

“Jesus Welcomes Children”

Matthew 19:13-15

June 21, 2020

Many of you know that I am a PK; in my case, the acronym does not refer to placekicker but preacher’s kid. My father began serving Presbyterian congregations forty years ago and continues in that vocation now. I have often heard that there are two kinds of preacher’s kids, though I don’t think anyone has ever described them for me in detail. I think I know what they mean. In any case, as a child, I adored being the son of the pastor. I delighted in standing with my father after the service and greeting worshippers. I wouldn’t miss an opportunity to accompany him on a pastoral visit. My father gave me an inspiring and joyful picture of what parish ministry can be, as I was nurtured and raised by congregations filled with faithful and loving people, hundreds of unofficial grandparents, aunts, and uncles. Most of all, I am grateful that, from the earliest memories of life, the church has been for me a place of comfort and acceptance. As one who grew up climbing pews, run-walking down hallways and swiping animal crackers from the nursery snack cabinet, I love being part of a community where children feel at home. The church has always been that kind of place for me, and I have always felt its welcome.

I also know that this is not the case for all of us. Often, I hear stories of those whose experience of the church sounds very different from mine. Those for whom the church has been a place of deep pain, cruel judgment, or bitter rejection. In my ministry, I have been challenged and blessed by listening to those who have never lost their faith in God but whose trust in the institution has been stretched or even shattered. Some are considering giving the church a second chance, or have found at Second a place of healing. Even as I give thanks for this openness and forgiveness, I grieve the wounds that faith communities can inflict, the ways that our words and actions fail to align. Too many were fed messages of exclusion, too many were taught only a theology of fear, too many were made to feel unloved or unwelcomed at the table of God’s grace. Though the church, as Christ’s body in and for the world, is a gift of God, we must acknowledge that it is also a human institution. We must confess that the church can

and does cause great harm when we miss our call to be people compelled by grace and not judgment, called to compassion and not condemnation.

This morning’s scripture from Matthew’s gospel offers a case in point example of these distinct approaches, specifically to the place of children in the community of faith. It is a brief encounter with a profound message. Jesus has been teaching, preaching, and telling parables to a growing crowd of devoted followers and intrigued listeners. Just one chapter ago, in response to a question from the over-eager disciples about who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, Jesus called a child forward and said, in no uncertain terms, that becoming like children is the surest way to enter God’s realm. Then, as if to underscore the message, he expands the teaching and offers this memorable line, “Whoever *welcomes* one such child in my name *welcomes me*.” Any questions?

Well, the line *should* have been memorable. But, in our verses this morning, barely a chapter later, those same disciples completely forget. Immersed in the ancient understanding of children as property rather than people, intent on protecting Jesus from an unacceptable distraction, they order a group of parents to get their noisy, sticky-fingered, unruly children out of the way. You can sense Jesus’ frustration (what did I *just* say?) as he reiterates the earlier point—hey guys, the kingdom *belongs* to these children!

I thought of this concise object lesson as I was selecting texts for our series of childhood Bible stories, and particularly as I was preparing for this Sunday at the beginning of our annual Vacation Bible School. It may not be a “children’s story,” but it certainly has a message for the church about the place and role of children...and, I believe, a broader message as well. You see, while very few of us could be accused of the kind of direct prohibition of the disciples, I do wonder what kind of subtle messages of dismissal we might send. What does this text have to say to the church today, called to be the body of Christ, to act as

his ambassadors in the world and in our lives?

Let's start with this. The statistics, surveys, and studies could not be clearer. The faith of our children, and therefore the future of the church, depends on families and communities who teach and live the stories of scripture and the virtues of our faith. No pressure, but...the most consistent and reliable predictor of the resilience and durability of faith is the intentional spiritual practices we learn as children. As most of us can attest, the messages (spoken and lived) that we receive about God in our earliest years have incredible staying power. And so, it is essential for all of us who care about the future to follow the instruction of Jesus and welcome children by offering them full access to the life of the church and the stories of scripture and to live our own lives faithfully as models for them.

And, living out this command of Jesus also involves stretching ourselves to offer a compelling and relevant witness to God's expansive welcome to all God's children. I remember hearing the preacher Fred Craddock share this experience in a gathering sponsored by the Children's Defense Fund. Craddock, whose retirement dream was to serve the children of his home region of rural Appalachia, described a series of setbacks in beginning this work. He said, "I was in a bad mood one night when I was saying my prayers. I questioned God I said, 'God, don't you have too many children?' That's what we hear a lot in our area—they just have too many children, can't take care of all of them. So, I asked God, 'Don't you have too many?' God said, 'What did you say, Fred?'" Craddock responded, "I just think you have too many children. I read the reports. Millions go to bed hungry every night... And what is it, a child in the U.S.A. shot dead every [3 hours]? If you can't feed and clothe and keep safe the children you have, well, then you just have too many." Craddock told us, "God didn't say anything right away, but then God said, 'Well, you came from a pretty big family, Fred. How did you all do it?...' 'Well,' I said, 'there was never any question. The older took care of the younger. Those who were able took care of those who weren't able.' God said, 'That's right. You got it. That's the plan. But you've got to stop saying, 'They're not my kids...not my responsibility...not my problem. Remember Fred, they're all children of God.'"

We adults make this so complicated. We form systems and frameworks, standards of judgment, and rubrics for determining worthiness. And along comes a group of children who really don't measure up, don't have

much to offer, aren't able to contribute. Along comes someone whose story is not the same as ours, whose background doesn't feel familiar, whose circumstances are suspect. Along comes someone whose presence makes us uncomfortable, anxious, uneasy, afraid. And we, responsible disciples that we are, step in to correct the situation. We bring our charts and our graphs and our spreadsheets. We make our argument. And Jesus, patient but persistent, even with us, teaches the lesson again. They belong to you. The kingdom of God belongs to them. God's reign cannot come on earth as it is in heaven until we grasp the width and breadth of its welcome. Every barrier we construct, every line we draw, every test we devise, every dismissive word we speak, keeps the kingdom at a distance.

In a few moments, you will see the faces and hear the voices of some of the children of our church. Like all of us, these children are struggling to understand the strange new world we now inhabit. It has meant separation from their teachers and classmates, their grandparents and cousins, their neighbors, and teammates. Like all of us, they are carrying the burdens of sadness that weigh us down these days. They are learning hard lessons about the power of hate and the human capacity for cruelty. They are watching and they are listening to the actions and the words of grown-ups both at home and in public leadership. What they see and hear will shape the future for all of us. So far as it depends on us, may they see compassion and hear kindness. May they learn to trust the promises of God and live the love of Jesus Christ. And, may we have the courage and wisdom to follow their kingdom witness of selfless love and generous hospitality. May we welcome both their presence and their gifts. This morning, some of our children will share comfort and hope with you in tangible and powerful ways. They are the church, deployed. Sent to bear witness to the presence of God. They will remind you that this is your call as well, as they sing words that form the center of our faith: Draw the circle wide, draw it wider still. Let this be our song: no one stands alone.

This morning, in scripture and in song, children are a picture of the kingdom in our midst, an opportunity to live out the truth of our convictions, and the testament to the beautiful simplicity of grace.

Speaking of beautiful simplicity, speaking of song, I close with a favorite story. After delivering one of the last

lectures of his life, surely one of the greatest theologians of his time, Karl Barth agreed to take one question from the audience at a Chicago seminary. A graduate student boldly stepped to the microphone: “Professor Barth, what is the single greatest theological insight of your life?” Barth had written tens of thousands of pages filled with theological insight. The thought of choosing one seemed preposterous.

The elderly scholar closed his eyes, leaned on the podium, and was silent for several seconds. Then he smiled as he shared some simple words that tell the story in a way we can *all* understand, “The greatest theological insight of my life is this: Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.” Words our children know by heart and live naturally.

And that’s why the kingdom belongs to them. Amen.