



Westminster Presbyterian Church

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Graced Vulnerability

Now the word of the LORD came to me saying,

⁵*“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.”*

⁶*Then I said, “Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.”⁷*

But the LORD said to me, “Do not say, ‘I am only a boy’; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you.

⁸*Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the LORD.”*

*Mark 10:13-16 “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.” ****

Can you imagine the scene in which Mark sets in this story? Jesus, reputed to be a great teacher and healer, is surrounded most of the time by admirers – and by those who find him a threat. He’s constantly on the go; crisscrossing Palestine. Today, Jesus hopes to relax awhile. But more people are headed his way, with lots of raggedy, skinny, not-so-clean kids in tow. The disciples - just trying to be helpful “He’s so tired,”- decide to intervene with the Crowds continuing to surround him. So they began to sternly shoo the little ones away. Children who had been urged to the front of the crowd, edged back toward their family members; disappointed, maybe embarrassed. They had been told they could talk to, be blessed by, the Rabbi; that amazing teacher, the one with a voice which could soothe, as well as boom; the one whose eyes filled with love upon seeing these mothers and their young ones. The big gruff men surrounding Jesus pushed the children back, saying, “Go away. The Rabbi hasn’t time for you. He needs his rest!”

Scripture records that Jesus became indignant at the disciple’s actions. Indignant! Angrier than when he chased the money-changers out of the temple! Mark 10:14 is the only place in the New Testament where it is said that Jesus reacted with so strongly!

Jesus then, sitting down on a rock at child height, called, “Come here children,” and gathering them around him, as he spoke quietly with them, and blessed them.

While the Old Testament emphasizes that children are a gift from God and Hebrew children were cherished, this was a stark contrast to the attitudes of the Greco-Romans in first century Palestine. Children in that society were held in very low esteem. First and second sons, sons only and only if

healthy, were important because they had future potential as laborers and soldiers. Baby girls? They often weren't even given names. Children in general were of no importance and Childhood was seen as an inconsequential prelude to adulthood. And so for centuries it was, and sometimes still is, that children are seen as the future rather than genuinely valued for what they bring to the here and now.

Our understanding of and care for children is certainly more like that of our ancient Jewish ancestors than that of the Greeks and Romans. Yet, I wonder how many of us fully accept biblical scholar, Hans-Ruedi Weber's understandings of the young. According to Weber, scriptures recounting interactions between Jesus and children point directly to Jesus' understanding of the Kingdom of God. When Jesus said "children are at the very center of life in the kingdom" he meant just that – children, those who, in his time (as they are now in too many places), were among the most marginalized and insignificant members of a marginalized and insignificant culture; those children brought the kingdom of God right into the center of that multitude of disciples, followers, religious leaders, Roman police. By extension, when we see the children in this sanctuary, as we think of other young ones in our families, our neighborhoods and schools, we are reminded that we are on holy ground - the kingdom of God is evident in the youngest among us!

Have you ever found yourself making a child wait, just because he is a child, as you held a "more important" conversation with an adult? I certainly have, with my own children, especially when they were little. It can happen, when children need adult attention, they are told "not now", "later", "wait." And sometimes they are shooed away in less than gentle terms.

Sylvia and Michael..."Mama, when I talk to you, look at me!"

Jesus said, "Don't push these children away. Don't EVER get between them and me."

When I was a girl, my father served as a Lay Reader, in charge of a small, very small Episcopal Church on the eastside of Cleveland. Holy Spirit had a population of 7 blue-haired ladies, faithfully attending each week; 3 squirming children (my baby brother, younger sister and I), our mother; and a smattering of others who dotted the bare wooden pews. And, in leadership, in addition to my father, there was Estelle, who played the organ. Perhaps this is a reason simple, old churches, with a Communion table up front, or as I knew it then, an altar, - perhaps spending Sunday after Sunday in my father's church, ingrained in me, an attachment to a certain architecture. I know the faintly musty scent of old wood and worn fabric, usually red or royal blue, in churches on the edge, the scent is that of my childhood.

Estelle invited me to sit with her at the organ bench some Sundays, where I watched her gnarled fingers gracefully play stained ivory keys while her black organist shoes pumped the pedals with an enthusiasm belying her age. I was safe, encouraged and cared about on that organ bench, as in the church community itself. I was blessed by those followers of Jesus and suspect that the Holy Spirit at Holy Spirit church acted to plant within me the seeds of my deepest and most enduring faith.

We know that Parents are the primary transmitters of faith to their children, they cannot do this alone.//To raise Christian children families need to be surrounded by a supportive community – one which understands their lives, encourages them, lifts them in prayer, pitches in to be part of their lives of faith, which over and over affirms to them God’s blessings of love and acceptance.

Great admiration for families who get themselves and their children to church...

Children “disrupt worship” according to an usher in another church, who instructed a visiting parent to keep her kids still and quiet, so they wouldn’t destroy the service. But Children run. Children spread their worship bags out on their pew, scribble on prayer cards, rustle their papers and ask questions. (Not always about a deep point in the sermon, either.) Children touch fellowship baked goods and are guaranteed to take more than the one or two allotted cookies.

Supporting children, especially those we do NOT live with daily, as they experience worship and the fullness of life within a community of faith means offering radical hospitality, (which may mean sometimes putting their needs before our own.) The scolding Presbyterian Usher offered a message starkly at odds with the space in which he was standing. (by the way Mom and kids were there to hear her husband preach!). His church has a prayerground, a place explicitly set up in the midst of the sanctuary to welcome parents and little ones, to give them a space and soft toys, where they can interact with the service – to dance when the music moves their spirits, where they can absorb the sights and sounds and feel of the community of faith. Where out of this internalization of the essence of the congregation, a child begins building a life of faith, and without a word said, feel a part of the body of Christ – as long as he and his family are truly welcomed. (Welcomed just as I was among the old ladies of Holy Spirit.)

For Children embrace the world with grace and they remind us of the child each of us carries within. Children embody hope. They matter because Jesus said that they ARE the KINGDOM in our midst. Presbyterian theology speaks of the church as called to be the provisional exhibition of the kingdom of God. To be a kin-dom, even imperfectly means to welcome the loud, the wiggly, the ones who do not know how to whisper. *And as we enjoy their presence in our worship we open ourselves to who we once were. Have you ever felt tears spring to your eyes while listening to an anthem? Have you ever swayed (or wanted to) while singing a bright and beautiful hymn? Do the bread and wine of Communion pull you beyond yourself toward a whole, renewed creation? The worship of God connects who we were, who we are and who we will be, with the church throughout history! So sing with joy, dance a step or two, savor the gifts of salvation, even though you know you don’t understand it all!* Yes, children force us to look beyond our comfort and ourselves in small and large ways, for together we are provisional exhibitions of the Kingdom of God – separate or alone, everyone fails.

This is Way of Jesus. Jesus took children into his arms and blessed them. He ate with drunkards and the mentally ill; he made the blind see and the lame walk; he gave up his life even for those who had put him to death. There is no more sacred task for the church than bringing Jesus to others, by being Jesus for others.

The body of Christ in the 21st century is called, as it has always been, to be a community of faith living as an alien culture where God's grace is courageously embodied in ALL of its worship, witness and service; where young and older and oldest, are welcomed, embraced, appreciated, blessed - and drawn into the work of Jesus, who taught, "Look at the children in your homes, in your community, in your church. They will show you what the kingdom of God is like. They will, if let them, teach you about living a kingdom life."

Daniel and nursing home blessing balm...

In June I brought my eight year old, unchurched granddaughter to Westminster for Grand Camp Day. We went to the Sanctuary before leaving, at the end of the day, where she was entranced by the stain glass windows, as well as the sound coming from above the chancel. That's the organ being played, I told her. "Do you want to see it? We have to be very quiet because Mr. Neely is practicing." When we got to the front of the church, we tiptoed up the stairs and stood just close enough for Lucy to see John as he played. When he saw us, John stopped playing to speak with Lucy, and ask her if she had ever played an organ. When he asked if she would like to, her reply without hesitation was "sure!" John lifted her up onto the organ bench, where he showed her how to play different sounds, and even held her so she could push the pedals, a bit. *It is in small moments that we receive grace upon grace, these are sacred connections with God - where one person has put on Jesus for another, just as John and Daniel did.*

The good news is that God loves the world; that God came into the world as an infant; that God is present in children of all ages and all circumstances and in all places around this big world. The good news is that God is present in the child within each of us, no matter what our age. And God will be present in love, through eternity. We are blessed by the children of Westminster. Jesus invites us to do as he did for: "of such is the kingdom of heaven." Thanks be to God.