

This We Know: Promises for People of Faith & Doubt *A Front Row Seat*

Matthew 19:13-15

June 23, 2024

Some of you know that I am a PK. In this case, the acronym does not refer to placekicker but preacher's kid. My father began serving Presbyterian congregations a couple of years before I was born and continues in that vocation now in semi-retirement in the mountains of North Carolina. As a child, I remember often hearing that there were two kinds of preacher's kids, though I don't think anyone ever described in detail either one for me. I do think that I'm beginning to understand exactly what they meant. In any case, I was the type that adored being the son of the pastor. I delighted in standing next to my father after the worship service, greeting parishioners as they came out the doors. I wouldn't miss an opportunity in the summer to go with my dad on a pastoral visit. I was responsible for the home communion set that he kept in his office, preparing and carrying it on my lap in the car.

As I watched Dad go about his life and his work, I was captivated and ultimately called. I watched how his ministry drew people together, gave them a sense of purpose, grounded them in the Gospel. And so, as the old pastor John Ames puts it in Marilynne Robinson's novel *Gilead*, "My father left me a trade, which happened also to be my vocation."

I count it among my greatest blessings to have been nurtured and raised not only by a family but by congregations, churches filled with people who modeled faith for me, who served as bonus grandparents, aunts, and uncles—witnesses to my life and the lives of my siblings. I am grateful that, from my earliest memories, the church has been for me a place of welcome and acceptance. Church has always been home for me. And as one who grew up crawling under the pews, helping hand out bulletins, and swiping the

occasional animal cracker from the nursery snack cabinet, I love being a part of a community where children are valued, fully included, because I believe that how we welcome our youngest members says a lot about the quality of our discipleship.

Jesus seemed to think so. This morning's scripture from Matthew's Gospel offers a kind of case in point, an object lesson, two distinct approaches to the place of children in the circle of faith, a brief encounter with a timeless message, and a bold promise.

First, we must set the scene. Jesus has been preaching, teaching, telling parables to a growing crowd of devoted followers and interested interlopers. This part is particularly important: just one chapter ago, if you turn back to Matthew 18, in response to this awkward, uncomfortable, inappropriate question from his disciples (who is the childish one here?) the disciples ask, "who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" (Read: Pick me! Pick me!)

Jesus ignores his disciples, instead choosing a child. He brings her to the center of the circle and says, in no uncertain terms, that becoming like a child is the surest way to enter God's realm. Now, I want you to hold that thought. But then, to underscore and expand the lesson, he gives them a memorable maxim, a proverb to print and paste on the refrigerator door.

"Whoever welcomes one child welcomes me." – Jesus

At least, that line *should* have been memorable. But, here we are—it's a chapter later—and those same disciples completely forget. Now, maybe they were captive to the ancient understanding of children as property and not people, or simply determined to

protect Jesus from unnecessary distraction. They order the parents to get their noisy, sticky, silly, unruly children out of the way. Now, if you have chapter 18 in mind, you can sense Jesus' frustration from the very beginning of the encounter (*what did I just say to you?*) as he returns to the earlier point. "Hey guys, remember: the kingdom—my kingdom—*belongs* to these children!"

The promise is both explicit and direct, offered to people of faith and of doubt. Children are offered a seat on the front row. When we welcome a child, we experience the presence of Jesus. When we hold a child back, we deny the Spirit's call.

There is a practical implication to this spiritual wisdom. The statistics and surveys, the studies could not be clearer. The faith of our children, and so the future of the church, depends on families and congregation who teach and live the Gospel, who demonstrate the virtues of our faith. The most consistent and reliable predictor of the resilience and durability of faith is the intentional spiritual practices we observe as children. As most of us can attest, the messages (spoken and unspoken) 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 to welcome children, to offer them full access to the life of the church and the stories of scripture, to live our own lives faithfully as models for them. Churches that fail to make room on the front row for children are forfeiting their future and missing the message of the Gospel.

All week long, our church campus will be filled with the sights and sounds of children experiencing the embrace of community, the joy of song, creative projects, new friendships, and most of all the love of Christ. We know that these experiences are irreplaceable building blocks in the formation of faith, and we know that all who make them possible are faithful servants—even saints—of the church.

I know this because it is my story. I am here, in no small part, because of the people who kept the promise they

made at my baptism. I am here because of the saints who saw me not as a distraction or an impediment, but a child of God. I am here because faith was taught in words and modeled in actions, and I imagine that the same is true for many of you as well. For my part, I am here because Gloria Correll rocked me in the nursery and kept me in her home. I am here because of an ancient man named Ralph Moore, Uncle Ralph we called him, who gave me sticks of Juicy Fruit chewing gum to quiet me down in the pews, and always did it with a smile on his face. I'm here because Julia Wetmore taught me children's songs, and Gin Reid Mitchum took me to Montreat. I'm here because Miss Lena Cooper gave me a hug every single Sunday after worship. I am here—and I trust that you are here—because saints of the church prayed for me and taught me and encouraged me to use my gifts, who made a way for me, who were patient with me, who laughed with me. I'm here because the church took seriously its call to show up in my life. And it is worth a moment of your time to consider those saints who showed up in yours. Who kept the promise of the church at your baptism? Remember their names. Call them to heart and mind now. And then, having been so deeply blessed, commit yourself to paying those gifts of the Spirit forward in your life and in this community. This is our call.

And one more thing. Remember that charge that precedes the promise, the one I asked you to hold in mind. Yes, we are called to welcome children, but we are also commanded to become as they are. I believe that this is about more than simply becoming childlike. What might it mean? Many things, to be sure. But here is one: do not lose your capacity for wonder. Do not allow yourself to become so calcified in your convictions, so certain that you no longer make space for surprise. I will confess that sometimes I worry that the Church of Jesus Christ is at risk of collapsing under the weight of its self-importance. I think about that as I read about denominations and individual congregations, of all types across every spectrum, who are making these sweeping generalizations or drawing strict lines of exclusion around people and perspectives that might challenge

the status quo. I think about this while out of fear or desire for so-called stability, we implicitly conclude that God is speaking to us and nobody else. And if the others want to know what God thinks, they can just ask us. Isn't Jesus lucky to have us? For shame.

Here we are, forming systems and frameworks, standards of judgments and rubrics of worthiness. And along come a group of children. They don't really have very much to offer. They are noisy, sticky, unruly, chaotic. But not only that. Along comes someone whose story is not the same as your story, whose background doesn't match your expectations, whose circumstances are suspect. Along comes someone whose very presence makes you uncomfortable, anxious, uneasy, afraid. And we, responsible disciples that we are, step in to correct the unfortunate situation. We offer our solutions. We quote chapter and verse. We draw lines. We make statements. We craft arguments. We try to protect Jesus from them, and all the while Jesus, patient and persistent, repeats the lesson again and again. The ones you aim to exclude have a seat up front. The kingdom of God belongs to them. God's gracious reign cannot come on earth as it is in heaven until we grasp the breadth of its welcome. Every barrier we construct, every line we draw, every test we devise, every dismissive word we speak, every child we send away, keeps the kingdom of God at a distance.

What if instead we welcomed the wonder of uncertainty? What if we opened our hearts to the wonder of grace? What if we made room in our lives and in our pews for the wonder of those who see things differently, trusting that God is above and beyond all of us? What if we stood together as receivers of grace, rather than dispensers of grace? What if, following the lead of our children, we returned to the heart of our faith? There was no hesitation from our children this morning when I asked them the question, "How did Jesus respond?" Jesus welcomed.

One of my favorite stories. After delivering perhaps the last lecture of his life, the greatest theologian of his time, Karl Barth, agreed that he would take one question from

the audience at a Chicago seminary. No surprise here, a graduate student boldly stepped to the microphone. "Professor Barth," the young man asked, "what is the greatest theological insight of your life?" Now, you need to know that Karl Barth by then had written tens of thousands of pages filled with theological insight. The thought of choosing just one seemed preposterous. There was a chuckle that went through the audience as the elderly scholar closed his eyes and leaned heavily on the podium. He was silent for several seconds, so much so that some in the crowd thought the old man had fallen asleep at the podium. But then a smile flashed across his face. "The greatest theological insight of my life is this: Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so. I learned it in Sunday School."

So did I. And *that*, my friends, is *the* promise, *the* truth, *the* Gospel. Amen.