

“BLESSING CHILDREN”

Mark 9:33-42; 10:13-16

June 17, 2018

Rev. Jerry Duggins

Happy Father's Day! I like that in our country we set this day aside along with Mother's Day to honor parents. We like to say that the future depends on our children, but it's also true that the future of our children depends a great deal on parents. Every year, this day reminds me to be grateful that I have shared a job with Janet for the last thirty years and thus been allowed to take an equal part in the lives of our children. Many fathers are not so fortunate. In a lot of families, the father goes to work and leaves the child-rearing to mom. This is still true in some families even where the mother has gone to work as well.

If we look at the examples of fathers in the Bible, we have to wonder whether it might have been a good thing to leave the care of children up to mom. Abraham appears to be willing to sacrifice his son Isaac when he takes him on a father/son outing. Jacob sets up some nasty sibling rivalry when he plays favorites with Joseph over his other children. David nearly loses the kingdom to his eldest son, Absalom. To save it, he must give into the inevitability of Absalom's death. When the question of succession does arise, Solomon and Adonijah fight a deadly battle for the throne, resulting in the death of yet another of David's children. I struggled to find a positive example of a father in the Bible when Janet reminded me of Philip in the book of Acts who had four daughters that all became prophets. We're not given any details of his parenting style, but there must have been something there that opened up the future for his daughters.

Today's reading doesn't help with the scripture's silence around positive imagery for fathers. In fact, I found myself hoping that Jesus' disciples didn't have children of their own. So imagine this. The disciples are playing this "Who's the greatest?" game, when Jesus catches them out. He gives them this lecture on servanthood which he concludes by taking a child into his arms and saying, "whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

The disciples pretty much ignore this and change topic, but Jesus insists on being clear on the point regarding children. He says, "If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea." In other words, God will not take kindly to those who don't treat children well."

Despite the threat of death, within a few days the disciples prevent children from getting to Jesus. Becoming quite angry, Jesus repeats the lesson: "To such as these belongs the kingdom of God." You will never get into it unless you become as one of these little children.

As far as we know, Jesus was never a father, but here's the image for fathers that we'd want: someone sticking up for children. We love this story. It recalls those songs from Sunday School days: "Jesus loves me" and "Jesus loves the little children." Jesus holding a child in his lap is perhaps among our favorite images. We of course throw all of our sentimental ideas about children into the story: their innocence, their insatiable curiosity, their ability to trust, their hopefulness and belief in overcoming impossible obstacles. In short, when we were children, this story affirmed our worth and acknowledged God's unwavering love. That's the real value of this story: its ability to speak to children about love. We see ourselves in these children.

But there's another side to the story, a darker side, something that breaks my heart every time I read it. I am no longer a child and I am certainly not enough like Jesus. I am the other adult in the story, the disciple who doesn't get it. I wonder about the disciples, what they could have been thinking... but I sometimes do the same thing.

Before I come to that point, though, let's stay with the story and talk about what's implied by the behavior of the disciples: namely that children were not highly valued as children. The positive imagery that we have for children doesn't fit the time of Jesus. One did not become too attached because many did not live into adulthood. Among those who did were many he grew up without parents because of high mortality and shorter lifespans. There was no childhood as we know it today, no period of innocence, no time for curiosity or play. Children were extra sets of hands in the field.

Certainly births were celebrated and most parents loved their children, but children had no rights. They were often the first to suffer during famine. They were among the most vulnerable of society. It is this point that Jesus is emphasizing in his lesson about children. The measure of the true disciple is the degree to which he or she cares for the least of the world. It is in caring for one another that the kingdom of God is known. But in this story, the disciples are looking out for their own interests, for the prominence of their position with Jesus.

This is just what happens to us as well. In looking out for ourselves, we forget about the vulnerable, about those who can't speak for themselves, about children. This is why this story breaks my heart. We hear the statistics, but our minds hardly comprehend what they mean. The numbers haven't changed much over the years. Nearly half the children of this state live in a low income household. Half of those live in families below the poverty level. There are nearly thirty million children in low-income households across the country. Poverty impacts a child's ability to learn as well as his or her physical and mental health.

Children are among the victims of terrorists attacks. Lest we think ourselves much better, many children were within the impact area of Hiroshima, and among the dead at Mai Lai in Viet Nam. About 1500 children have now been separated from their parents along our southern border, some of whom have been placed in temporary make-shift "rooms" of chain-link fence. The current administration is not the first to separate

immigrant children from their parents, but they are the first to do so as a matter of policy in an attempt to deter mothers from bringing their children across the border.

These are tough times for pastors. Now if I were preaching at Galilee Baptist Church, they would be wanting to hear some pretty strong language from me on this topic and I know that many of you share my disappointment about this policy. But some of you are hung up on this separation of church and state thing. But I ask you, what am I supposed to do when government officials like the attorney general start using the Bible to defend their policies as he did a couple days ago? What am I supposed to do when Jesus says, "Let the children come..." and the government says, "Based on Romans 13:1, the government is entitled to do this." Steven Colbert, also not a biblical expert, reminded his audience, that just a few verses later, Paul writes that the whole law is summed up in "Love your neighbor."

I'm not going to get into whether these "border crossers" are illegal immigrants or asylum seekers. This gospel story is about blessing children. We don't know where these children came from, whether they're orphans or come from a stable home. Jesus doesn't ask whether they belong to good practicing Jews or the Roman hierarchy. Let them come to me... for to such as these belongs the kingdom.

So if we want to follow the Bible in our social policy, we will do the things that bless children. We will prioritize funding for schools. We will design the best healthcare we know how. We will see that the 30 million children living in poverty in this country are given a step up. We will think about the impact that requiring Medicaid recipients to work has on the welfare of their children. We will figure out how to make our children safe in school instead of dithering about a person's unconditional right to own a gun.

Sounds political, but it's not about the politics for me. It's about the children. As people of faith we should be about blessing the children. As fathers we should be about blessing children. We should stop behaving like the disciples in this story and either imitate Jesus or at least clear the way to Jesus. Sometimes being faithful, blessing children means writing your legislator, advocating for a certain policy. Sometimes politics hurts children. In so many ways we are keeping children from Jesus.

Let the children come! Clearing the path to Jesus isn't of course the only thing we should be doing. As important as advocacy and engaging the world through faith is, there is still the actual blessing of children, the building a relationship with the "least of these."

Janet sent me a link to an article on Fred Rogers. In addition to being my seminary's most famous alumni, he played a large role in my children's early development. He created *Mister Roger's Neighborhood* as a response to what he considered unhealthy television programming for children. In four decades of children's programming he managed to receive just about every conceivable award, including induction into the Television Hall of Fame and the Presidential Medal of Freedom from George W. Bush, recognizing his contribution to the well-being of children and a career in public television

that demonstrates the importance of kindness, compassion and learning. He built relationships over the TV. He'd ask questions and my children would answer. He never met them, but he blessed them. He affirmed their worth. They've never doubted how special they were and are. If you're looking for a great father image, Mr. Rogers certainly qualifies. There's a documentary about him just released

To watch him is to wonder how we ever found it difficult to bless children. Blessing children should be a non-partisan activity. Look how Jesus does it. He welcomes them, even holding one of them in his arms. Not every child wants to be touched of course. Children on parts of the autism spectrum sometimes find it invasive, but appropriate physical affirmation creates an atmosphere of safety and love. It could be a hug. Mr. Rogers did it with eye contact. When he was talking directly to the children in his audience, he was always looking straight into the camera. Do we make a connection with children? Are they welcome in our worship? Or do we become distracted by the noise they make? Do we wonder why the parents don't take them out? Are parents nervous about disturbing the other worshippers with the children? Do we greet them after worship, offer them a smile in passing? The blessing really begins with allowing children to be in your space, with welcoming them into your space.

Jesus talked to them, had a message for them: "You belong to the kingdom. God notices you, includes you." What are the messages we send to children? Do they sense God's love through us? Are we telling them how special they are, that we like them just the way they are?

Jesus values them declaring that children are among the "greatest" in the kingdom. Do we like them as infants but become more distant and awkward when they become teenagers. Do we really value children? Enough that we are happy to continue supporting the schools even after our own children are grown?

He offered them a positive vision for their future. It doesn't get any more positive than being included in the kingdom of God.

Father's day is a great day to think about the future for our children. Are we keeping the air clean, securing a safe water supply, and preserving nature for them to enjoy in the next generations? Are we only tending to our own children's future or are we tending also to the malnourished child in the Sudan, the refugee child now in Eastern Europe, or the occupied child in Palestine? The way to the kingdom passes right through the midst of these children and others. Give them a future and you will know the power and love of God in way you never imagined.

This is the challenging part of blessing children: getting out of our world and into theirs; stepping away from our self-interest into the desire of God. Staying the course, day after day, child after child, obstacle after obstacle.

Let the children come! Bless them! Don't stand in the way. Make a way! In so doing, you fulfill the whole law of God, which is of course...love. Happy Father's Day.