

Kidding Around

Mark 10:13-16

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Margaret Rose Buffo. October 1, 2000. That was my first baby dedication, the first time I had the honor of following Jesus' lead of taking a child in my arms, holding them, and blessing them. Since I dedicated Maggie, I've done 93 other baby dedications, including my own daughters and, just a few weeks ago, my niece and nephew. Many of you have allowed me the privilege of dedicating your children or grandchildren, but remember: If they act like hooligans, don't blame me. I did the best I could, but I'm not Jesus.

Today we mark the celebration of Universal Children's Sunday, and I'm so proud of all our kids for stepping up to help lead us in worship. In 1990, the United Nations established Nov. 20 as World Children's Day to promote the importance of children's welfare and well-being across the globe. The 2023 theme of World Children's Day is, "For every child, every right." Every child deserves to be seen, heard, and treated as a precious gift from God.

Well, don't tell that to the disciples. Their motto was "For every child, no rights." Jesus is in the middle of speaking to a crowd of people when a group of parents bring their children forward for a blessing. As the parents get close to Jesus, the disciples step in, acting like Taylor Swift's security guards, controlling access to this religious celebrity. "These people shouldn't be bothering Jesus. They have kids with them! And you know what kind of behavior that means: demanding, short-tempered, sulky, stubborn, selfish. And the kids are even worse! We don't need that kind of childish behavior around Jesus." There will be glitter and confetti and smashed goldfish crackers everywhere! The disciples knew that when a child is present, it changes things. Are we OK with that?

I remember a time here at Crestwood when a family with a young child was visiting for the first time. In the middle of the service, the child started getting restless and causing a bit of a commotion, so the mom scooped up the child and tried to make an inconspicuous exit. As the mom exited the pew, the child started scream, "I don't want to go! I don't want to go!" See? This is exactly what the disciples were worried about! I paused the sermon so that the mom could make her way out of the sanctuary, the kid screaming the whole way, then I looked right at the congregation and said, "How come none of you all do that at the end of the service?" When a child is present, it changes things.

Can you imagine hindering our kids today? Can you imagine the Elders blocking the aisle during Children's Time? "Sorry, kids, we have more important things to do than make room for you." Back in Jesus' day, Christianity was really the first religion for the entire family that invited both sexes and children to participate. Thankfully, we've continued that trend and we welcome all shapes and sizes of families into our midst, because we know when a child is present, it changes things.

This past Thursday, our Bible study had a special guest. Usually, the group is made up of seasoned veterans, but on Thursday we were joined by TJ and his mom, Allie. Allie and her husband, Tyler, have been visiting us for several months and have found a home here at Crestwood. I like them, but I absolutely adore their seven-month-old son, TJ. I learned at Bible study that TJ is a wide-eyed future Bible scholar. How do I know this? Because all throughout the Bible study he was asking questions and making observations and offering insights. OK, it sounded like baby talk, but I just know that's what was going on in his head! And I got such

pleasure from watching the grandmas in the room watch TJ. I don't know that they learned much about the Bible, but that wasn't the lesson God had for us that day. When a child is present, it changes things.

In our story, we may bristle at what appears to be the disciples' insensitivity to the presence of children, but it was accepted behavior back in those days because children weren't valued. They were treated almost like property. Children added nothing to the family's economy or honor and simply did not count. In the Greco-Roman world, a father could literally throw a child away by not claiming them as part of the family. It was easy to ignore children or bar their access because there was no one who really cared or would fight for them.

Except Jesus. Just one chapter earlier, Jesus chastises two of his disciples because they were arguing over which one of them was the greatest, and now they are denying access to the least of these among them. When the disciples try to block the kids, Mark tells us Jesus is indignant. He's not just perturbed or ticked off or annoyed; he's indignant. He recognizes an injustice has been done, a power play has been perpetrated against the powerless. And he turns the disciples' sense of authority against them. Gathering the children like a mother hen, Jesus says to his followers, "You all are so concerned about entering the Kingdom of God? You want to be the greatest? OK. Here's how. Look at these kids. Be like them." What does Jesus mean by this?

I think he means we need to stop trying to be adults, stop trying to figure everything out, stop trying to boss everyone around, and be more like kids. For example, while adults tend to be cynical, children are trusting. Unlike us, they have not yet learned to be suspect of the world. Think of the level of trust they exhibit, especially in those of us whom they love. When my daughter Molly was young, as she was coming down the stairs, if I was standing at the bottom, she would take off flying from the middle of the steps so that I could catch her. That's the trust Jesus is talking about here, being willing to take a leap of faith, believing that we will be safe in God's arms.

As adults, we want to question, examine, dissect, pull apart. We sometimes come at our faith like forensic investigators, putting God under a microscope to try and discover why things happen and if God is really listening to our prayers. And there's a place for asking questions in our faith journey. But children seem to have this instinctive understanding and acceptance of God's presence. Sometimes we ask a lot of "if" questions about God – if God is real, if God loves me, if God is listening. Children may ask "how" and "why" questions about God, but for them, God isn't an "if." That's trust.

I believe Jesus also calls us to exhibit authenticity. Children don't try to act like someone they're not; they're not conscious of the image they are trying to project. They are uniquely, fully themselves, which I witness every time I watch the kids come forward for Children's Time, clutching their favorite stuffed animal or eager to show off a drawing they just made. I remember one time a little girl came forward wearing shorts, a pajama top, rainboots, and a feather boa. Do you think that girl cared what people thought about her? We all have stories of a child who has blurted out an inappropriate statement in the middle of Target. I would share some personal stories here, but they're not fit for the pulpit. But that's kids! They don't have a socialization filter in their brains; they don't worry that other people won't like their artwork. They simply want to share what they have, be it curious questions or dinosaur drawings. That's exactly what God wants from us, not our filtered, curated, smoothed-over, socially presentable selves. God wants us, as we are, from our rainboots to our feather boas.

This leads to another child-like quality that I think almost all adults are seriously lacking, and that is a sense of wonder. When a child discovers something new, it immediately becomes the coolest thing in the history of the universe, and they just have to tell you about it! Do we remember what it's like to feel that sense of wonder? Think about a baby discovering her hands for the first time. She'll look at them like they are some sort of alien tentacle that's waving in front of their face, and then she'll suddenly realize that she can control this tentacle, she can actually make it do things like pick up that stale cheerio and put it in her mouth. A whole new world has opened up! I wonder what it would be like if we re-discovered God like a baby discovering her hands? We if we greeted God each morning like *that*?

All of these qualities – trust, humility, a sense of wonder – are smaller parts of a bigger quality I believe Jesus is highlighting here. On our tax forms, what are our children called? They are dependents. In other words, they depend on us, their providers, for their well-being. I believe Jesus is encouraging complete dependence in his followers. We adults tend to separate life into two categories: the big stuff that I need God for and the other stuff I can handle myself. But kids bring it all to God. They pray to God for their dead goldfish and their friends' skinned knee and their mommy's tummy ache, not out of obligation, but because they believe God actually cares about those things. And you know what? God does.

Legend has it that, during a Q & A session, world-renowned theologian Karl Barth was asked if he could summarize his theology in a single sentence. This guy wrote dozens of theology books, many of which I was supposed to read during seminary. How can he boil his life's work down to one sentence? As the story goes, Barth responded by saying, "In the words of a song I learned at my mother's knee: 'Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.'"

My prayer today is that the complexity of our belief about God can be boiled down to the same thought. I hope we can approach God with the same trust, the same authenticity, the same wide-eyed wonder. I also pray we never stop valuing the presence of children in our midst, that we never say that Missy is "just" a children's minister or that Steph is "just" a youth minister. The work they do is not only excellent, it is invaluable to this church. They are cultivating the kin-dom of God among us. Crestwood, we are blessed beyond measure by our children. We may think we have a lot to teach them, but in reality, we have a lot to learn from them. In a few weeks, we'll begin the anticipation of another child coming into our midst, a child that brings with him the promise of God with us, a promise that is fulfilled every time we see a child here at Crestwood. This baby we are waiting for will remind us that when a child is present, it changes things. Thanks be to God.