

***“Like A Child”***  
**Reverend Bill Gause**  
**Overbrook Presbyterian Church**  
**25<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time**  
**September 23, 2018**

**First Scripture Lesson: Matthew 25:31-40**

<sup>31</sup>“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. <sup>32</sup>All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, <sup>33</sup>and He will put the sheep at His right hand and the goats at the left. <sup>34</sup>Then the King will say to those at His right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; <sup>35</sup>for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, <sup>36</sup>I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ <sup>37</sup>Then the righteous will answer Him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw You hungry and gave You food, or thirsty and gave You something to drink? <sup>38</sup>And when was it that we saw You a stranger and welcomed You, or naked and gave You clothing? <sup>39</sup>And when was it that we saw You sick or in prison and visited You?’ <sup>40</sup>And the King will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’

**Second Scripture Lesson: Mark 9:30-37**

<sup>30</sup>They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; <sup>31</sup>for He was teaching His disciples, saying to them, “The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill Him, and three days after being killed, He will rise again.” <sup>32</sup>But they did not understand what He was saying and were afraid to ask Him.

<sup>33</sup>Then they came to Capernaum; and when He was in the house He asked them, “What were you arguing about on the way?” <sup>34</sup>But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. <sup>35</sup>He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” <sup>36</sup>Then He took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in His arms, He said to them, <sup>37</sup>“Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the One who sent me.”



**Sermon: *Like A Child***

I don't remember the first thing I ever learned as a child in the church, but I'd be willing to bet it was a song. And most likely that song was either *Jesus Loves Me* or *Jesus Loves the Little Children*. Both introduce young children to God's great love for them. And while the word “unconditional” may be too big a word for kids, those songs teach the concept that God's love for them is not limited by their skin color or where they live or anything else; that God loves them just the way they are. That's an important message for a child to hear.

One of the things I *do* remember clearly from the church in which I grew up, is the stained-glass window in the sanctuary; a window that depicts Jesus with a group of small children gathered around him. Jesus is shown with His left hand resting gently on the shoulder of one child while another sits in His lap. It's a peaceful, happy scene.

I can remember very little about the things that went on in worship when I was a child. I don't remember the sermons our preacher preached. I don't remember the prayers he prayed. But what I do remember that stained-glass window. Whenever I would lose interest in what was happening in church (which was pretty often), I would focus on that window, memorizing its colors and shapes and thinking about the story it told.

The image in that window comes from Matthew 19:13-15:

<sup>13</sup>Then little children were being brought to Him in order that He might lay His hands on them and pray. The disciples spoke sternly to those who brought them; <sup>14</sup>but Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; *for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs.*" <sup>15</sup>And He laid His hands on them and went on His way.

That story is a little bit different from the one we read this morning from Mark's gospel. In Mark's version, Jesus simply picks up a child in His arms and says "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me..." But the core message is the same.

It is here in these gospel stories that Jesus gets His reputation as one who is kind to children. And it all fits Jesus' persona. Jesus is the "Lamb of God." He enters the world not as a conquering King, but as a small, helpless infant. He is gentle and loving and children feel comfortable around Him. And of course He wouldn't let adults get in the way of His sharing God's love with children. When I was growing up, thanks to songs like *Jesus Loves the Little Children* and that window in my church, I may not have known anything else, but I knew that God loved me.

But I grew up. And when I became an adult I learned that there are more to these stories. Jesus didn't have strictly *kids* in mind when he talked about welcoming the children. This isn't a saccharin sweet feel-good, "Hallmark" moment story. Adults are meant to learn a lesson here that is much more radical.

For starters, take a look at what's going on in Mark's gospel when this happens. The disciples are arguing amongst themselves about who is the greatest. Who is most important? Who is in charge when Jesus has to go away on business? And when Jesus asks them what they were talking about, they all clam up. All of a sudden, no one has anything to say. But Jesus knows ... He's not dumb. Had He *not* known what they were talking about He wouldn't have asked them the question. He tells them that "whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."

To be of service to others is certainly what Jesus taught the disciples over and over. That's not new. But in that culture, the servant had no real social importance beyond their ability to serve. Obviously servants served others. But one who is servant *of all* even served the other servants. That servant was less important than literally everyone else.

So, while the disciples are debating who among them is *greatest*, Jesus is teaching them that they've got it completely backwards. It's in *this* context that Jesus brings a small child into their midst and tells them that welcoming a child is the same as welcoming Jesus, and by extension, it is the same as welcoming the God who sent Jesus.

Now, I grew up with Mr. Rogers. And he taught me that all children are important and have value. He looked in the camera and said to the millions of children watching: "You are a very special person. There is only one like you in the whole world. There's never been anyone exactly like you before, and there will

never be again. Only you. And people can like you exactly as you are.”<sup>1</sup> That’s a pretty powerful thing for a child to hear.

But Jesus lived in a different time; a time without Mr. Rogers where children weren’t valued in that way. As biblical scholar Sharon Ringe writes:

in this time “A child did not contribute much if anything to the economic value of a household or community, and a child could not do anything to enhance ones’ ... prestige or influence ... Children and servants were of equally low status.”<sup>2</sup>

How jarring to basically go from arguing about who gets to sit in the front seat to finding out that every one of them is actually going to be walking. Whoever wants to be first must be last and servant of all.

But I find that transition from Jesus talking about disciples being servants to them welcoming children very interesting. It’s almost like there was something happening in-between those two sentences that the author doesn’t tell us about.

So I wonder, what were the disciple’s reactions when they heard they had to become “servants of all?” Did they start looking around at all the poor and outcast people in the area and think “even them”? Did their facial expressions betray their inner thoughts? Did Jesus see Thomas’ raised eyebrow, Levi’s disgusted sneer, Peter’s furrowed brow? Did Jesus realize they would struggle to be servant of all because they looked down on so many people they were being called to serve? Or feared them? Or despised them?

It’s almost like Jesus sees all of this and a light goes on in His brain. “Hey, you do know that these people who get pushed to the margins; the foreigners, the sick, the poor, the outcasts; these people are important too, right? You do get that when you shun one of them you shun me? And when you welcome one of them, you welcome me and God who sent me. You do understand that, right? These people you fear, you despise, you look down upon; I *am* these people.”

And that’s when He calls one of the children playing nearby over into their midst and what Jesus says to the disciples is “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and... the One who sent me.” But what He really means is “This child may be the least important person here, but like all the other people this world calls unimportant, he is important to me and therefore he has to be important to you.”

So, there are two big lessons we find here in this little story. First, being a disciple is not about who gets to be first in line. It’s not about who helps make the rules or who benefits from knowing the head person in charge. Being a disciple isn’t about being the greatest. It’s about serving and caring and welcoming the least of these. It’s not *just* about what you get; it’s also about what you get to do. Which is a radical, upside-down way of looking at the world and our role in it.

Second, this scene isn’t just about Jesus sweetly welcoming the children. It also shows us that God’s values are very different from the world’s values. It shows us that every person is important to God; that every single person, right down to the most seemingly insignificant people in our society, have value.<sup>3</sup>

It echoes the passage in Hebrews which says “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.”<sup>4</sup> It reiterates the message of Matthew 25 which reads: “...just as you did it to one of the least of these (the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the sick, the imprisoned) who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

And I think we know that. Intellectually, we know that. But it's so easy to get wrapped up in *my* problems and *my* schedule and *my* worries and it's so easy to forget that we are really supposed to be patient and kind and loving *to everyone* ... not just the people who are *easy* to treat with patience and kindness and love. It's easy to retreat into our little "me bubbles," walled-off from the rest of the world and *their* struggles and problems. But I wonder what would happen if we could hear Jesus words to His disciples all the time.

Google Chrome has a great feature where if you're on a page that's written in a foreign language, it will translate that text into English with a click of your mouse. There is also a setting on Facebook that lets you change your preferred language to "Pirate" which translates your Facebook message into words a pirate might use. Your news feed becomes your "Captains Log." The link that normally reads "Make a post" now invites you to "Scrawl in ye public logs." Instead of "What's on your mind?" Facebook now asks, "What be on yer mind, Cap'n Bill?" You get the idea.

So, what if your browser had a similar function that would translate the news relative to Jesus' teachings here in the gospels? What if every time we read about the people Jesus called the least of these - the poor and the oppressed and the marginalized - what if those headlines were automatically translated to reflect Jesus' teachings?

What if instead of reading about refugees fleeing civil war in Syria, we were reading about Jesus fleeing civil war in Syria? And when we read about those refugees being turned away and denied asylum, we were reading about Jesus being turned away and refused asylum?

What if instead of reports about children being separated from their parents at the U.S. border and held in U.S. detention centers, we saw reports about Jesus being separated from His parents and held at a detention center?

What if instead of reading about the single mother of three who must choose between paying her rent and paying for her child's seizure medicine, we read about Jesus having to make that heart wrenching decision?

What if every article about the working poor struggling to survive on minimum wage, working multiple jobs, became an article about Jesus struggling to get by on minimum wage, working multiple jobs?

What if when we read about victims of a typhoon in the Philippines or an earthquake in Indonesia or famine in Yemen - all very real, recent or ongoing events - we were reading about Jesus suffering the effects of typhoon and earthquake and famine?

We grow numb to the plight of the hungry, the homeless, the underinsured, those who struggle with disease and cannot afford the treatments. But would it mean more if we knew Jesus was hungry, homeless, sick? Would we feel more of a sense of urgency? Would we be moved to serve more?

Would our reactions be any different?

I know that's a lot to put on you. I know my childhood reading of this story is much better. Jesus loves the little children. That's easy. And comforting. And *comfortable*. But the gospel of Jesus Christ, while certainly all three of those things, is also difficult, and challenging, and uncomfortable. And just when we get most

happy with “Christmas-Jesus” and “Bouncing-children-on-His-knee Jesus”, we get confronted with You-must-be-servant-of-all-and-I-do-mean-servant-and-I-do-mean-*all*, Jesus. But that’s who Jesus is. And that’s why this whole discipleship thing isn’t for the faint of heart.

It is natural for us to think in terms of resources and costs and risks; of what can be afforded and what we can actually manage, and what “makes sense.” But the fact of the matter is, that to reach out to and be in relationship with, and care for men and women and children on the margins - to welcome them in, to sit at table with them; this is not merely an act of hospitality or charity. It is at the very core of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. It is to welcome Jesus and to make a place for God in our lives.

I know this is hard. Please know I am convicted by the challenge of this gospel message too. I’m not standing up here wagging my finger. But whenever we are tempted to lose ourselves in the sweetness of Jesus and the comfort of God’s love for us, we must be reminded of the challenge of Jesus’ message and our responsibility to respond to God’s love.

“Then He took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in His arms, He said to them, ‘Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the One who sent me.’”

To God be all glory, honor, power, and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.

#### End Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Rogers, Fred. *Life's Journeys According to Mister Rogers: Things to Remember Along the Way*. Hatchette Books, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Ringe, Sharon. “Mark 9:30-37, Exegetical Perspective.” *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 4*, edited by David Lyon Bartlett and Barbara Brown. Taylor, Westminster John Knox Press, 2009, p. 97.

<sup>3</sup> Ringe, p. 97

<sup>4</sup> Hebrews 13:2, NRSV