

Let the Little Children Come!

Rev. John Allen

During my call weekend, when I was here for the very first time getting vetted by all of you for this job, the Search Committee was tasked with planning events to help me get to know as many people in the church as possible. Of course, it is hard to meet everyone in a weekend.

So, the denomination advises that the candidate should, at a minimum, meet what they call the “key” members of the congregation. Those who are long tenured, in positions of leadership, or otherwise influential.

I still remember the afternoon I got my itinerary in an email from Steve.

The first item on the list was: Delaney’s Birthday Party.

In their wisdom, the search committee knew that a lot of the church's key and influential members would be there.

And when I arrived most of them were either getting their faces painted or bouncing in the bouncy castle.

And so it was, that my first official act as the pastor of this church was attending a child's birthday party.

We put a lot of time and energy into our children in this day and age. For families with kids, I am aware that their schedules often revolve around pick-ups and drop-offs. Meals squeezed in their somewhere.

And even for those of us, like me, who don't have children of our own, we live in a world that is structured for their safety and well-being. Crossing guards slowing down our cars. Large public spending on schools. Kid's menus and crayons at the restaurants.

And I am all for it.

But it wasn't always like that.

In fact, in Jesus time. Children were at best ignored. But mostly considered a nuisance, even by their own parents, at least until they were old enough to contribute meaningfully to the household.

If a family could afford it, they would hire nurses and tutors to keep the children occupied and out of sight during those early years.

Children were primarily thought of as capricious, volatile, unpredictable, and chaotic annoyances. Just one of those things you have to deal with in life, but not something you especially enjoy.

I know some of you parents might be thinking to yourselves that you feel that way about your children some times. But I know that most of the time, they are the light and joy of your life.

But that is why when people started bringing children to Jesus his disciples scolded them. They held them back, and send them away.

After all, Jesus was an important grown-up doing important things. No time for the annoyance of little-one scurrying underfoot.

The disciples couldn't stand to see him distracted from the important work at hand.

But Jesus says, Let the little children come to me. He takes them in his arms and blesses them.

And then, he takes it one step further.

He looks at all the grown-ups, who have come to be a part of the very serious. Very important. Very grown-up thing Jesus was doing. And he says— which children sitting on his knees—:

The kingdom of God belongs to people like this.

So what did he mean?

While, first I think what he meant was pretty simple. Children matter.

They matter to God. And so they should matter to us.

For us, this means that as Christians we should care about the well-being of children. And not just our own. We should care about the welfare of all children as if they were are very own.

But Jesus is making a broader point too. He is saying, “the realm that God is creating among us, belongs to those that we tend to ignore.”

Those people that we look past, and look over. They are the ones who God is lifting up, and putting first. The poor. The oppressed. The prisoner.

All those who we would prefer to ignore.

Anyone whose very presence in our midst might feel like a source of chaos, or an annoyance. They matter to God. And so they must matter to us.

So imagine not only the sweet scene of Jesus with darling children bouncing on his knee saying the kingdom belongs to these.

But imagine Jesus standing in lockup, gesturing to the inmates all around. Put away. Forgotten.

The kingdom belongs to these.

Imagine Jesus, with an orange life-jacket on riding a raft with refugees tossed in a violent sea.

The kingdom belongs to these.

Imagine Jesus among the unemployed folks, losing hope, in parts of the country that the powerful prefer to fly-over.

The kingdom belongs to these.

All those who many would prefer to ignore.

God's kingdom belongs to them.

But don't stop there.

Jesus takes it one step further still.

“In fact, I tell you, unless someone received the kingdom as a child, they will not receive it at all.”

Jesus tells us we should not just pay attention to children.

We should become like children.

So what did he mean?

I don't think it means that in order to have faith we have to forget everything that we have learned or experienced in adulthood.

Rather, I think that Jesus recognizes that children have a way of seeing the world that is radically open to wide possibilities. They are fairly unencumbered by pragmatism.

They find adults' reasons why things are the way they are to be frustrating, questionable, and unsatisfactory.

They dream big dreams and hope big hopes.

The see the world as a place of beauty and wonder.

They love hard. They feel even small things deeply.

So let the little children come.

They are indeed key members of our congregation. Not just because of what we want to do for them. But because of what they have to teach us about a life of faith.

Let the little children come.

They will remind us of our responsibility toward all that is vulnerable in this world and they will help us feel the pain of the world as our own.

Let the little children come.

They will urge us on to dream bigger.

They will free our minds from the way things are, and let our hearts
glimpse God's coming reign of love.

Let the little children come.

For God's kingdom belongs to them.