

The Gift of Children
March 1, 2015
Mark 10:13-16 (NIrV)

The Bibles available in the pews are a translation known as the New Revised Standard Version. While excellent for adults, it is challenging for children since it is written at an eleventh grade reading level.¹

This morning's lesson will be read from the New International Reader's Version. This modern translation was created with children in mind, and is written at a third grade reading level.²

Listen now to a familiar story from the tenth chapter of Mark's Gospel beginning in the thirteenth verse.

People were bringing little children to Jesus. They wanted him to touch them. But the disciples told the people to stop. When Jesus saw this, he was angry. He said to his disciples, "Let the little children come to me. Don't keep them away. God's kingdom belongs to people like them. What I'm about to tell you is true. Anyone who will not receive God's kingdom like a little child will never enter it." Then he took the children in his arms. He put his hands on them and blessed them.

May God bless the reading and hearing of these wise words.

Let us pray . . . Holy Parent remind us of the gift of children and help us to reconnect with the child within and with the children who enrich our lives. Take and use my words to empower our imaginations, awaken us to new possibilities, and embolden us in our actions. Amen.

In many churches the simplest way to identify which rooms are intended for children and which are reserved for adults is to observe the size of the furniture. Since so many of you are parents and grandparents, I hope you know that children are not miniature adults.

Some of the adults here have talked to me about our recent use of many different versions of the Lord's Prayer. The most common comment is that this variety has led you to really think about what you are saying each time you pray the Lord's Prayer. Perhaps you are becoming child-like in your approach. You want to know the right words for a given week and strive to say them with enthusiasm.

¹ "A Guide to Popular Bible Translations."

<<http://www.cokesbury.com/FreeDownloads/BibleTransGuide.pdf>>

² Ibid.

There are countless ways young children think the Lord's Prayer should be said after listening to adults recite it. Perhaps you have heard a child say something like:

- Our Father who does art in heaven Harold be thy name³, or
- lead us not into temptation, but deliver us some e-mail⁴.

Whether about prayer or other matters of faith, we like to think that we teach children, but often they teach us far more than we teach them. And, they certainly ask some great theological questions

- Did God mean for the giraffe to look like that or was it an accident?⁵
- In Sunday school my teacher told us what God does, but who does all that stuff when God is on vacation?⁶

With questions such as these perhaps we should extend the time given to the children's message each week. Or, maybe I should consider adding something new to each worship service: a time for adults. Imagine a child inviting all of the grandparents present to come forward to the chancel steps for a time of learning.

I don't think we will go there, but am excited to begin exploring what it is we will do to respond to the blessing of children. According to our recent congregational survey there are two things this congregation does exceptionally well: radical hospitality and passionate worship. While we do both well overall, we must also strive to do both well with children.

According to *The Jesus Priorities* book by Christopher Maricle that inspired this sermon series, we turn the priority of valuing children as precious into a habit when we

- become like children,
- protect children, and
- welcome children.⁷

³ "Prayers." <http://www.iusedtobelieve.com/religion/prayers/prayers_d10.php>

⁴ "From the Mouths of Children."

<http://www.1stholistic.com/reading/liv_humor-from-the-mouths-of-children.htm>

⁵ "Letters to God." <http://lossofsoul.com/LIFE_IS/God/letters_1-en.htm>

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Christopher Maricle. *The Jesus Priorities: 8 Essential Habits* (Nashville, Upper Room, 2007), p.108.

For some of us the most difficult behavior on this short list is to become like children or to be childlike. We must, however, find our way to this way of being since Jesus in this morning's reading is quoted as saying, "Anyone who will not receive God's kingdom like a little child will never enter it."

Think about how young children live life so fully and freely. Imagine yourself imitating such thorough trust, amazing affection, and enthusiastic exploration. Imagine our weekly worship service as your learning lab – a place where the carefree version of yourself can practice passionate worship while developing childlike attributes that enrich all of life.

As you begin to master or to reconnect with your childlike faith, your adult sensibilities will demand that you protect children by ensuring the world they live in is safe. Here in our church this caring begins by crafting and living by a safe church policy that outlines the specific ways we make all church activities safe for children alongside the screening and training procedures for the adults who volunteer as leaders.

Moving beyond our call to protect children means standing up for children with our voting, our caring, and our activism. The most recent annual observance of Children's Sabbath in our country called on houses of worship to lead the way by recognizing that children are precious in God's sight by answering God's call to cherish and protect every child.⁸

As we reconnect with our own childlike faith and work to protect children, we will provide children with a wonderfully warm welcome. For us this is an important part of what it means to be a congregation known for its radical hospitality. We welcome children when we give them our undivided attention and when we make sure that our campus and our activities are truly child friendly.

Children are welcome here. By now, I hope that you have noticed that today our children have remained in worship rather than exiting for Sunday school after the children's message. Together let's welcome them this Sunday and every day, and let's include them in our conversations about the future.

⁸ For more information see "Precious in God's Sight: Answering the Call to Cherish and Protect Every Child." <<http://www.childrensdefense.org/library/2014-sabbath-manual/documents/2014-childrens-sabbath-2.pdf>>

Recognizing the gift of vivid imagination so readily available in childhood, I invite you to imagine with me some of the many ways our congregation might welcome children now and in the not so distant future.

- Imagine children of all ages participating and helping lead worship on more than just a few special Sundays each year.
- Imagine a children's ministry that doesn't segregate or isolate children but one that is multi-generational and multi-sensory.
- Imagine a youth ministry that helps middle and high school students discover who they are and what it means to follow the Way of Jesus.

Imagine the possibilities. And, as you imagine, don't forget to visualize the role you will play.

Amen.