

Mark 10: 13-16

13 People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. 14 But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. 15 Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." 16 And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

A New Creation of Reconciliation

Today we are going to look into our own context through the lens of the Apostle Paul, who writes letters to a number of early Christian communities that he had a relationship with as an evangelist for Christ. In Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, he establishes the vision of a new creation in God that is founded on reconciliation.

What is going on in our context today that we can view through the lens of this Apostle? Way too much for one sermon is what! Climate change, economic devastation, and violence on a massive scale have forced people around the world to become refugees. Our nation's leaders have chosen to cast aside the voices of women survivors in order to yet again affirm the character of an accused sex offender to the supreme court. Our city has convicted an active duty police officer of second degree murder in the death of Laquan McDonald. And our church continues to struggle with challenging questions of identity in the face of racism and oppression in our community. We are not one story, but an intersection of narratives that fills our souls with the hum of creation.

Paul's story, too, is an intersection with many narratives. In today's reading, Paul writes to the Corinthians to defend his ministry after coming into conflict with them during his previous visit. They reconcile with Paul through tears of friendship which gives him an opportunity to describe God's actions through Jesus as divine reconciliation as well.

Paul explains that God is reconciling us to himself through Christ - creating a new creation in us, which calls us into God's ministry of reconciliation in the world.

God reconciles with us through Christ, we experience a new creation through the grace of Jesus Christ, and God calls us to continue Christ's work of reconciliation in the world today.

I heard a few weeks ago that I use big words sometimes and don't explain myself. In seminary I rolled my eyes every time I learned a new word. How am I supposed to talk to anyone about God with all these nonsense words hanging around? Christian theology and biblical studies can be as much a foreign language class as a learning about our faith class. So if you hear me say any words you don't know without explaining them, I want to know! Write them down. Bring them up!

Let's start with reconciliation. It's a simple enough idea to grasp on the surface. We use it in our own conversations: "Reconcile your differences." or "Apologize and forgive." or "Turn away from whatever sin came between you and return to right relationship with one another."

But is any of that really a simple concept to understand let alone put into practice - even at a basic level? What happens to you when you seek to reconcile with someone after a conflict? Are you able to forgive? Are you able to confess and apologize? Does the brokenness between you become healed? Are you able to trust again? Are you able to reconcile?

Relationships are complicated, and power dynamics in relationships complicate them even further. But Jesus makes our relationship with our all powerful God uncomplicated by being our source of reconciliation. Jesus is constantly healing the brokenness between us and God caused by sin.

Paul says it this way, “God is reconciling us to God’s self through Christ.”

Reconciliation in this sense could be defined as grace. The gift of God’s grace is available to us to heal the brokenness we experience because of sin in our lives. And Jesus wants - Jesus demands - that we receive this grace like a child. That we accept grace like a child. That we trust in God’s grace like a child. That we return to right relationship with God like a child - fully trusting in God’s promise.

When the disciples try to stop families from bringing their children to be healed by Jesus, he says to them, “Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.”

In the new creation of the kingdom of God, Jesus continues to overturn the structures of power in our minds, to overturn the order of power in our world, and receive the gift of God’s kingdom like a child.

And this gift - this kingdom - is not merely a reward for good behavior or belief in Christ, the kingdom of God is a vision for us to work toward today - right now. God is already reconciling us to God’s self - freeing us from the power of sin through Grace - through forgiveness - through the healing medicine of God’s love.

Jesus just asks us to receive this gift like a child.

So, who are the children in our world that we can learn from? Who do we know that can receive God’s love as a gift as a child?

Our children are here in worship with us.

Our children are trying to learn in our Sunday School class.

Our children are trying to grow at Esmond Elementary School.

Our children are trying to survive on the streets of our neighborhood.

Our children are organizing for justice and love in our community.

Our children are Laquan McDonald who’s gifts were taken from him by a corrupt system lacking accountability to the people.

Our children are Laquan McDonald whose death triggered a tidal wave of love and justice - seeking reconciliation in our city for the brokenness that provoked Jason Van Dyke to use his police privilege to murder a hurting child.

Our children are the organizers, the speakers, the lawyers and the leaders who would not stop until this brokenness was revealed and justice could shine in.

Our children are Laquan McDonald.

He liked to rap and dance and could make you “laugh until you cried,” a youth volunteer for a social service agency recalled. “Always bubbly, always smiling, always asking questions.”

His greatest love was family, especially his younger sister, now 18, of whom he was fiercely protective,

relatives said. And he was quick to give a hug.

“He was more like a brother,” said Tyniece Hunter, a younger cousin. “A big piece of the family is gone because he was the life of the party. He kept everyone together and smiling.”

Like every child, we know that Laquan was not perfect. He struggled with mental illness and PTSD. He struggled with drugs that he used to self medicate. He struggled with anger that he learned from those around him.

But, like a child, he received the love of family, mentors and teachers as a gift.

Jesus just asks us to receive this gift - to receive the gift of God’s kingdom as our vision for community.

So, when our children are killed in the street, like Laquan McDonald was killed in the street in October of 2014, we can accept God’s gift by trying to apply the vision of the kingdom of God in this situation of total brokenness.

It is this vision of love and justice that I see lived out in the lives of youth and young adults who worked tirelessly to get to the truth and seek justice for the unlawful murder of our child.

We do not have to be anti-police to seek justice for Laquan, we only have to be pro-peace. In a city with over 12 thousand police officers, only around six hundred of them have a long list of citizen complaints against them, according to a New York Times Magazine article that ran after the video of Laquan’s shooting was released in 2015. Yet the department rarely disciplined or retrained even its six hundred most destructive officers. The message was clear: there is no consequence, no accountability for police misconduct. There is no effort to seek reconciliation between the police and the communities of color most impacted by violence in our city.

Of the 409 shootings by police officers investigated since 2007, only two of the shootings were found to be unjustified.

So it is not surprising that Officer Jason Van Dyke, who shot Laquan McDonald 16 times seconds after his arrival on the scene, had at least 19 complaints logged against him, 11 of them for excessive force.

Jesus just asks us to receive the gift of reconciliation - to receive the gift of God’s kingdom as our vision for community.

So we can celebrate the changes in our government since our child, Laquan McDonald, died on that lonely October evening four years ago. We can celebrate our children that have led the protests, led the legal proceedings, led the public media campaigns that have had at their center - a vision of love and justice for our community that is based in accountable relationship.

Our children are leading our city into a season of reconciliation that is only more complicated than our own struggles to reconcile with each other. Our youth are passing on the gift of God’s kingdom to the world.

And the Apostle Paul reminds us that when we receive this gift, we are filled with joy and gratitude that inspire us to take action to live out the vision of God’s kingdom founded in love and justice.

So with the act of accountability found in the conviction of Officer Van Dyke this week, we can accept it as a gift of God's reconciling love - and seek to use that gift to build a world that more fully lives out the love and justice of God's kingdom here in our community.

Jesus calls us to receive the kingdom of God as a little child. Let us receive God's kingdom in this community this day. Amen.