own great capacity to make room for affection, and when we refuse it entrance, when we insist we have no more room to give, this affection stays right there on our doorstep, as if to say, “Should you ever change your mind, I’ll be right here waiting.” “He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who did, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, born not of flesh and blood, but of God,” John writes of this affection in his gospel.

But back to Mark. Mark has been living in a world where the gods dole out their affections based largely on whether the gods believe we deserve it or not. In Mark's world, affection is the work of a day trader on the floor of the stock exchange whose commitments wax and wane based on what they see and how much of a good return they think they'll get on their investment. In such a world, power lies not in the act of affection itself, but in the power of a person to wield it like a weapon, using affection for private gain. What Mark envisions, however, is a different world, one in which God is known by a public display of affection.

From the very beginning of Mark's gospel, the affection of God appears only ever in full view of the public. When Jesus first appears, he is by the Jordan River, standing shoulder to shoulder with all the other sinners who have come seeking God's blessing at the hand of John the Baptist. This is followed by a brief and private 40-day foray into the wilderness where he is tempted by Satan, but then it's right back to the public square. In the first 9 chapters of Mark, Jesus is seen spending almost no time alone. Everywhere he goes there is a crowd, and in that crowd is someone Jesus touches. A man with an unclean spirit, a man with a withered hand, a leper, a paralytic, an exiled demoniac, a hemorrhaging woman, a deaf man, a dumb man; all in all Jesus reaches out to touch at least 15 specific individuals. I say "at least" because on two occasions the number of people Jesus is willing to touch is so many that Mark just says, "And the whole city was gathered at the door, and he cured many who were sick and diseased."

Jesus' disciples loved it, which is a bit surprising. After all, Jesus had pretty much gone and taken the whole list of people the rest of the world had tossed aside and he made them his whole world. You might think it would have made the disciples' stomachs churn a bit to see Jesus getting that close to a bloody woman, or a man whose skin was flaking off, so much so that pus was oozing off his cheeks.

"Here fellas, come closer."

"No, I'm good. I can see from here."

"Come on, you can't see what you're not willing to touch. Bring it here."

Reaching out to pull them in, they pull back. “Don’t, don’t touch me, Jesus. God knows where your hands have been!”

It reminds of Caravaggio’s famous painting of Jesus following his resurrection from the dead. Appearing to his disciples once again, they can hardly believe it’s the same guy they saw hanging on a cross just three days earlier, getting stabbed in the side with a spear. Thomas says that if he’s going to believe it’s really Jesus, he’ll need not only to see the hole in his side, but also to touch it. And Jesus gently reaches out to guide Thomas’s hand in to the specific spot, because sometimes it’s hard enough to locate our own fear and pain, let alone someone else’s.

So it’s a bit surprising to discover at one point in Mark’s gospel that the disciples don’t seem to mind touching. They tell Jesus, “Jesus, we touched someone today. You should have been there to see it! There was this huge crowd of people, and the pressure was on to heal this guy they brought to us. Man, he had all kinds of issues, totally messed up, and we didn’t think we’d be able to do it, you know, he was pretty ugly, but we remembered what you told us about how every person is God’s greatest discovery, so we just closed our eyes and touched him, and man, you should have been there. We were amazing. I mean, it was amazing.”

That was just a few days ago, Mark says. How it is then that just this morning, when these same people brought little children to Jesus in order for him to touch them, the disciples tried to get in their way. “We’re trying to build a kingdom here. It’s serious work, and kids are only going to get in our way, take them and go stand over there.” When Jesus saw it, he became indignant, which is another way to say, he had righteous fury. “Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for they are the ones to whom the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, if you can’t let them in, then you’re not as in as you think you are.”

A kingdom that belongs to children—what would that look like? In the run-up to our presidential election, I’ve been thinking a lot about it. In a kingdom belonging to children there would be no palaces of White Houses, which means there would also be no thrones or leather desk chairs. Everyone would live on a playground, or in a classroom, and all the chairs would be

18 inches off the ground. When the adults sit down we'd look ridiculous, except the kids wouldn't make fun of us, they'd just thank us for being so funny.

In a kingdom belonging to children everyone would say "please" and "thank you," and we wouldn't get offended when someone tries to remind us that we need to work on our manners.

In a kingdom belonging to children negotiations would never come down to who can hold out the longest to get what they want. Instead, from the beginning, it would be understood that we all simply take turns.

In a kingdom belonging to children there would be a concern for basic rules of play, for ensuring that the fat kid who can't run doesn't get picked last for the kickball team, and that the new kid with the funny name and weird clothes who just came to town, and whose parents don't speak the language, doesn't sit alone at the lunch table.

In a kingdom belonging by children, when someone is hurt and bleeding all over, no one would think about the danger it might pose to run over and help them out. Rather, you think only about the danger it poses to them if you don't run over and help out.

In a kingdom belonging to children we put our heads down on the pillow at night and dream expectantly of everything the world is going to hold for us again tomorrow.

What does a kingdom belonging to children look like? I don't think it's a coincidence that when I posed this question to a small group of adults this past week, we had a difficult time coming up with answers. Like the disciples, perhaps we have grown so accustomed to a kingdom run by adults that we just can't imagine our world any differently. We have forgotten that for as specific as Jesus wants us to get in reaching out and touching one another, when he says, "The kingdom of God is at hand," he never specifies whose hand he means. Is the kingdom of God in my hand? Or is it in your hand?

The terrifyingly good news may be that the kingdom of God could be in any of our hands. If like children we learn to protect the weak, to leave no one off the team, to say please and thank you every time, and to not be so afraid to touch each other's wounds, then we can have the kingdom of God to hold and to share. On the other hand, if we don't do these things, if we don't do these things, Jesus is going to come at us with righteous fury, and take our kingdom away from us, and give it to the children, who, being children, and being like Jesus, will still pick us to be on their kickball team.