

**J.D. Ousley**  
**Sermon—7Oct18**  
**Mark 10.2-16**  
**“Opening Up”**

*In the Name of God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. Amen.*

Children are cute.

Their cuteness to us may be a result of evolution. Attractive babies could be more likely to receive good care from their parents. As a result, they are more likely to survive than less-attractive babies. Survival of the fittest becomes survival of the cutest!

Even so, children aren't always given the care they need. The news is filled, for example, with stories of children who are victims of the war in Syria. Families in that country have been slaughtered by bombs and nerve gas. Children that survived were forced to flee the country and take up residence in squalid refugee camps.

So, too, at the time of Jesus, children couldn't count on being treated well. In ancient Roman society, unwanted babies were taken out into the wilderness and left to die.

So the Gospel story of Christ's meeting with children goes against the cultural prejudice of the time. St. Mark's Gospel reports that “People were bringing little children to Jesus in order that he might touch them.”

The disciples didn't want Jesus to be bothered by the young visitors that society didn't consider very important, so the disciples “spoke sternly” to the children's parents.

But, the text reports, “when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to his disciples, ‘Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.’”

In a moving ending to the story, Christ took each child in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

The church has a long tradition of ministering to children that can be traced back to this episode in Christ's life. Sunday schools and youth groups follow the model of Jesus in welcoming children and educating them and giving them spiritual training.

Major institutions within the church also contribute to this ministry—like our 740-acre Incarnation Center in Connecticut. Incarnation Center serves thousands of children every year. It offers them a variety of summer camps as well as several educational programs during the school year.

And this episode in Christ's life also suggests a more general theme of Christian ministry: Christians are to be *open* to all people.

But while this goal of “openness” is expressed so frequently that it has become a cliché, it's not always clear how exactly we are supposed to go about being “open.”

For example, an individual congregation might say that it wants to be open to diverse sorts of people. It will try to welcome anyone who wants to join.

Yet then when someone wants to join whose political beliefs don't agree with those held by most of the people in the parish, the visitor receives a cold reception. That congregation might then ask itself if it really is “open.”

Now I would admit that much of this comes down to individual cases. There are limits to any Christian welcome. The boundaries of a church can stretch only so far. We can't be “open” to Nazis. We can't be open to terrorists.

And on a practical level, it's hard for us to offer a universal welcome because it demands a lot from us psychologically. Openness is draining. I might find it challenging to chat with a stranger who comes to Incarnation. I should look on their visit as an opportunity to meet new people and tell them about our church.

But, at the same time, the reception could be socially challenging for me. Maybe there will be awkward silences in my attempts at conversation. Maybe I will say something silly and make a fool of myself.

Now I recognize that, for some people, openness is a cinch. St. Francis of Assisi, for example, had no social anxieties! Francis would find that people gathered around him wherever he went. They took sheer joy just in being with him.

Francis even displayed a mystical relationship with *animals*: people believed that wild beasts became tame in his presence—so tame that Francis could talk with them!

No wonder that Francis has been an inspiration to animal lovers ever since. In that spirit, we will be welcoming pets from the neighborhood this afternoon in front of the church and blessing them in honor of St. Francis.

As a congregation, too, we are continually looking for ways to be open to the world around us. Recently, Incarnation had a new portable sign made to go out on the sidewalk by the Madison Avenue entrance. The sign proclaims in large letters, "OPEN."

The sign then lists in small letters the various spiritual activities people can participate in if they decide to take advantage of the fact that the doors are unlocked. They can enter the church to pray; they can rest; they can meditate; they can light a candle.

I like this sign. The design is patterned on a similar sign that I once saw in front of a church in Massachusetts. It conveys the useful information that at that moment, anyone is free to come into the building to perform the spiritual acts that people do in churches.

And there's perhaps a more general lesson here. Because we want people to think of us as "open,"—both literally in terms of the church building and figuratively as a church community—we should also ask: What difference does it make to us? How are we changed by being welcoming to the community around us?

I will likely find, for instance, that being open to new *experiences* will make my life more interesting.

I will find that being open to *people*—really listening to them and being present to them will bring me closer to them. I might find that because I have paid more attention, an acquaintance becomes a friend.

It's good advice to build on whatever we're *already* open to. If we like to read, for example, we'll be able to bond with other readers. If we like cats, we'll be especially open to fellow cat lovers.

But it's also good advice to try to stretch our natural inclinations. Senior citizens can go out of their way to be friendly with young children even though the children are many decades younger than they are. Seniors discover that the young person's enthusiasm for life is rejuvenating!

Talk about "openness." As Jesus remarked, "Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it."

*And now unto God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit be ascribed as is most justly due all might, majesty, power, dominion, and praise, now and forever. Amen.*