

“Let the Little Children Come”

Children’s Sabbath

Luke 18:15-17
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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In my many years of youth ministry, one of the things that I found myself getting more and more frustrated with was when people would say, “Children are the future of the church.” While I understand it was meant as a word of hope concerning the church in the decades to come, it also carried an unintended negative connotation.

It seemed to me, and many others who worked with young people, to diminish the important role and presence of children and youth in the *here and now*. So I was among those who would often respond, “No, actually, children and young people are the ‘now’ of the church.”

In the months preceding my graduation from seminary in 1993, I interviewed for the position of Associate Pastor for Youth and their Families in three large Presbyterian congregations – one in Texas, one in Illinois, and one in an upscale suburb of New York City in New Jersey. Two of the three, by intentionally scheduling children and youth church school at the same time as the service of worship, and by expecting them to attend class and not worship, sent a very strong message – more than just that children and youth should be seen and not heard, they shouldn’t even be seen. One church even had a youth house across the street, meaning young people could come to church each Sunday without even entering the main church building itself.

Given my strong feelings about the need to include children and youth in the full participation of the life and ministry of a congregation, I told those two congregations, “thanks, but I’m not interested since I can see there is no intention of changing this practice of exclusion.” That, among other factors, is how I ended up accepting a call to First Presbyterian Church in Fort Worth, Texas. **And even though my years of focusing primarily on youth ministry would eventually come to an end, my strong feelings about the need to be intentionally inclusive toward children and youth has not.**

You may be interested to know that this, thankfully, is the official position of the Presbyterian Church (USA) as well, as stated in the *Directory for Worship* section of our *Presbyterian Book of Order* – something that I was teaching about just last Thursday at the Presbyterian Polity class I’m leading this fall at Phillips Theological Seminary. Since I can’t state it any better, let me quote W-3.1004:

Children bring special gifts to worship and grow in the faith through their regular inclusion and participation in the worship of the congregation. Those responsible for planning and leading the participation of children in worship should consider the children’s level of understanding and ability to respond, and should avoid both excessive formality and condescension.

The session should ensure that regular programs of the church do not prevent children's full participation with the whole congregation in worship, in Word and Sacrament, on the Lord's Day.

Not only is that something that I strive to follow and encourage, so has this congregation throughout the years – something we should be quite proud of, because it's not something that every congregation strives to do.

There's no better biblical justification for this inclusive approach toward children than in today's Gospel Reading from Luke, a story that's also found in the gospels of Matthew and Mark. We learn that Jesus himself was delighted in children and demonstrated that God's grace and inclusive love have ample room for everyone, including children. No one was unimportant to Jesus. For unlike the message given by some churches, whether intentionally or subconsciously, **no one is unimportant to God.**

Since **we are called to carry out the ministry of Jesus in our day and time**, it is appropriate to continually ask of ourselves: Are we also demonstrating a love that has ample room for everyone? **Do our attitudes, words and actions demonstrate that no one is unimportant to us, including children and youth?**

Let's back up just a bit and look closely at today's Gospel Lesson from Luke 18. The story begins with a report that "People were bringing even infants to Jesus that he might touch them" (v. 15a). Though the text doesn't say why, perhaps it's because parents wanted Jesus to touch their little ones in an act of blessing or healing. Even more likely is that children were brought for healing. It has been estimated that infant mortality rates back then ran as high as 30%. The terror of disease, famine, and war claimed 30% of those who survived by the age of six; and 60% by the age of sixteen. Perhaps only 2-4 out of every 10 babies born lived to see their sixteenth birthday. [Malina & Rohrbach, "A Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels", Fortress Press, 1992, p.383]

In that same verse, we are told, "When the disciples saw this, they sternly ordered [the people] not to do it" (v. 15b). However, before we start thinking that the disciples were just a bunch of mean, crabby guys who didn't like kids, we have to understand how children were viewed in the culture in which Jesus and the disciples lived.

The cold, hard truth is that in that society children were viewed as unimportant. The shocking part of this story, then, isn't that the disciples tried to keep the little children away from Jesus, it's that Jesus told them not to keep the little ones away from him. We learn that it is always a mistake when people in positions of power hinder others from entering or recognizing that they belong to the kingdom of God.

We also know by the time we get to the 18th chapter of Luke that a hallmark of Jesus' ministry is to reverse many standards of what was common in their culture back then. Even though children were prized by their parents – especially male children – they were largely ignored as unimportant by society at large. Children, before they came of age, weren't considered worthy of much adult attention outside their own families. Yet, contrary to this way of approaching and understanding children, we read in verse 16-17, "But Jesus called for them and said, 'Let the little children come to me, and 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 Luke's literary world, **Jesus uses this occasion to teach something not just about the need to accept children, but also something very important about the kingdom, or**

realm, of God. Using the example of little children, Jesus instructs his disciples that the kingdom of God belongs to those who are *like* little children.

Usually, at this point in a sermon on this biblical text the typical preacher will go on to list characteristics of little children that we are to emulate. They will demand that those are the characteristics that we, as adults, must possess in order to enter the kingdom of God. The typical list of child-like characteristics usually includes: innocence, openness, trust, and humility. Yet the more I studied this passage, the more I learned that that may not be what Jesus meant. After all, writes one biblical commentator:

Modern ideas about the innocence of children cannot be carried back to the first century. The child in antiquity was radically dependent upon the father, who actually had the authority to decide whether the child would even be accepted into the family. Children belonged to their father and remained subject to his authority even as adults.

The saying 'to receive the kingdom like a child,' which most scholars treat as originally independent of the scene about accepting children, must, therefore, refer to the radical dependence of the child on the father for any status, inheritance, or, in families where children might be abandoned, for life itself. It warns the disciples that they are radically dependent upon God's grace – they cannot set the conditions for entering the kingdom.

Pheme Perkins (*Mark, New Interpreters Bible*)

In other words, **children belong to the kingdom of God not because of any particular trait they possess, because that in itself would be a violation of the understanding that entry into the kingdom of God is by God's grace alone, and not something that we can earn or merit by our own virtuous characteristics.**

So what does that mean? **Instead of you and me trying harder and harder to exhibit traits such as innocence, openness, trust and humility (as important as those things are in their own right), what we need to recognize is that Jesus was teaching us that in order to be part of the kingdom God, we must give up our own sense of power, status, and importance – and recognize that our power, status, importance, and life itself come from God.**

How much easier it is for children to do that than the Pharisees who thought they deserved the kingdom of God because they followed all the rules, or the hard-hearted who didn't think that any of this applied to them in the first place.

Earlier in the Gospel of Luke, we learn that the realm of God belongs to the poor, to women, tax collectors, the paralyzed, the Samaritans, and the lepers. Children are now added to that unlikely list. **Little children, who possess nothing and bring no merit or claim to privilege, are in a position to "receive" God's kingdom in the only way it can be received, as a free gift. For us to hear that and say that is enough. Added to this is Jesus' call to respect children and welcome them.** If everyone held firm to these values, perhaps there would be a lot less neglect and child abuse.

Jesus was not too busy or preoccupied or self-important to pause and interact with children. **He took time with and for children – and so should we! May our children and youth know just how important they are – to God and to us.**

Amen.