

Mark 10:13-16 - "Who does this belong to? - Katy Fazio

## Jesus Blesses Little Children

**13** People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. **14** 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. **15** Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.' **16** And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

I grew up in the First Baptist Church of Medford, which is the church that my grandmother raised her seven children in. Surrounding the church building are several houses that the church owns and rents out as low income housing, and so for my whole life, my grandmother lived on church property, in an apartment just a few steps from the sanctuary. And although I was a kid who loved church and who took my faith seriously from a young age, I was not a "good" church kid in the traditional sense. By that I mean that I was a precocious know it all who happily rolled around on the floor of the sanctuary during services, ran into the kitchen before coffee hour had even started to see if there were any cookies, opened doors I was not supposed to, and sometimes even hid from my mother in the elevator when it was time to go home.

I'm telling you this story because from a very very young age, there was no doubt in my mind that I *belonged* in that church and that church *belonged* to me. I was comfortable in church, the church was as familiar and as welcoming to me as my Nana's home, and as unconditionally loving to me as Nana herself, and that unconditional love was also evident from the grownups in Sunday School and coffee hour who talked to me like I was a whole person even though I behaved at times, if we're being honest, like a wild animal. **And thank God.** Truly. Those grown ups convinced me that I was *lovable* and *loved* by God. They convinced me so thoroughly that later in my life when I encountered Christians who told me that women couldn't preach, who told me that me and my friends were sinful, who told me that God loves some people more than others, that toxic theology could not take hold in me although it tried. Thank God for those grownups. They let me, a loud little girl with unbrushed hair, come to Jesus, and they did not stop me.

Jesus says, it is such as these (wild, crying, fidgety, neurodivergent, hungry, chatty, messy) little children that the kingdom of God belongs. Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child does will never enter it.” The gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke all have this story although they tell it a little differently. In Luke, people were bringing Jesus babies, not children. Mark, which we read, has an interesting difference too; “Jesus was indignant.”

People were leading their children to Jesus for a blessing, and the disciples were rebuking them, and when Jesus saw this, Jesus was indignant. Commentaries say that the other two gospels leave Jesus’s anger out of this story because they prefer to present a calm serene leader, but in Mark’s gospel we get a sneak peek of the Jesus who in just a few verses would be at the temple flipping the tables of moneychangers who were exploiting the poor among the worshippers. There is nothing that makes Jesus angrier than religious people gatekeeping the kingdom of God.

Because Jesus says, the Kingdom of God does not belong to the rich and powerful. It belongs to the poor. To the meek. It belongs! To the children! A lot of sermons and commentary on these passages ask what it means to “Receive the kingdom of God like a child,” what is it about children that is so important for us to emulate. But since “belonging” is one of our guiding principles at United Congregational Church, the question I want to ask is what it means, truly, for the kingdom of God to *belong* to the children. And what it looks like for us to act like it.

In one of our first conversations about the consolidation, Beth and I talked about the values that guided us in planning our respective ministries. And we discovered that although yes we had different traditions, we have basically the same hopes for the children in our churches. We want them to feel *safe* and *loved* in our church. And we want them to learn the stories of our faith, stories that affirm God’s unconditional, extravagant, radical love and welcome to all.

All, including the little children. Including the little children who are trans, and mentally ill, and refugees, and living in places across the world where it’s not safe to be a little child because of war or famine, or climate collapse, or gun violence. **This week especially I have felt the urgency of this mission like never before.** Children are some of the most vulnerable people among us. And beloved, we are called by Christ to be in solidarity with the vulnerable among us.

- Solidarity with the kids in our church building might look like bringing some fidget toys from the baskets over for them to play with before the service.

- It means paying attention to the pronouns our youth have on their nametags, and adding the pronoun buttons to your nametags too.
- Solidarity holding the hymnal at their eye level and pointing with your finger to the words that we're singing, so they learn how to read a hymnal.
- Solidarity with kids means introducing yourself with your name to kids, even if *you* know *their* names or even if you've maybe met them before. They meet so many grownups and we all look the same to them.
- Solidarity might look like volunteering to be an adult presence in Sunday School or at Youth group, even if you're uncomfortable entering a space centered around children, because children are in spaces centered around adults *all. the. Time.*

And finally, solidarity with kids means engaging the world in acts of service and justice, and telling them about it, or better yet, helping them participate. In a few weeks on February 9th we'll have our church engagement fair where you will see that there are SO MANY WAYS to live into this calling. Yes, it is overwhelming that there is so much work to be done. **But we don't need to do it alone. We know at United Congregational Church that we are better together,** and in just these last few weeks I have felt it every time I step into this building. I mean look around, God is doing a new thing here. At a time when people are more and more disconnected, more and more divided, we are choosing to be together in a new way, to risk something big for something good. We are not alone in the struggle for justice because we have each other.

Activist and midwife Robina Khalid writes, "Kids don't feel safe because you shield them from the oppression and injustice of the world. They feel safe because you stand up against it."

Kids learn by modeling. They learn to be welcoming when you welcome them. They learn to sing when you sing with them. They learn to pray when you pray with them. They learn to care when you care for them. They learn to serve others when you serve others. They learn this world is worth saving because they see you saving it.

Children are the future. We are building the world that they will inherit. But we are also teaching them through our example who belongs in this church, who the kingdom of God belongs to. And I want you to know that if we do our jobs right, there is a distinct possibility that one day that kid who's running under your feet to get to the cookies at coffee hour is going to be telling a story - maybe even in a pulpit preaching - about how generous and understanding and loving this congregation was to them. How you showed them what it meant to follow Jesus. How they still remember your name. How you made them feel like the Kingdom of God *belonged* to them.

May it be so.