

Suttons Bay Congregational Church
Mark 10:13-16

April 27, 2008
Rev. Robin Long

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.

I was sick at home a couple of days last week and my sinuses felt like they were desperate to escape, pushing against my cheekbones and sending radiations of pain throughout my head. Nathan, also sick, had missed his nap one afternoon and had become the embodiment of cranky. Corey wouldn't be home for another three hours. I had a sermon to write, a paper to finish, and three phone calls to return. I just needed to get Nathan to eat his fish sticks and go to bed so that I could get some work done. But instead of settling down he was running around, chasing our poor dog Ruby. I finally got him to sit down at the table and as soon as he did, he started reaching for everything in site, knocking over his sippy cup and getting the research books for my sermon all out of order. In the quiet and firm voice I learned from watching *Super Nanny*, I asked him stop grabbing things and as soon as the words were out of my mouth his arm jutted out as he reached for a bowl on the table and as he did so my hand came down fast, quick, and hard as I slapped his hand. As I slapped his hand hard—way too hard. As I slapped his hand not to teach him a lesson but to release my own frustration. As I slapped his hand even though I don't believe in using physical aggression as a form of discipline. As I slapped his hand and then looked into his eyes that were welling with tears—the look of defiance that had previously inhabited them being replaced by a look of shock and fear. Absolute shock because I had slapped his hand, slapped it so hard that an angry red welt was beginning to form on its surface, a welt that reflected my shame, my humiliation, and my deep regret.

And Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs." Nathan didn't deserve to get slapped. He wasn't doing anything a normal 3 year old who has a cold and had missed his nap doesn't do. On most days, I would realize that and though annoyed, I would have kept my cool—I would have been the adult he trusts me to be—I would have disciplined him with patience, calm, and consistency. But instead of receiving discipline born of love, Nathan received violence born of frustration and stress—frustration and stress that had very little—if anything—to do with him. He trusts me to do better than that. He trusts me to think more clearly than that. He trusts me to do the right thing and on that day, I didn't do it. And if a series of such incidents would have followed, I would have further shaken his trust—not just in me, but in anyone who cares for him, anyone else who might—for seemingly no reason at all—flip out and hurt him.

And Jesus said "let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs" and when he said this, he flummoxed his listeners. They would have been even more confused when he picked up a child to hold on his lap. The disciples had just "spoken sternly" to the people, to the children—trying to get them to go away and leave Jesus alone. But Jesus was indignant with them—not the children vying for his attention but with his disciples who tried to send those children away. The disciples' actions towards the children reveals common attitudes of the day. Children in Jesus' time had no standing, no rights. "Parents were not indifferent or hostile to their children, but they did not spend much time attending to children and did not expect child development, or the child's perspective on life, to be particularly interesting. They saw children as adults in the making, not as individuals with a distinct experience of life and a developing understanding of the world."¹ There were high rates of infanticide and children in poorer families were put to work as early as they were able—often before the age of seven. Children were often thought of a dispensable—a commodity. They had no standing

¹ Gillian Cloar, "The Fathers and the Children" in *The Church and Childhood*, Diana Wood, ed., (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1994), 12.

and no rights; children had to trust someone else to care for them. And they weren't alone. There were many such populations—groups of folks who were dependent on others for survival. Widows also had no standing—even if they had been married to the wealthiest and most upstanding man in the community—when he died, his widow had nothing—no standing, no rights. She was dependent on the kindness of male heirs for her livelihood and survival. Widows had to trust someone else to care for them. People with skin ailments and other diseases weren't of value, it was believed that they were impure and their disease a direct result of sin. They had no standing, no rights. They had to trust someone else to care for them. People with mental illness were thought to be inhabited by demons, necessarily evil because of what we now understand as an illness, not a personal fault. They had no standing, no rights. Those with mental illness had to trust someone else to care for them. When Jesus says that the kingdom of God belongs to children—he doesn't mean just children—he is saying that the kingdom of God belongs to all of those who have no standing, no rights. All of those who society has deemed unnecessary or burdensome. All of those who are commodities—think poor children working in sweat shops in foreign countries. All of those who are dispensable—think children, dying by the thousands in war zones or places of famine. The kingdom of God belongs to all of those who have to trust someone else to care for them.

And that's what Nathan was doing when I failed him, he was trusting me to care for him. But the burden of stress and frustration I was carrying that day got to me. A high level of stress and frustration certainly doesn't make striking one's child right—but stress and frustration surely make it more likely. And the crazy part of all this is that if I—a healthy, middle-class, most-of-the-time-happily married woman with a home, loving parents, good friends, fantastic neighbors, and a seemingly endless network of social support—if I reached that breaking point—how much more likely is a single parent working a minimum wage job wondering where the money for the next rent payment is going to be coming from and hoping to hit all the green lights on the way home so she's not late to pick her kid up at the sitter—how much more likely is a person under that kind of stress, living with that level of frustration—how much more likely is she to scream and yell and hit. Statistics tell us that it's much more likely—single parents have higher rates of abusing their children. But research shows that it's not so much about one parent versus two—Lord knows we all know of some single parents who do a fantastic job raising children—the higher rates of abuse are more likely linked to the higher rates of poverty among single parents, not the fact that the parent is single. It's the poverty, or constantly living on the brink there of, that creates the stress and frustration out of which violence can be born.

And Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.” And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.” And if Jesus blessed them, well the obvious conclusion is that we ought to be blessing them as well. And as a church, we're trying. We've invested a lot in our Sunday School. Lynn is great with our children, teaching, mentoring, and guiding them in their journeys as Christ's disciples. Cindy provides safe and loving care for our younger children in our nursery. Margaret goes above and beyond her job description to lead children in singing during Sunday School. Jane works hard on the Young Disciples program. And I simply don't have time to mention the names of all of the volunteers—the Christian Education committee members, the volunteer Sunday School teachers, the party helpers, the nursery helpers—and Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me . . .” and that's exactly what you do and for that we are all grateful.

And all over town we see businesses and organizations with children cut-outs in their windows. Those cut outs are part of the Children Matter campaign and each business with a child in the window is making a declaration that Children Matter. Children matter to Jesus. And adults with a child-like heart, adults who trust in God as a child trusts—they matter too. And Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” To receive the kingdom of God as a little child is to receive the kingdom of God with a sense of wonder and awe, trust and love. Folks who think they're entitled to it, that they've earned it, that they've got the corner on truth—folks like the Pharisees and Tax Collectors who think they're all that and have secured

their place in heaven through all of their piety and righteousness . . . to them Jesus is saying, “Nope, that ain’t it. If you want a piece of this, you’ve gotta trust, you’ve gotta give up your impressive standing, you’ve gotta make yourself like a child again—trusting, vulnerable, dependent.” If you want to receive the kingdom of God, climb on up here, climb on up to the lap of God, and let me bless you—not because of anything that you have done, but because of everything that I have done.

And Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.” Jesus is not only calling us to receive the kingdom of God as a child receives it, but I believe also calling us to preserve, honor, and uphold the children in our midst. For if they are forced to grow up too quickly, they will become like us, and if they become like us, we cannot learn from them what it is to be child-like. They cannot remind us of what it is to trust if we create societies in which children cannot trust. And so it is no less than Christ’s call to us to create churches, schools, towns, and societies in which children are protected, children are valued, children are treasured. Parents can’t do it alone—trust me, I know.

About a year ago, I had to do our bi-weekly, big ol’, seemingly never ending grocery shopping trip. I’d been in Meijer for at least an hour. Nathan was, understandably, bored out of his gourd. My patience was running thin but the shopping was finally finished and I went to get in line to find that there weren’t fewer than 5 people in each and every line. By this time I had run out of my bag of tricks, I had nothing left to help Nathan pass the time. He began to cry and I almost did too. And then the woman ahead of us in line just came back to us and started talking to Nathan. I think she may have nodded her head in my direction, but her intent was to talk to my son who was ensconced there in the front of that blue, wire shopping cart. And talk to him she did. She talked to him about trucks and trains and bugs and balls. She pointed out the pictures on the balloons soaring high above the registers. She asked him about the dogs, and kittens, and bunny rabbits. She talked to him, and talked to him. She talked to him while she unloaded her groceries and while she paid. She even stuck around, after she was all checked out, to talk to him while I unloaded my groceries and paid. And then just as soon as I was ready to turn around and thank her profusely, she just kind of disappeared. My Meijer angel. She got it. She knew. And Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.”