

Follow that Child!

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Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

18th Sunday after Pentecost - September 26, 2021

Texts: Isaiah 11:1-9, Mark 9:31-42, 10:13-16

Is 11:1-9

This text is often referred to as “the peaceable kingdom;” notice that it’s a child who leads the way. It’s often used to celebrate the blessing of the animals on the Feast of St. Francis, every year on October 4 or thereabouts.

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins. The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder’s den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

Special Music: “Prayer Of The Children.” This song was written about children in civil war torn countries, but also has context in today’s school shooting epidemic in America. A video of Australian children can be seen and heard here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r9x6hSdRAvI>

Can you hear the prayer of the children
On bended knee, in the shadow of an unknown room?
Empty eyes, with no more tears to cry
Turning heavenward, toward the light.

Crying, "Jesus, help me
To see the morning light of one more day;
But if I should die before I wake
I pray my soul to take."

Can you feel the heart of the children
Aching for home, for something of their very own?
Reaching hands, with nothing to hold on to

But hope for a better day, a better day.
Crying, "Jesus, help me
To feel the love again in my own land;
But if unknown roads lead away from home
Give me loving arms, away from harm."

Can you hear the voice of the children
Softly pleading for silence in a shattered world?
Angry guns preach a gospel full of hate,
Blood of the innocent on their hands.

Crying, "Jesus, help me
To feel the sun again upon my face;
For when darkness clears I know you're near
Bringing peace again."

Dali kujete sve dječje molitve?
Can you hear the prayer of the children?

Mark 9:38-42, 10:13-16

You may notice a couple of things about this reading: first, it's taken from two different chapters, with a lot skipped in between. But there is a similarity between today's two stories - can you identify it? Also, you may think I made a mistake and repeated last week's lesson about Jesus hugging children. Actually, there's a difference, and it's intentional. Remember, the disciples have just tried and failed to cast out a demon; Jesus had to do it. Then he cautioned them about trying to be the greatest. He reminded them to follow the example of a child. Have they learned?

John said to him, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." But Jesus said, "Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us. For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward. 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."

People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

First of all, did you spot the similarity in today's stories? In both cases, the disciples are trying to limit the Jesus effect: first a stranger using Jesus' name to heal, and then the children being brought for a blessing. In both cases, Jesus' answer is the same: "Don't stop him! Don't stop them!"

How often do we, by our words or actions, try to control and limit God's love, too?

Did you spot the difference in the stories about the children? Last week, Jesus pulled one child apart and used it as a parable of welcoming children (which the disciples immediately forgot, apparently). This week, lots of parents are bringing lots of children. Again, Jesus welcomes, hugs and blesses them. But this time he adds that only children really get the program. He moves from, welcome *this* child and you welcome me, to welcome all the children, and finally to welcome God *like* a child.

How often do we, too, think we know better than children?

Please pray with me: Loving God, you welcome those who welcome you without hesitation or limits. Give us the humility to follow where the children lead. Amen

A little child shall lead them to the peaceable kingdom, said Isaiah.

When we were kids, our family took a lot of vacations. In the early 60s, we went to the deep south. We were surprised that all the gas stations had three restrooms: Men, Women, and Colored. I think I was most disturbed because the Colored one didn't distinguish between Men and Women. But it was my little sister Wendy who nailed the scandal. She was just six but already a discerning reader (as she still is). After a week on the road, we went a laundromat to wash our clothes. The sign in the window read, "Whites only."

"We can't go in there!" Wendy said. "Our clothes are *all* colors!"

How right she was. We were all vaguely embarrassed by the overt racial segregation. Of course, that didn't mean we came back any more aware of the *covert* discrimination against the Native people in our own town of Pipestone, who remained invisible. Somehow, I didn't make the move from one to the other, from particular instances to systemic racism. Does that make sense?

I think it would make sense to Jesus, and to Mark, as he told the story of Jesus' life. In the past few Sundays, we saw Jesus healing one precious daughter of one particular foreigner. We saw that God loves each child as though it were the only child, but also that God's love crosses boundaries of race and nationality. The next week we saw Jesus healing a boy in the context of his community. When one child was healed, the whole family and village were healed.

In last week's story, Jesus used a single child as an example of *whom* to welcome. Today, he uses a whole crowd's worth of children to teach *how* to welcome God's reign on earth. Children

show us the way. He moves from the particular to the universal, and from the universal back to the particular. He moves from the personal to the systemic, and from the systemic to the personal.

I'll try to explain. It's in our nature to be most attached to what's closest to us. We see those most dear to our hearts as more important than the rest of the world. I remember a wonderful couple in a church in rural Minnesota. Bill and Lee were shining examples of the Christian life, supporting the mission of the church in every way: by their giving, by their volunteering, by their leadership. She was the choir director, he was on the council. They passed their values on to their three children, too. The youngest, Tia, had been delicate all her life, susceptible to every germ that came along, and they were very protective of her. But Tia wasn't a sick little girl any more. She graduated from college and announced that she was going into the Peace Corps. Oh-oh! Trouble in paradise! "Of course, the Peace Corps is a great thing! Of course, *other* people should join it. But not our Tia! She's too frail, too precious! It's too dangerous!" Nevertheless, Tia persisted, and came through the experience just fine, and we all learned a lot from her.

It was the same with my suburban congregation in Chicago. Zeal for social justice was high on their agenda. They gave a full 25% of their annual budget to worthy causes. But when I invited their children to come with me to volunteer in Cabrini Green, it was, "Oh, no! The inner city is just too dangerous for our own darling children." How, I wondered, could they sleep at night, then, knowing that so many other darling children had no choice but to live there? What made their kids exempt? It's our nature, and it's hard to reason from the particular to the universal, hard to see the system we are part of.

If my child is precious to God, then all children are precious to God, right? Of course we wish that every child on earth could be raised in a safe and loving home with enough to eat and drink, and the opportunity to learn and grow. But that simply isn't the case. Take water, for a very basic example.

Jesus had something to say about the gift of a cup of water, too: "Whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward": all children bear the name of Christ, in a way, because all are created in the image of God. Water is such an ordinary thing, and yet so precious in an arid land like Palestine. But water is always and everywhere a necessity and a basic human right. Something every child should have because every child is God's child. But one out of five children in the world lacks clean water. Every day, nearly 1000 children die of preventable illnesses due to that lack. Many girls lack the opportunity to go to school because they are tasked with fetching water for the family. These children are loved by their parents, and beloved of God, too. Is it any wonder that mothers and fathers risk everything to bring their children to a country where the water won't kill them? No, the children haven't earned it, but don't they deserve it? Water isn't their reward, it's their right. In letting the children come to the water as they came to Jesus, we glimpse the realm of heaven. Children

teach us that all are welcome there. God gives us what we can't earn. We can't earn God's love, or God's grace and mercy any more than we earned the right to be born in the United States instead of Haiti or Yemen or Burkina Faso, or any country where children die for lack of clean water.

Every child in the world could lead us to the peaceable kingdom, the realm of God with no limits and no boundaries, where everyone is beloved, where natural enemies like wolves and sheep, and lions and calves, are friends; where children play with poisonous snakes and come to no harm. There, as Isaiah said, "They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea."

What a perfect description of love without limit: an earth as full of the knowledge of a God as the sea is full of water, for God is as completely love as water is completely wet.

Like the disciples, we keep trying to limit who gets what - not intentionally, of course, but somehow, we keep putting ourselves first, and our children first, and our own community and our own people first. And in a way, that's OK. God gave us to one another to love and cherish and care for. God puts your dear ones first, too. God puts every child first.

Does it sound like a contradiction? Believe me, I've been wrestling with this idea for the last month. But it's the message I keep getting. God loves each one of us as though there were only one of us, and God loves all of us together. God knows that each of us needs to have our hands washed and our souls healed before we can enter the kingdom. We all need to follow a child right into God's laundromat, not whites only, because God's beloved are all colors, all stripes, all fabrics, and all weaves. Welcome as we are, welcome just as God made us. Thanks be to God.

Prayers

God of children everywhere, teach us to receive you as a child. Help us remember that we don't need to prove ourselves worthy or better than anyone to receive your love. Remind us that when we lean on you in our weakness and poverty, we make your heart glad.

God of children everywhere, we pray for children caught up in civil wars or global conflicts, for those lacking clean water and opportunities for education, for those carried far from their homes by parents trying to save their lives, for those in schools jeopardized by the unvaccinated and the unmasked. They are your children, too.

God of our own precious children and grandchildren, we fear for a world that may be less hospitable to them than it has been to us. Show us how to make the world a better place; help us follow a child into your kingdom of peace and light and plenty.

God of all, you have given us particular others to love and care for and we pray now for those closest to our hearts: for those who helped build this beloved community but who are now

isolated from it. We pray for all who mourn; may we learn to see death ultimately as the gate to eternal life in you, who taught us to pray: Our Father....