

“Making Room for Children”

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¹³People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. ¹⁴But 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. ¹⁵Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” ¹⁶And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.” (Mark 10:13-16)

Have you ever stepped back and just watched a child draw a picture? It is amazing how they dive headfirst into the creative process, immersing themselves in the grand opportunity to make something of their own. As a general rule, they are not worried about making a mistake. They aren't worried about staying in the lines, nor do they fret too much over which color to use. Sure, most tree trunks are brown, but if they don't happen have a brown crayon handy, that's no problem. This tree trunk will just have to be orange. You can tell the late painter Bob Ross remained a life-long child-at-heart, given his oft-repeated mantra, “We don't make mistakes, just happy little accidents.” A kid lives that philosophy to the fullest. Their artwork might be full of accidents, but they tend to be happy ones – messy, wondrous, beautiful little accidents.

At some point, though, our attitude changes. We begin to notice that other kids color in the lines and get praised for work that is neater and tidier than ours. Maybe at some point someone dismisses an expression of our creativity as silly or wrong. And we start hearing the message that “Children should be seen and not heard,” and we begin to question whether we should speak up or just keep quiet. If we are not careful, we begin to lose that child-like wonder that was never embarrassed by an orange tree trunk – the part that took only delight and pride in it. At some point, we begin to think that messy is bad.

My point here is that I don't really blame the disciples in this story. They weren't bad people. They were just acting like adults. They weren't trying to be mean. They just knew that Jesus was a serious guy on a serious mission, and they also knew that serious people were ganging up against him. Jesus has already predicted his own suffering and death – not once, but twice – and the disciples are confused and worried about what he is talking about. So, when little kids starting coming around making their joyful ruckus, letting their creativity run amok, and generally making a mess of what we would call “propriety” and “decorum,” the disciples moved quickly and decisively to shut it down. Again, they weren't bad guys – they thought they were helping Jesus by keeping things quiet so he could rest... so he could think... so they could all figure out what to do next.

It must have come as quite a shock to them when Jesus got mad about it. The English translation said he got “indignant” about what they said and did, but the Greek word is stronger than that. We might get indignant if our flight is cancelled, or if the compliments on the dinner we cooked are lukewarm. A better translation for Jesus' response would be “incensed.” The verb Mark uses suggests the kind of anger that is aroused by a great injustice. Jesus wasn't just miffed. He was “miffed off.” *“Let the little children come to me,”*



Jesus commands. *“Do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.”*

And Jesus doesn't stop with that admonition. *“Truly I tell you,”* Jesus continues. [Or my own translation, “Listen real close to what I am about to say to you.”] *“Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.”* It is a not-so-subtle hint that the disciples would do well to pay close attention to these little children and how they were acting, because the adults in the room might learn some very important lessons from them.

That is the exact idea behind a spiritual movement that has gleefully taken the name “Messy Church.” This intentional movement has a few basic values – first and foremost, it is Christ-centered, but it is also intergenerational, creative, celebratory, and hospitable. The gatherings are “messy,” in that people are invited to come “in all their mess, with their messy lives and their messy families, just coming to God as they are, to see what a Christian community is all about.”

Messy Churches eat meals together, they talk about the Bible together, they do arts and crafts together, and cook up science experiments together. It's not a chaotic food-fight, nor do they throw paint around like Jackson Pollack did. But they do try not to worry so much about the mess they make when they get together. They focus instead on the real, precious, and holy conversations that happen when all ages come together to share an activity or a meal in a common space. As one of the founders put it, “it's all about meeting God in the safe space of play.”

Without a doubt, the kids learn some things from the adults. But the real miracle may be that the adults almost always come away from Messy Church meetings having been taught, refreshed, and even healed by the joy, laughter, and wisdom of the children. “We adults might actually need our kids to remind us how to embrace wonder and imagination and mess,” says Associate Director Johannah Myers, “because the story of God is about creativity and wonder and if you've actual read your Bible, you'll see, the story of God is never neat and tidy. God is far more likely to be found in the messiness of life... When there's **no room** for wonder and mess, suddenly there's no room for a creative, messy God who likes to play in the dirt, throw impromptu picnics, and have dinner parties with sinners.”¹

A few weeks ago, we experienced what I would call a “Messy Church” moment here at Larchmont Avenue Church. It was a Friday night, and we were hosting our first LAC Family Movie Night down in the Carhart Room. We watched the movie “Encanto,” and every time one of the familiar songs would begin, people of all ages – from grandparents all the way down to toddlers – would start singing the lyrics together. By the end of the movie, the energy was a little crazy. Fueled by a bunch of popcorn, a pretty good amount of soda, and a whole lotta candy, kids were jumping, running, and laughing all over the place. When the movie was over and we flipped on the lights, popcorn kernels were everywhere. It was a total mess, but it was a gleeful, grateful, and gregarious mess. And without anyone saying a word, a bunch of people stuck around to help us clean it all up. And those of us who were lucky enough to be there realized without a doubt that God was there in the wonder and mess of it all -- not the stern, stodgy, persnickety God who wants everyone to sit quietly in their seats facing forward with hands firmly and safely in their laps – but the “creative,

¹ Johannah Myers, “Creating Messy Spaces,” <https://plainaccount.wordpress.com/>.

messy God” who loves a good movie, loves to sing “about Bruno,” and loves to eat Twizzlers and popcorn with sinners of all ages.

I hope we will look for more opportunities to create messy encounters with God here at LAC, and I hope we will continue to make room for children in all the ways we try to be the church. It will not happen without some planning and preparation, and it will not happen without people who are excited about jumping in, rolling up their sleeves, and making some time in their lives to get a little messy in the name of God.

And, because this Children’s Sabbath Sunday is also the kickoff for our annual Stewardship Campaign, I will also say that I hope we can make more room in our church budget for ministries to children and youth. Right now, the percentage of our budgeted spending that is devoted to activities for children and youth is about 1.6%. Given that ministry to children and youth was identified in our recent Mission Study as one of the top four priorities for our mission and ministry, I think we can do better. I think we ought to do better, given that Jesus made it pretty clear that we need to let the little children come right to the center of this thing we call church in all of their messy creativity and joy -- that we are not to stop them or to hinder them in any way, *“for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.”*

Who knows what might happen if we loosen our grip on “the way things have always been,” or how things ought to look and sound, or what we might think about keeping things neat and tidy and decent and in order. What if we made some room to bring children right into the midst of it all, even if it meant things could get a little messier in the process? We have plenty of mops and brooms, but can we ever have enough joy... enough laughter... enough wonder... or awe... or hope... or love? As it turns out, we adults might really need the little children to lead us, to remind us to embrace wonder and creativity and imagination and mess, because in the messiness of life, we might just find the living God.

Even if we just prayed together, we might hear requests and petitions like these actual prayers that kids have prayed... prayers that may be a little messy, but are, at the very least, honest and true...

“Dear God, please heal my mom from being allergic to cats. I really want a cat and I don’t want to ask my mom to move out.”

“God, please let the dinosaurs come back to life... but just the ones that eat leaves.”

“O Lord, please help me not to say bad words... words like...” [you’ll have to use your imagination for the rest of that very real prayer.]

“Dear God, thank you for this food. But just so you know, we do not need any more broccoli.”

“Dear God, I read that Thomas Edison made light, but in Sunday school they said You did it. I bet he stole your idea.”

“Dear God, is Pastor Dan a friend of yours, or do you just know him through the business?”

"Dear God, if You cannot make me a better boy, don't worry about it. I'm having a real good time just like I am!"²

And, with our spirits lightened, if we can continue to let children into the inner circles of faith, if we are willing to see how much they can teach us and help us to be more innocent, more loving, and more tolerant in our own lives, we could be led by actual prayers like these...

"Lord, my prayer is that our niceness will stay, and our meanness will go away."

"Dear God, do you draw the lines around the countries? If you don't, who does?"

"Dear God, I didn't think orange went with purple until I saw the sunset you made on Tuesday night. That was really cool."³

"Dear God. I am amazed at something... Heaven is so big, which means it must be so heavy – and yet it can hang so high up in the sky above the clouds. How do you do that? I was just wondering."

"Dear Jesus. Please forgive me for disobeying. I'm so sorry that I did that. How can you ever forgive me? But I know that you will. I love you so much. Amen."⁴

The disciples thought they were helping by keeping the creative messiness of kids away, but Jesus would not stand for that. He commanded them to make room for children, to recognize that they belonged just as much as anyone else at the very center of the church. May we hear that teaching, and embrace a little mess, in the name of God the Creator, Savior, and Holy Spirit, **Amen.**

² <https://www.beliefnet.com/followingjesus/features/funny-prayers-from-kids.aspx>

³ "Top Ten List of Funniest Prayers by Kids," https://kicks105.com/top-ten-list-of-funniest-prayers-by-kids/?utm_source=tsmclip&utm_medium=referral; <https://www.ldsliving.com/we-asked-you-answered-20-hilariously-sweet-and-funny-things-kids-prayed-for/s/93158>

⁴ <https://jimdaily.focusonthefamily.com/the-funny-things-kids-pray/>