

I want to start with a story about me. A lot of you guys know I'm a musician, I'm a worship leader, and I get invited to go to all kinds of places to play music. A lot of times I'll get invited to a camp, but the problem that I have is if you ask me far enough in advance, I don't ask about the details. So what has happened in my life is I've just shown up to a lot of places, not having any clue what I'm walking into. I could literally fill this whole time with stories of crazy situations that I've walked into because I didn't ask enough questions before I just showed up with my guitar.

But one of the places that I got asked to come to was a Christian camp. I've done a lot of Christian camps before. It's kind of like you see one, you see them all; they just need you to play music. So I started prepping my stuff and not really asking any questions. I show up at this camp, and I soon realize that it's not at all what I thought it was going to be. Maybe some of you have heard about this camp before. It's called Joni and Friends.

Has anyone heard about Joni and Friends? It's an incredible camp that I had never heard of before. This is their mission statement: "They want to be a place where families living with a disability find rest, hope, and community in the body of Christ." Families who have kids with disabilities can come to this camp for low or almost no cost.

My job was to lead worship for the chapel. So I go to the chapel service and found out very quickly that families who have kids with disabilities often don't even have an opportunity to go to church together because a typical worship service like this can be difficult if you have a child that acts out or speaks out. They don't want to get shushed, or they don't want to get rushed out of the room, so they often just go to church at home or whatever.

My job was to lead worship for families, and they could come in and just enjoy going to church together. When I got there, to be quite honest, I hadn't really spent a lot of time with kids with disabilities, especially at that time. So I was feeling pretty nervous, and I was feeling a little bit awkward because I didn't know what to say or how to act, and I didn't want to say the wrong thing.

As the week went on, though, something started shifting in my heart, and I started feeling at peace. I started feeling this weird sense of belonging like I didn't have to try to be something different. It all kind of culminated in this one night when they let all the kids come into the chapel service. As you know, I'm used to leading worship in this environment every single week, but this chapel service was entirely different. All the kids were given an instrument. Some of the kids were given tambourines, some

were given shakers, and some these little toy trumpets. It was the coolest, most chaotic thing I've ever led worship for, ever!

It was an incredible night, and I just said, "Wow, there's something about this that I need more of." To be honest, it was kind of like one of the greatest glimpses of the Kingdom of God that I have ever gotten because it was so loving and accepting. And I also learned that the rules are pretty different. There was a lot of square dancing. Have you guys ever square-danced? I did. There was a lot of slug kissing. Have you guys ever done that? They actually find a slug, and they make you kiss it! But the biggest rule at Joni and Friends camp was that no one was to be excluded. Everyone was in. Everyone belonged. That was hard because I started realizing over the course of the week how often we accidentally exclude people.

I think about how my kingdom is so different from that kingdom. When we look at this journey that the disciples are on in Mark, it's a pretty crazy journey. Jesus is walking around, showing them how to do things, and Jesus is saying, "This is how you do things here." He says, "In my kingdom, we do it this way." And they're like, "Let's do it that way." And he says, "Nope, not that way. We don't do it that way. We do it this way." And so over and over again in Mark, we've been seeing the disciples messing it up; they're not getting it. Then Jesus shows them a new way. He gives them an imagination for what the kingdom of God might look like.

I heard this quote. I don't know who this is for, but I just want to give you this quote real quick.

I want this to sink into your brain. If you came in here and you're cynical, I heard this quote that said, "Cynicism is the atrophy of imagination." Maybe you walked in here, and you're cynical, or maybe you're skeptical about all this stuff, maybe someone dragged you here, or maybe someone promised you lunch if you would come to church. Maybe you're visiting your mom, and you're thinking, fine, just to get her off my back, I'm going to go to church. I just want to tell you—God wants to give you a new imagination for his kingdom. So I'm going to ask you just for the next few minutes to lay that cynicism aside and consider that maybe it's all more beautiful, and it applies to you much more than you've ever imagined. Is that okay? Can we do that? Let me pray.

Lord, we don't want my wisdom up here, Lord. We want your wisdom. We want your spirit to speak today. So I ask God that your Spirit would continue, as it did in worship, to fall in this

room, Lord, that you would continue to draw people closer to you, that we would hear from you as we open your word and we look at you, Jesus, we look at you. We see what you're about. Lord, would you expand our imagination? Would you help us set aside our cynicism, and would you give us a new imagination for your kingdom? And we pray. We love you. Amen.

When I think about the disciple's journey; I can't help but think of this guy that I've been discipled by growing up. He's this amazing songwriter, an amazing poet. His name is Weird Al Yankovic, and he has a song that just made me think of the disciple's journey.

**Everything you know is wrong  
Black is white, up is down, and short is long  
And everything you thought was just so  
Important doesn't matter  
Everything you know is wrong  
Just forget the words and sing along  
All you need to understand is  
Everything you know is wrong**

Mark 10:13 says, *"People were bringing little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them, but the disciples rebuked them."* People were coming, and they were lining up for a rabbi's touch. This would've been pretty common in Jewish days when Jewish was the predominant religion. They would've had kids lining up; a lot of times, they were little kids. But the kids in this story don't necessarily mean just little kids; it's all the kids. They would've lined up to receive a touch from the rabbi because they believed that the rabbi had a kind of special direct line to God. They keep themselves very clean, and so if everything can go through the rabbi to speak to God, God listens to their prayers a little better. I know we don't think that here at our church; we don't feel like Kevin or I have a special voice or a special line to God, but back then, they believed that.

I heard this quote from a famous rabbi. He said,

**A rabbi is, in many respects, like a plumber, and God wants to only bestow goodness upon us. And all a person needs to do is to make himself a vessel to receive the good. But our bad deeds jam up the pipes through which divine goodness flows, and a rabbi "unclogs" the pipes for the person. Grand Rabbi Levi Yitzchak Horowitz (the "Bostoner Rebbe")**

So the parents are lining up to see Jesus. They want to unclog the pipes of their children, so they have the children all lined up, and the disciples rebuked them. I just want to remind us here that tensions are high. I've read this passage a lot of times before, and I never read it quite the way I'm reading it now.

If you think about what's happening in there, if you remember what Dan was talking about last week, the Pharisees are trying to trap Jesus when they ask him about divorce. John the Baptist, he

just had his opinion on divorce. And what did that get him? It got him beheaded. So now the Pharisees are coming to Jesus, and they're saying, "Jesus, what do you think about divorce?"

The disciples, they don't exactly know where Jesus is going and what he's doing, even though Jesus is trying to tell them. They don't really know. But they at least know that tensions are high, that things are not going well. They're marching their way to Jerusalem, where Jesus keeps saying things are going to get a lot harder for all of them, especially him.

In the midst of that is when this scene happens, and all these kids are lining up. I can imagine it's probably a little bit chaotic, and the disciples are seeing that, and their stress intentions are high. The reality is, we all know this, if you've been around kids or you have kids, kids are not great in stressful situations.

It makes me think about when we got this Ford Explorer a couple of years ago, and I was so excited that we got a four-wheel drive car because my whole life, I've driven Honda Civics. I don't go and do four-wheeling stuff, but there's something about having a four-wheel drive that makes me feel like more of a man! So I was so excited to have this four-wheel drive truck. My parents lived at the time in Hayfork, which was in the mountains above Redding, and they actually got snow there. I said that we're going to Hayfork for Christmas and we're going to test out this baby. All right, let's go! So we go up there with a couple of my parent's friends, and they bring their late nineties 4Runners and Ford Rangers with all these nubby tires, and I come here with my slick Ford Explorer with the street tires on it, and they're looking at me like, dude, you shouldn't climb that mountain.

But you don't understand, the Explorer has a little knob that says snow mode, and if you put it in snow mode, it can do anything you want it to do in the snow. And they're like, this is going to be fun, city boy! We go to the snow, and I have my whole family with me in the car. They're going to see what the Explorer can do. We start making our way up the hill. The other cars immediately just smoked me. They make their way up the hill, and they're not worried at all.

We're slipping a little bit, and the comments from the backseat start coming like they are still trusting, "Daddy, we're slipping." As if to say, "Dad, we trust you, but we also might die, so can you please handle this situation?" I'm like, don't worry—snow mode. And I keep going, and we're slipping.

Finally, the road starts to narrow, and the car starts to tip, and I just get a little glimpse over the edge. It's quite a long way down, and the only thing to stop us were a few little measly trees. So then the "daddy" starts turning into full-on yells like, "Daddy, daddy, what are you doing? We're going to die!" And my response to that is, "Okay, listen if you are not going to be part of the solution, get out of the car." They stayed in the car of course. It was a chaotic, stressful situation. I brought that up to them,

and I said, "Do you remember when we got the Explorer stuck?" And they're like, "Dad, we will remember that for the rest of our lives; that was the moment that we almost died!" Kids are not good in stressful situations.

You can imagine why the disciples might say that this is not a good time for kids. "Come another time for Jesus to bless your kids. We're dealing with some real stuff here." And so it says in Mark 10:14, "*When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, 'Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.'*" If you're like me, you don't use big words like indignant all the time. So I had to look that up. In our language, if we say indignant, we might be trying to say annoyed or angry.

But I had to look at what Mark was saying here. The word for it is *aganakteo*. I don't know if I'm saying that right, but something like that. It's two words: *agan* means much, and *achthos* means grief. So when you look at how Jesus felt in that moment when the disciples stopped the little kids, he was actually experiencing much grief, and he wasn't happy. This wasn't like the gentle moment that we always picture where Jesus says, with a smile on his face, "Let the little children come to me." He was actually feeling grief. Why? Why was he feeling grief at that moment? I could see why he would be annoyed because, like maybe a chapter before, he just told the disciples to welcome all the little children, and they're not doing it. They keep not getting it. So I could see he's maybe annoyed, but why grief?

I think it's because they were hindering people that God cared about. If you think about what it would've been like to be a child in Rome in those days, children were not someone that Rome really cared about. They had a pretty rough go of it. To be a child in Rome, you were relegated to the sidelines. You weren't very useful. What that meant was that the father had ultimate authority—the *pater familias* is what they called it—the ultimate authority over anyone who did anything in his family.

Legally he could do nearly anything to his children. He could disown them; he could kill them, whatever he wanted to do. If a family was trying for a boy and they ended up having a girl instead, they could take the baby girl outside and leave it to the elements. It was something that commonly happened. They would leave the little baby outside. So to be a child in Rome was pretty rough. They didn't have any leverage. They didn't have any rank. They didn't have much value at all. They had no social capital. They were vulnerable, and Jesus says the kingdom of God belongs to people like this.

He tells the disciples that do you think I came for your agenda? Whatever you think is happening here when I'm being questioned and as we're marching our way to Jerusalem, you might have it in your image what your Messiah is going to look like, but I came for people like this. Don't hinder them. Don't grieve my heart by keeping them away from me. I came for people like

this. This is the center of my heart. And he goes on to clarify in Mark 10:15-16.

**"Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." And he took the children in his arms, placed his hands on them and blessed them. Mark 10:15-16**

So we have to ask ourselves this question: How do we receive the kingdom of God like a little child? What does that look like? How do I become a little child again?

I started thinking about this, and there are a couple of ways you could take it if you're trying to be literal with it. You could receive it like one would receive a child, for instance. How would you receive a child that was coming towards you? You might receive the child with open arms. Or could you receive the kingdom of God as children receive the kingdom of God, which is without reservations? I wrote this down in my notes: Children haven't learned to reject God yet. Or is it by becoming childlike without status or without rights? I was thinking we don't actually value children for what they give us, do we?

There's some kind of inherent value that we have. Occasionally we'll ascribe value to what they might become. This person might be the president one day, or this person might be that. But in reality, we don't value children because of what they're going to offer us. If anyone has a teenager, you know it's generally more costly at this stage in life than there are benefits. But I think the overall question that Jesus keeps asking and he's trying to answer here for us is, what is God's kingdom like?

Do you ever ask yourself, what does God want? I've asked myself that before. What does God want? If you would just tell me what he wants, I would do it. And he says, my kingdom belongs to people like this, to people such as these. I think that means that we have to expand this beyond just children. Anyone who is vulnerable, anyone who is marginalized without social capital. And here's what I think it is—people that this world would never consider great. That's who he says his kingdom belongs to. This started ringing bells, and I felt like he's told me before or told us before that the kingdom belonged to someone else.

I can't remember him saying, children. But then I remembered in Matthew 5; there are the Beatitudes. "*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.*" Now are these people the meek, the poor in spirit? Are these the people that we see on the cover of Time magazine?

We don't have to ask what our culture values. We just have to look at who we value and who we're trying to become. And as I started looking at what our culture values and how our culture evaluates humans, it's a very confusing road. If you really start asking the question, maybe at lunch today, have this debate: How does the world, outside of God, outside of Jesus, how does the world find value? What makes a human valuable to someone

outside of God? You will find that discussion very difficult to have because it's kind of like a moving target. There are all kinds of things that our world says are valuable. There are a million little mechanisms that tell us what we have to become and why if we do this, we'll become a little bit more valuable. But if you really want to find an intrinsic value, it's really hard. You get statements like, "Well, human beings are valuable because they're human beings."

Does that really mean anything? It's difficult; it's pivotal to try to unravel how the world assigns value. But here's what I want you to understand this morning. I think this is huge at the center of Jesus' heart. The kingdom of God completely obliterates our socially constructed valuation of human beings.

That means all the stuff that we try to do to become valuable to our society God gets rid of. He says that's not what's important anymore, which is actually maybe bad news for some of us. For some of us who have spent our life building our own kingdom, building a valuation so that people will see us as valuable, we've been pretty successful at it. This is saying that is not really useful in the Kingdom of God. That might be bad news to you, but I think for a lot of people, it's actually great news. It's actually great news. Because there's this push. Do you guys know what I'm talking about? There's this push and pull that we've had since we were teenagers or maybe even younger, where we try to come up with our value in this world, and we try to search for significance.

So we build this persona that the world will tell us, "Okay, fine, you fit. Now you're in; you're good enough." Maybe it's making money. Maybe it's being successful. Maybe it's having the right kind of family. Maybe it's being married. Maybe it's being single. I don't know what it is for you because everyone who builds their own culture has this moving target. But what Jesus is saying here is that his kingdom is different. He doesn't value all that kind of stuff.

I started thinking about my little eight-year-old Charlie. When I tell her, "Charlie, you're beautiful." She says, "I know." And I think, at what point did my values start unraveling? Because I remember I was raised by good parents. I know not everyone has my story, but I was raised by parents that made me know they loved me. They messed me up in a lot of other ways, but they made me know that they loved me. I knew. And I started thinking, at what point did I start questioning my value in this world?

I remember it all comes down to junior high. Junior high is the worst. If there are any junior highers in here or you're listening to this, I'm so sorry; it's going to be over soon. But when I got into sixth grade, we were homeschooled for a couple of years, and then we reintegrated back into sixth grade into public school. I have a twin brother; we're fraternal, so we don't look

alike. But when you have a twin, and you get thrust back into a public school system, and one of you excels, and the other of you doesn't, it really sends a very clear message—there's something wrong with me. There's something broken with me. So as I started having encounters with friends that would betray me for the first time or people that would leave me out or exclude me, or I wasn't good enough at this, or I didn't have these kinds of characteristics, or I wasn't smart enough, whatever it might have been, I started getting this message deep into my head that I wasn't valuable enough and that I had to change something in order to become valuable.

So I started that journey way back then. Part of it I found in music. I was this really, super shy kid. I mean, I would not talk to anybody. I wouldn't sing publicly, but as soon as I found out that I could find a little bit of value in singing, guess what? I'm on the stage. As soon as I figured out that there were things I could do to talk to people that would make them like me more, I realized, oh, well, why don't I just have that with every conversation? So I started building this persona where I would make people like me, even though really I don't like that many people, you know? Everyone I talk to, I start building this thing, and I find my value, and it's this exhausting fight.

I wonder if anyone feels that way, and maybe your fight is a little bit different. But we struggle, and we fight, and we strain to try to become someone that we were never actually meant to become. And God obliterates that value system. I think that's why we're exhausted. I think that we're exhausted in this world trying to fight for our position and our significance and our value, but Jesus says that you're in. He says you belong in the kingdom of God. So what that means is, as we look at this for us, he says, "You need to accept me as a kid would accept me." What that means for me, and maybe it means this for you, is maybe some unlearning. Maybe you have to unlearn some of those ways that you have learned to construct value in yourself or in other people.

It made me think about my grandpa, who decided when I was in my twenties that he was going to teach me how to golf. So my grandpa teaches me how to golf, and we're about two years in, and my grandpa's kind of older at this point; I have in my head that when he was younger, he was this rockstar golfer. He's my mentor, right? So one day, we're golfing, and I say, "Grandpa, tell me about the good old days. How good were you? What was your best score?" He says, "Oh, I was never very good at all. I never broke a hundred. I was always way above a hundred. I'm a horrible golfer." Now I'm thinking, why are you teaching me how to golf? Why am I trying to learn from you?

Anyone who knows me knows I'm obsessed with golf, but really the only obsession I have is unlearning everything that my grandpa ever taught me about golf. He had this one where he told me to slow my swing down. If you're a golfer, you know it's



all about tempo. But I slowed my swing down one time so slow that I actually hit the corner of the club, and it was just a straight shank lob shot, and it knocked him right on the head! He's okay, but he still has a Nike insignia on his head!

But I think sometimes that means that we have to unlearn, right? We have to unlearn some of those ways that we have learned to value ourselves and others. People being a subject in God's kingdom means unlearning our socially constructed valuation of ourselves and others. And this is huge. I want you to understand this. This frees us up from using people for our value to serving people that God values.

Let me say that again for someone who needs to hear it because I need to hear that. This frees us up from using people for our value to serving people that God values. I want to go back to Mark 9:35.

**Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, "Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all." He took a little child whom he placed among them. Taking the child in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me." Mark 9:35-37**

There's a story I've been debating whether I wanted to tell you, but I feel like God wants me to tell you this; so much to my shame and despair, I'm going to tell you this story. A couple of weeks ago, I was at an event where my small group went to Street Life Ministries, and we were serving meals for the homeless. I was thinking through it because when I went there, I ended up spending more time talking to my small group than I did talking to any homeless people. I was just trying to think through that as I was driving home. Why was that? Was it because I love my small group so much, and I just really wanted to connect with them, and I have this deep care and love and respect for them?

The answer is no. I mean, I do love my small group, but the real answer is I was feeling awkward. And as that was happening, as I was thinking through that and trying to be honest with myself, I was driving and was supposed to turn left, but at the left intersection, when I was going to be stopped at that stoplight, there was a woman sitting there with a sign and instinctively not even thinking about it I pulled out of the left lane where I was supposed to turn left, and I went straight and just kept going through the light so I could do a U-turn and not have to look this woman in the eye. And Jesus says that when I was moving into the center lane to avoid her, I wasn't avoiding her; I was avoiding him.

Mother Theresa said it like this: "We've all forgotten that we belong to one another." In our passage, Jesus, I think we understand a little bit more. Jesus is grieving. He's grieving because the disciples were doing what? They were excluding people. They were excluding people that Jesus cared about. Jesus is saying, "In

my kingdom, we don't exclude; we bring them closer." So I want to ask you a question. I want you to really engage this question. What stops you from including people? And let me prime the pump here for you. I've written down some of the things that came to my brain. Maybe they're irrelevant to my goals. Maybe it's too awkward. Maybe it's too messy, too risky, too busy. I'm too busy. I'm too comfortable.

I want to ask you another question. What stops you if you're in here and you haven't accepted Jesus' invitation? Jesus is actually inviting all of us to come closer. We are his children. He refers to disciples sometimes as kids. We are his children, and he's inviting you to come closer. What's holding you back? What's stopping you?

When I was at that camp, the Joni and Friends camp, one of the most impactful things that happened to me was meeting a little kid named Jesse. He was severely deaf and severely blind, and he couldn't communicate. He had a few hand signals, and that's about it. They introduced me to Jesse, and he was very scared, and he was shy when we first started the camp, so he was kind of hiding. But I just say, "Hi Jesse, I'm Brandon, a Musician."

I remember a little later in that week after God had softened my heart a bit. I was in my hotel room, and I was trying to make sure my hair looked okay. So I get my stuff out, and I have my routine. I'm starting to mess with my hair, and I just had this thought, you know, no one out there cares what my hair looks like. The world has a lot of things. If I come here and my hair looks like a flock of seagulls or something, you guys are going to say; I wonder what's going on with Brandon. I wonder why his hair looks like that. But in that camp, nobody cared what my hair looked like.

Then I went to my suitcase which I had brought, just in case there was a funny joke day, a bright purple shirt that said, Jesus is my BFF, letters in the rainbow. And I thought that if I wear this and have crazy hair, nobody will care because I'm not here for that, and they're not here to see me looking polished or excited or whatever. So I put on that shirt, and I had my hair crazy, and I just walked out, and it was the freest I've ever felt just walking around. People are like, "Hey, Brandon, what's going on?" Nothing. No one cared what my hair looked like. Then I saw Jesse.

There was a sidewalk running through Mission Springs, and Jesse, who had previously been hiding because he didn't feel safe, had found this patch of sidewalk in the middle of everything, and he was taking a nap. And I realized this place was so safe for him. He belongs here. I wonder how many places Jesse could take a nap on the sidewalk anywhere else in this world. And that night, I was leading worship, and I was at the grand piano, and I saw them bring Jesse in, and they walked him through the aisle, and they walked him up to the grand piano. They put his hands on the grand piano because Jesse was deaf, but if you put his hands on the piano, he could hear the frequencies resonating through

his bones, and he could participate, and he could worship, and he belonged. Guys, this kingdom is for everybody. And who are we? Who are we to say who's in or out when Jesus has already said you're in?

Not much later in Mark, the Last Supper occurs as Jesus makes his way and marches his way to Jerusalem. As we get ready to take our communion elements, let me read this. "When the hour came, Jesus and his apostles reclined at the table." So this is Jesus. One more time, he's going to give them an opportunity to see what his kingdom looks like. He is going to give them an opportunity to say, let me show you how we serve people in my kingdom. I'm about to die for all of you who I love. This is what you do.

**When the hour came, Jesus and his apostles reclined at the table. And he said to them, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it finds fulfillment in the kingdom of God." After taking the cup, he gave thanks and said, "Take this and divide it among you. For I tell you I will not drink again from the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me." Luke 22:14-19**

Father, I pray that this wouldn't end here, that your spirit will draw us closer and closer to you, and as we draw closer and closer to you, that you will give us opportunities to partner with you in your kingdom. Lord, would you put people in our path that you care about, that we can show belonging to, that we can show compassion to, that we can reach out to and show your love? Lord, would you help us become servants for you? We need your help to guide us, and I thank you for the way that you have shown us what real love is.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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