



WESTLAKE HILLS
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

"Let the Children Come to Me"

Mark 10:13-16

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Sunday, January 8, 2012

Introduction.

Have you ever seen those letters to God written by children? In the simplest of ways, kids put it right out there and tell it like it is. Here are a few I came across last week.

Dear GOD, Please put a holiday between Christmas and Easter. There is nothing good in there now. –Ginny

I read where Thomas Edison made light. But in Sunday School they said You did it. So I bet he stole your idea.
Sincerely, Donna

Dear GOD, Are you really invisible or is that just a trick? -Lucy

Dear GOD, I want to be just like my Daddy when I grow up, but not with so much hair all over. –Sam

Dear GOD, Did you mean for the giraffe to look like that or was it an accident? -Norma

Dear GOD, I went to this wedding and they kissed right in church. Is that okay? -Neil

Dear GOD, Thank you for my baby brother, but what I prayed for was a puppy. –Joyce

What is about children that enables them to speak so honestly, straight from the heart? Kids tell it like it is, don't they? I think it's one of the reasons Jesus liked being around children.

This morning we begin a series of sermons that kicks off our church's celebration of the Year of the Child at WHPC, and we consider a time in the ministry of Jesus when He said, "*Let the little children come unto Me.*". What can we learn from the passage about not only how Jesus viewed children and their importance, but also what that means for you and me today?

I. The Attraction of Jesus.

There was something about Jesus which attracted people. Fishermen left their nets to follow Him. Tax collectors abandoned their work. And a woman with an expensive jar of perfume was willing sacrifice it all for the Lord. Christ was winsome and magnetic, and people were drawn to Him, including children.

The passage tells us that a group of parents brought their kids to have Jesus touch them. These were probably small children, because the Greek word used in this text, *paideon*, suggests children from birth to age 12, and the fact that Jesus took them in His arms indicates they were small enough to be held. These parents brought their kids to Jesus so He would bless them.

Children have always been attracted to Jesus. There's a spiritual hunger and a childlike faith in most kids which creates a greater openness to the things of God. Like little lambs they feel comfortable with the Good Shepherd, as Jesus was called in the Bible. Children have believing hearts and a willingness to trust, and they are attracted to Jesus.

Have you ever been around someone who was great with kids? There are some people who have certain qualities that kids just love being around them, and they're able to get down on a kid's level. I think Jesus was that kind of person, and children were attracted to Him.

II. The Rebuke of the Disciples.

Parents were bringing their children to Jesus, but the disciples rebuked them and tried to shoo them away. They acted like body guards, and the disciples tried to protect Jesus from these unwanted guests. They didn't think Jesus had time to waste it with children. He had things to do, people to see, and places to go, and He certainly didn't have time to be hanging out with a bunch of kids.

This didn't happen at the beginning of Jesus' ministry when He first called His disciples; it took place after they had been with Christ for about 2 years. Even after spending significant time with the Lord, they still didn't fully understand or appreciate the values and priorities of Jesus. As on other occasions, they got it wrong again, and they tried to run the kids off.

My friend Jim Singleton told me of a time when he was 10-years-old. He was living in Oklahoma City, which had a minor league baseball team, and the Houston Astros came to play an exhibition game against the Los Angeles Dodgers. This was a big deal, because the Dodgers had been in the World Series the year before, and they had a team full of stars. After the game, Jim was hanging around the clubhouse door hoping to get autographs, and several of the second tier players were happy to oblige. But he wanted an autograph of one of the big stars.

Just then, Don Drysdale came out of the clubhouse. Jim recognized him, not only because Drysdale was 6'6" but also because he had seen Drysdale on the Beverly Hillbillies that season! Very politely Jim asked for his autograph, and he will never forget Don Drysdale's reply, "Get lost, kid!" Jim doesn't remember much about that day – who won or lost the game or the other autographs he got. But he still remembers the dismissive look in the baseball player's eye and the tone of his voice when he said, "Get lost, kid!"

When have you and I been like Don Drysdale, or the disciples of Jesus, and said to a child, "Get lost, kid!" We didn't have time for them, or we were impatient when they took too long, and in our words and actions we communicate in an awful way, "Get lost, kid!"

I have a great relationship with my three sons, and I think I was a pretty good dad most of the time when our kids were growing up. But I also remember the times when I came home from work exhausted only to be greeted with what felt like demands from Lorie and the boys. All I wanted to do was be the king of my castle, pull up the draw bridge, put water in the mote, and place the alligators in the water! I wanted to go into my man cave; I wanted to be alone. But my kids said, "Read me a book." "Let's throw the football, dad." "Can you help me with my homework?" I look back with regret and think about the times that in one way or another I communicated to my children, "Get lost, kid!" What about you? Do you ever express that attitude to the children in your life?

The reaction of Jesus startled the disciples, and perhaps the parents and the children, too. The passage says He was indignant. Christ rarely expressed anger. He did when He drove the money-changers out of the temple, and again when disease deformed a poor leper. It wasn't often Jesus got upset, but He was upset when the disciples kept the children from coming to Him, and He is upset with you and me whenever we communicate to a child, "Get lost, kid!"

III. The Loving Arms of Jesus.

Jesus said to His disciples, "*Let the children come to Me, and do not forbid them.*" Here Christ expressed His values and priorities, and He wanted children to know they are always welcome in His kingdom, they are always welcome in His church.

There are three things Jesus gave the kids that day – His time, His touch, and His blessing. That's what kids need from us today, too. They need us to make time in our busy schedules just to be with them. I'm talking about quantity time, not just quality time. I read of one study this week done in 2006 in the UK which said the average working parent spends only 19 minutes a day with their kids one-on-one. That won't cut it if we want to give kids what they need most from us. We shouldn't shortchange our children with one of the most precious commodities we can give them – our time.

The **second** thing Jesus gave them was His touch; children need our touch as well. We're all born with a need for touch, and in order to thrive newborns need to be touched as much as they need to be fed. Studies in hospitals and orphanages reveal that infants deprived of skin contact lose weight, become ill, and sometimes they even die – all from a lack of touch.

Some of us grew up in homes where there was very little physical affection. Others grew up in families where we experienced physical abuse, and the only touching we knew was hurtful. These things can damage a person's ability to know how to touch in positive and helpful ways, but let's not allow the pain of our past to limit our capacity to

meet the needs of the children in our lives today. Let's give them what we never had – appropriate loving touch, just like Jesus gave these children.

When our kids were young, sometimes they wanted to wrestle with me, and other times they wanted to cuddle. All of it was born out of a desire to be touched in a special way by someone they loved and trusted.

The **final** thing Jesus gave these children was His blessing, and kids need our blessing, too. I'm struck by the fact that at Jesus' baptism, when Christ came out of the water a voice from heaven said, *"This is My Son whom I love; with Him I am well pleased"* (Mt. 3:17). It was the blessing of God the Father on His Son Jesus Christ as the Lord began His public ministry. And in the words of that blessing, the Father gave the Son what He needed to hear – what I think we all yearn to hear.

Jesus heard in these words the Father's approval which affirmed that He belonged, He was loved, and the Father was pleased with Him. We all wonder Who am I? Am I loved and accepted? And am I good at anything? They are questions of identity, affection and belonging, and competence and worth, and they are questions we all ask. Jesus heard a strong affirming Yes! to each of these questions in the blessing the Father gave His Son that day. Our kids need us to give them that same blessing, too. I encourage you parents and grandparents to think about how you will bless the children in your life this year.

The loving arms of Jesus should translate into the loving arms of the church. I want kids to know they are always welcome at WHPC, and they belong here. It's one of the reasons we have a Time for Young Disciples most weeks during worship. Kids belong in worship just as much as we adults do, and we should do all we can to make them feel right at home here. Are children noisy and distracting? Sometimes. But so are you adults on occasion! That's what it means to be a family. We're all in this together, growing as an intergenerational family of faith in the loving arms of Christ.

IV. Children and the Kingdom of God.

Jesus concluded His remarks that day by saying, *"The kingdom of God belongs to such as these,"* referencing the children. What Christ is saying here is that childlike faith is what God asks each of us to cultivate in our relationship with Him. We're all invited to become children of God in the family of our heavenly Father, because, as one commentator put it, "the kingdom can only be entered by one who knows he is helpless and small, without claim or merit."ⁱ

Earlier in this service we baptized a child. You'll recall that I said one of the reasons Presbyterians baptize children is because it reaffirms the fact that all of us must come to God as a child acknowledging that we are helpless to save ourselves and dependent on God to be our heavenly Father. In that baptism we affirmed the truth that long before this child can even say the name of God, He is reaching out to that little one with His love and grace in Christ. And long after the water evaporates from this child's head, God still sees His mark of covenant love and says, "You are Mine; I have called you by name."

Christ encouraged His followers to develop childlike faith, and He taught them in the Lord's Prayer to address God as their heavenly Father. What marks a child's faith? Trust. Honesty. Simplicity. It's not complicated with kids. All of us need to develop a faith in God like that.

In world missions there is a lot of talk about the 10/40 window. It describes the latitudes where the largest number of people still need to be won to Christ. But now Christians are beginning to talk about the 4/14 window. It's the age window in which most people make a decision to follow Jesus. In the U.S., nearly 85 percent of people who are Christians made an initial commitment to follow Christ between the ages of 4 and 14.

Right now there are 1.2 billion children around the world in the 4/14 window, and at least two-thirds of these children don't know Christ. 70 percent of the children in the 4/14 window live in the 10/40 window. They are the most ready and reachable unreached people group in the world today, so children need to become a strategic part of our mission efforts as we reach out to a lost and broken world. That's why we're partnering with World Vision to reach kids for Christ, and you'll learn more about that next week.

The future of the world Christian movement and the future of WHPC will depend in part on how you and I think about children and how we reach out to them. Will we be like the disciples who in essence say, "Get lost, kid!"? Or will we be like Jesus who welcomed them and took the time to bless them and patiently loved and nurtured their little faith.

Conclusion.

Many years ago, in the first part of the last century in a country church in a village in Croatia, an altar boy by the name of Josip Broz was helping the village priest celebrate mass. In the middle of the service, the boy accidentally dropped the glass cruet of wine, and it smashed to pieces on the floor. The priest was upset, and he slapped the boy and said in harsh tones, "Leave this altar, and don't ever come back!" The boy left, and he never did. Josip Broz grew up and later took the name Tito and became the communist leader of Yugoslavia after World War II. This tyrant never came back to the church.

About the same time, an altar boy named Peter Sheen was assisting a priest at a mass in St. Mary's Cathedral in Peoria, Illinois. This altar boy also dropped a glass cruet of wine, and he wrote about the experience years later. "There is no atomic explosion that can equal the intensity of decibels as the noise of the explosive force of a wine cruet falling on a marble floor in a cathedral in the presence of a bishop. I was frightened to death. The celebrant that morning was Bishop John Spalding, and as that glass broke, the bishop looked at [me] and with a warm twinkle in his eye he said to [me], 'Someday you will be just as I am.'"

That boy grew up to be one of the Catholic Church's most eloquent spokesmen for Christ in the last century. He did become a bishop, and he also wrote more than 50 books. During the 1950s, he had the first major religious television program ever, and some of you are old enough to remember him by the new name he later took from his mother's maiden name – Bishop Fulton Sheen.

Two children who were influenced in very different ways by the important people in their lives. As we begin this series on the Year of the Child, let's learn from the powerful influence of Jesus on children in the passage we have read this morning, and let's invest our lives in reaching and loving children for Christ. And let's do all we can to give them the gift of time, touch, and a blessing. If kids were a high priority for Jesus, we need to make them our priority, too. As one writer put it, kids are too small to ignore. Amen.

ⁱ William Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, p. 361.