

"A Welcoming Community"
A Sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian, New Canaan – Sept. 19, 2021

Please Read:
James 3.13-4.3, 7-8a
Mark 9:30-37

“Jesus loves the little children, All the children of the world. Red and yellow, black and white, They are precious in His sight. Jesus loves the little children of the world.” I learned that song in Sunday school. It was written by Clare Herbert Woolston, inspired by Matthew 19:14 where Jesus says, “Let the children come to me. Don’t stop them! For the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to such as these.” It’s a theme that we find throughout Jesus’ ministry. Jesus always welcomes the little children.

In today’s gospel lesson we read that Jesus and his disciples were walking along a road and, when they got to where they were going, Jesus asked, "What were you arguing about on the way?" They were silent because they were debating, "When Jesus is King, who’ll be on his cabinet? Who among us will be the greatest advisors?"

And that’s when Jesus took *a little child*, placed the child among them, as if in one last-ditch effort to get them to really see and understand. "Whenever you welcome one such child in my name, you receive me, and whenever you receive me, you receive the God who sent me."

The whole episode is ironic, really. Here is Jesus, the least, the lowest, the little one; Jesus, who has just announced to his disciples again that "the Son of Man is to be betrayed, ... and they will kill him, ..." And his disciples are arguing over success, fame, and power. You’ve heard it said that perhaps “Your God is too small”? Well, here Jesus is asking, “Is your God is too big?” He puts a little child among them as a kind of sacrament, “a visible sign of an invisible grace,” to illustrate what God is like and what God’s community culture is like.

The theological revelation of Jesus is counter-intuitive: God is the one who became smaller – who in Jesus Christ emptied himself of his heavenly glory and was faithful and loving for our sakes all the way to the cross. God’s kingdom is not like the amazing high-rises of Dubai, Shanghai and New York City; not the ostentatious gold-gilded glory of the royal chambers of Paris or Versailles. On the contrary, God’s kingdom is entered through a very small door. It is received by way of the cross. And if you would enter that way, you must wait your turn. Jesus said, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all..."

In the first century, children were indeed the last in the line of power. With the high infant mortality rates and great demand for human labor, people of the first century were not typically sentimental about infants and youth. They were the last ones to receive any attention in society because they had no power at all. The negligible value of children is hinted at in the Jewish writings called the *Mishnah*: Daughters under 12 years of age could be sold as slaves. Jesus, on the other hand, extends a special welcome to children, and highly values those with the least power.

Have you ever noticed the entryways of most churches? Usually, they are not small. Saint Patrick’s in New York, Saint Paul’s in London, Notre Dame in Paris. They all have rather big, ominous gates. Even here I need to use the automatic door opener because the doors are so heavy! They are meant to be big and impressive, not because we are so big and impressive, but as a way of indicating whose house we are entering.

In fact, you are a gathering of important people here this morning. Some of you wield incredible power, some of you work in the city and make big decisions that affect lots of people. Some of you have your own businesses. You went to the most prestigious schools in the world and pursued career paths up and up into the greater income brackets and ever higher circles of influence. Most of us have learned from an early age that it's better to be "big" in this world ...

Which makes Jesus' teaching so strange. It's different with Jesus. He takes a child in his arms and puts the child in the middle of us. The child is not given a lesson, nor scolded or told to be quiet. Jesus picks up the child and draws him close in his arms. This little detail in Mark is notably absent in Matthew and Luke. Mark recalls a beautiful moment of human warmth and intimacy. Jesus draws the child close, "taking it in his arms," in Luther's translation, "herzte es," *to his heart*. We are all small before our Maker, but in Christ, we are drawn close to God's heart of love.

Do you see what is happening? Jesus intrudes into whatever circles of power and prestige we may think we're caught. He breaks in and puts a child in the middle of it all, in an effort to get us to pay attention. Maybe we came here this morning feeling that we are in control, doing quite well, thank you. But here is a kingdom where we don't have to put on airs, don't have to smile and lie about the pain and suffering of our lives or ignore the ambiguities and perplexities of our world. Here is a community where the last are first, the lowest is the greatest, and a little child is the guide to God.

It's not that Jesus is telling us to be childish, although there is that playful dimension of the gospel. As James tells us we are to seek the wisdom from above that is pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits ... So, there are qualities of little children that we might want to recover in our adult selves ... But here the main point is that Jesus tells us to welcome the little ones, the weak ones, the small ones ... and that in welcoming such ones we welcome Jesus, *we welcome God!*

I've been reflecting on what welcoming the little ones means for us. What do you think it means? We make vows every time we baptize a child, when we promise to love and care for them, teaching them to observe all that the Lord commands. That's important ...

As a congregation, welcoming the little ones can also mean showing respect and honor to those who are different from us, those who may seem to be disadvantaged in some way or struggling to find their way on the path. Welcoming the little ones begins with admitting that each of us were once little ones in the eyes of God, that we all come through those heavy front doors weak and in need of a savior, the poor and broken of the world ... And so, as the Lord has shown compassion to us, so we also can show compassion for others. As we have received grace, so we can share grace with others. As God first loved us, so we love others ...

But there is another way of interpreting what it means to welcome the little ones ... I think it can mean to welcome the little child of your own heart ...

"Special Church" started again. I've joined them two weeks now and am going to try and lead the singing next week as Matt, the normal guitarist is getting married and won't be there. Pray for me!!

I've been so impressed with the work of Nancy and Kate, two volunteers who help to organize these weekly meetings for these "special needs" people. I grew up with a special needs cousin who actually lived in our house for a while. Maybe that's why I have a soft spot in my heart for special needs folk. But there's a lot going on with these people ...

When I first visited last week, one of the women, Julia, who is in a wheelchair and not able to speak in the same way we would, took my hand. I thought she wanted to shake hands. Well, she reeled me in like a fish, bringing my face just next to hers so she could get a good look at me, and smiled a big smile. This week, I extended my hand warily, but she drew it up to her masked face and kissed my hand about three times. It was humbling, and said very loudly, "Hey, I'm so glad to see you!"

Todd, another special member of the group, is perhaps the most positive person I've met in New Canaan. He is genuinely glad to see me, greeting me with a smile and a wave. He's that way with everyone. He is just so happy to be alive and to be with others. When we do the singing, he gustily sings and jumps up and dances like nobody is watching!

I am already learning from these Special Church sisters and brothers. Something about a lack of self-consciousness. Something about simply being thankful for the moment, right here and now. Something about freedom from the worries and concerns of my serious adult life ...

Perhaps welcoming the little child in our own heart is a spiritual path Jesus wants us to explore, remembering first that we are beloved of God, and that each person is valuable and has something to offer, no matter how small or insignificant they may seem from a worldly perspective.

As a community, we are called by Jesus to practice hospitality and extend welcome to every person, no matter what their status or rank. And often times, when we create the space for people to explore and discover who they are as a child of God, beautiful things can happen. They are set free to become the men and women God created and calls them to be. Like Julia and Todd ...

I admit this is a disorienting text. On the one hand, we're called to grow up into Christ, to become mature disciples. We are to put away all childishness and foolishness. But Jesus redefines for us what growing up is, what maturity really looks like in his kingdom ... How does James put it, "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble"?

Jesus' strangely states in Matthew 18.3, "You cannot enter the Kingdom of God unless you turn and become as a little child."

Perhaps part of what he meant, life being what it is, is that everybody gets to be small again someday. Vulnerability can strike any of us at any time. It happens predictably toward the end of life, when we are in retirement, when our health is fragile, but also with an accident, the death of a spouse, with physical, psychological or emotional illness, with divorce, the sudden loss of a job, or some other unforeseen tragedy ...

Being numbered among the "little ones" is a condition, not just in childhood, but at any stage in life when we are out of control, weak, needy, and dependent. Sometimes it happens even to those of us here, those who have worked hard to be big, important, powerful and in control.

In placing the child in the center of the disciples, Jesus gives a special priority to the most vulnerable. In taking a child in his arms and holding the child close to his heart, Jesus shows a special preference for the least of these. Yes, Jesus loves all the children of the world, but it seems he loves the little ones the most!

Do you see that Jesus would have us follow him in putting the children in the center of our community, holding even the little ones close to our hearts? That may sound like strange, if not challenging news to some of you. For in this world, nobody wants to be small, dependent, needy, empty and vulnerable. But in the kingdom of God, in the church, welcoming the little ones is called good news. It's the gospel!

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.