

They Brought Children to Jesus

It probably seems hard for us to believe that Jesus' disciples would attempt to keep little children or parents with babies away from their great teacher. After all, which of us can resist the little cherubs, especially when they are as intelligent, talented, and good-looking as our bunch? But the fact of the matter is that people continue to discount children and their gifts. Mark, Matthew, and especially Luke relate this story with very specific lessons in mind, lessons that are still important for us to hear and to translate to the world in our words and our actions. And, as usual, at least for this preacher, the greatest of these lessons is about love.

But let's spend a little time on this special "Children's Sunday" unwinding this passage and finding the truths in it for us. Let's start with a common misunderstanding regarding the last verse in Luke's treatment of this passage, one about which I had great fun teasing my lectionary buddy, Episcopal priest Fr. John Forman. When I was growing up in the heavily Roman Catholic suburbs of St. Louis, my Catholic friends would tut-tut at my heathenish Baptist ways and solemnly inform me that my kind had it all wrong about Baptism. Clearly, they said, pointing to the Markan rendering of this verse, one must be baptized "as a little child" to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. I stoutly maintained the error of all such papist foolishness but the wording of the King James Version did give me a few qualms. I'm happy to say that my mind was set at ease once I learned Greek, for the particle *hos* is most often used as a comparative and not to define a state of being. Entering the Kingdom of Heaven is a matter of being *like* a little child and not a matter of chronological age and I'll return to that idea in a moment.

Nevertheless, this confusion regarding whether one enters the Jesus Way *as* a little child or *as if* one were a little child is important to note, although I think Good Shepherd Baptist has dealt with this successfully for years. First of all, we Baptists need to be careful about spiritual pride over whether or not we are closer to the practice of the Early Church with our style of baptism than are our sisters and brothers in traditions that practice infant baptism. Being arrogant about such a thing doesn't win us any friends. Indeed, those who were baptized in that fashion and subsequently experienced confirmation are just as likely as those of us who experienced believer's baptism to have deep and authentic relationships with God in Christ and there is absolutely no reason for us to discount their faith and walk because it is different from ours. Again, I know that's been understood in this congregation for a long time. As I look out over those gathered today and consider those who are not with us this morning, I can think of a number of the "pillars" of our church who came to us from Lutheran, Roman, Presbyterian, or Methodist backgrounds. I'm happy to say that style and timing of baptism stopped being an issue for me years ago, although all things being equal I still recommend believer's baptism by immersion.

It's also important for us to remember that the impetus which gave rise to the baptism of infants in the Church not very long into its history is the same impetus which caused the parents of the children in this passage to bring their little ones to Jesus. As parents, we want to do everything we possibly can for our children. We want to keep them healthy and safe from danger. We want them to live lives blessed by God. In the physical absence of Jesus, we want to ensure that our children are still touched by his spirit. And so, while some have their infants baptized or christened, we come together to witness parents dedicating their children to God, as John and Sujin did a few weeks ago, and we as their church family pledged our help in raising little Jeanne in a loving, spiritually nurturing environment. We look forward to touchstones of our children's

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progress in this regard, such as the leadership of the children in today's service or the first time the younger members of the host family cautiously make their way up the aisle with the flame for the candles or even their first shy and halting questions during Children's Time. It will always be important to people of faith that the children of their faith family are raised in the love and reverence of God.

As I mentioned, I particularly like Luke's treatment of this story, in part because of the way he positions it. Have you noticed where it is? It follows the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector praying in the Temple. It's immediately followed by what we usually refer to as the story of the "Rich Young Ruler," although that combination of traits comes from a harmonization of the three Synoptic Gospels. On the one hand, you have a clear example of spiritual pride, on the part of the Pharisee, versus humility, on the part of the publican. On the other, a story of the dangers of clinging to possessions. The linking story, our passage for the morning, certainly touches on spiritual pride as well, and not just in the "Baptist vs. Catholic" way I mentioned a moment ago. The disciples of Jesus, it seems to me, step in it in this story because of their pride. They think that Jesus is too important to be bothered with little kids and their parents – probably because *they* wish to be too important to deal with little kids and their parents. Although I'm focusing this morning on Luke's rendition of the story, I think it's important to note how Mark treats this detail: "People were bringing little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them, but the disciples rebuked them. When Jesus saw this, he was indignant." We don't have too many indications in the Gospels of Jesus being annoyed but this is clearly one of them. Anybody who thinks they are too important to deal with children is obviously on Jesus' bad list.

And what about the danger of possessions? Children certainly go through a phase of acquisitiveness. Anyone who's ever picked up a toy only to be halted by a shriek of "MINE!" knows what I mean. But once children grow out of that, they are in general far more at ease with sharing their possessions than the grown-ups. In one of the romance sci-fi mysteries that Connie and I read as our shared guilty pleasure, there is a passage about a little girl's second birthday party. She will not allow one of her little guests to separate her from a freshly unwrapped present but once the birthday girl has had a chance to look at it by herself for a moment, she turns and brings her little friend to it so they can both play with it. I found that moment in the book wholly believable and, in fact, kind of holy, too. The instinctive generosity of little children should be a lesson to us.

I want to return now to that phrase, "receive the kingdom of God as a little child," and I am indebted to Richard Vinson, professor of religion at Salem College and author of the commentary on Luke in the Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary for his insights. Vinson points out that there are three possible interpretations here for "as a little child." First, he says, it may mean that one is to receive the kingdom as one would receive a little child. The word "receive," he points out, is a Greek word meaning "welcome as an honored guest." Luke, in using this word to translate Jesus' Aramaic, is already setting up a vital lesson. In the Roman Empire of the day, children were not always welcomed as honored guests. Legally, a parent who was, for whatever reason, unable to or disinterested in raising a child could simply abandon them in a public place, where they would either be collected by someone else to be raised as a servant or a potential heir, or might simply be allowed to die. The disciples, although they certainly weren't

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guilty of abandoning the children, had also most certainly not welcomed them as honored guests. How then could they say they had welcomed the Kingdom?

This lesson seems to have taken hold in the early Church. In the Second Century, a Roman writer sympathetic to the Christians noted how responsibly they lived in society: “They marry like everyone else and have children, but they do not expose them once they are born.” It would certainly seem unlikely that any Christian today would abandon a child to exposure but I wonder if we shouldn’t be extending the concept of children for whom we are responsible even as Jesus extended the concept of neighbors for whom we are responsible with his story of how the Samaritan cared for the beaten Jew. Thanks to modern technology, we are now aware of starving, neglected, and endangered children all around the world. As Good Shepherd Baptist Church, we have helped send doctors and medical supplies to the Congo, sent funds to build a school and dig a well to Haiti, helped unknown children through One Great Hour of Sharing and World Vision and other worthy organizations. And we have our limits on how much we can do as a small church. But we must also remember to speak out against the forces that threaten children around the world as politicians seize on excuses for international violence, as our environment is degraded, as children are killed in our own country by poorly trained or improperly motivated police as well as by thugs and predators of all kinds. Part of our own calling to welcome the Kingdom is to be sure that little ones everywhere are welcomed and cherished.

The second reading Vinson suggests is to receive the Kingdom the way a child would receive it. Many commentators link this idea to childhood virtues and Vinson is no exception. He mentions their openness, helplessness, and humility. The great preacher and professor George Arthur Buttrick, for a time on faculty at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, wrote for The Interpreter’s Bible of the candor, seeking, trustfulness, and dependence of children that they should be a model for those who yearn for the Kingdom of God. Vinson also quotes Cyril of Alexandria, one of those honored with the title Doctor of the Church. Cyril wrote: “Knowing very little or nothing at all, a baby is correctly acquitted of the charge of depravity and wickedness. It is also our duty to attempt to be like them in the very same way. We must entirely put away from us habits of wickedness, that we also may be regarded as people who do not even know the path that leads to deception. Unconscious of spite and fraud, we must live in a simple and innocent manner, practicing gentleness and a priceless humility and readily avoiding wrath and spitefulness. These qualities are found in those who are still babies.”

Vinson’s third possible interpretation of “receive the kingdom of God as a little child” is particularly intriguing to me: “accept the kingdom as if *it* were a child, or you will never enter it.” He writes this with the lowly status of children in the ancient world firmly in mind. Robert Tannehill had previously written, “Jesus would be saying, then, that people cannot enter the great and glorious kingdom unless they can reject the world’s values and welcome the kingdom that now appears without status and power.” Or, as Vinson writes, “To enter the kingdom, you must abandon the world’s values.” This idea takes on fresh meaning for me every time I encounter the world in which money, influence, and power are enshrined. I am reminded of the words of Paul to the church in Corinth: “Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the

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strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, in order that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.””

So, what can we say we have learned from this precious old story this morning? First and foremost, certainly, is that our children here at Good Shepherd Baptist Church are worthy of our attention for even as we have things to share with them about our own walks with God, they have things to teach us as well. Jennifer Gage-Nielsen will be taking over soon as Deacon for Children’s Education and I hope that all of us will make ourselves available to her as she seeks leaders and teachers for our kids. As is so often the case in small churches like ours, we are about to enter a new phase in the life of the children at our church. Most will be in middle school or upper elementary grades next fall. We will also have some very little ones in need of nursery services. Please prayerfully consider how you might be of service to them. And parents, let me encourage you to bring your kiddos to us on a regular basis. Those older kids are ready to worship with us adults on Sunday mornings. If we hold their Sunday School at the old fashioned hour of 9:30, there will be classes for you, too. Or there’s always coffee up the street.

But it’s equally important for those of us who are adults to be in touch with the virtues our children display. Let us remember to go through the world humbly, willing to share, open to wonder and the calling of God in our lives. Jesus often referred to his friends and followers as “little ones” or children. The writer of the Epistles of John also does so consistently. We are always the children of God, no matter what our age or status in the community. We are called to respond to God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, as beloved children. God our Father has provided us with life in a beautiful creation and named us “very good” and “beloved.” Our Redeemer has welcomed us as brothers and sisters, joint heirs with him to the Beloved Community. The Spirit of love binds us together and to the heart of God. We are loved and so we are to love in return, remembering always that to love Jesus, to love God, is to love our brothers and sisters. For God’s love and for the love that wells inside us, thanks be to God.