

JESUS BLESSES KLUTZY KIDS

Maybe you've seen a picture like this on the front of a Sunday School leaflet: Jesus is sitting on a rock somewhere under a sunny blue sky. On his lap, standing and kneeling around him, are a group of bright-eyed youngsters.

The children are dressed in their Sabbath best, starched and pressed. Jesus smiles condescendingly at them; they in turn gaze piously at the master. A group of doting mothers stands in the background, eyed by a few skeptical disciples off to one side.

There's just enough truth to that scene to make it dangerous. It's true that on one occasion Jesus blessed some children over the protests of his followers. But to interpret that event in such saccharine terms is largely to miss its point.

The incident is mentioned three times in the Christian scripture, at Matthew 19:13-15, Mark 10:13-16, and Luke 18:15-17. The details of each account differ slightly, but by and large the story is the same.

One day some people brought their kids to Jesus, apparently so he could caress them or pray over them. But Jesus' followers vetoed the plan. They stood in the way and waved off the parents.

Try to understand where they were coming from. They knew what children are like. They had no illusion about entertaining polite, pious or cherubic youngsters. They were well aware that most kids tend to be obnoxious, impertinent and crabby.

Furthermore, if infants were included as Luke suggests, there's the additional threat of colicky crying and wet bottoms. Not to mention the dirty fingers and runny noses that come with any passel of country urchins.

It's no wonder the disciples were not overjoyed when such a crowd of klutzy kids approached their rabbi.

But Jesus objected. He chewed out his men, invited the children to join him, and even picked some up to bless them. "Don't stop these children from getting to me," he scolded, "because they own God's kingdom." With that announcement he set the whole business on its end.

This was not a case of some friendly uncle bouncing nieces and nephews on his knee. Nor was it a politician's "kiss some babies and win a few votes" ploy. It was the rather unthinkable case of promising rabbi allowing unkempt juveniles to join his entourage.

For the ancient rabbis, children were hardly models of virtue for the simple reason that they were largely ignorant of the demands of the religious tradition. No self-respecting rabbi would embrace children too young and unschooled for their bar mitzvahs.

No doubt Jesus' disciples were trying to protect their teacher's reputation as a respectable rabbi when they shooed away such children.

But Jesus grabbed a few and plopped them on his lap. "Amen! I tell you," he announced, "you'll never get into God's kingdom if you can't accept it as a child." He wasn't implying that youngsters are innocent or pious or trusting, as much as that they are so unassuming.

Adults, like the disciples in this instance, put on airs. They act as though they're better than they really are. Grown-ups are only too willing to put other people down so they will look good in comparison.

In contrast, children are more unassuming. They are markedly less pretentious. And it was that unpretentious quality which made them prime candidates for the kingdom.

So Jesus turned the tables. He gave his disciples the kind of scolding usually served for naughty children. And he blessed a bunch of klutzy kids by rating them as choice kingdom material.

The biblical authors are to be commended for keeping this vignette in their writings. It's a rather unflattering portrait of the men who later became the leaders of the church. By implication it still puts the finger on the leadership style of many religious heads today.

On the other hand, it can still prove encouraging to people who are short on status. The show-offs get a put-down, but there's a special blessing for the klutzes of the world.