

Sermon 9.15.16

Pastor Josh Ferris

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year C

Psalm 146 | 1 Timothy 6:6-19 | **Luke 18:15-17**

If ever there was a passage in the Bible where the translation we use matters, it's the one we read today from the Gospel of Luke about Jesus and children. Some of us who are older grew up in churches that used the King James Version of the Bible, full of "thees" and "thous" and "thys" that make it hard for many of us to read today. And in the King James Version of the Bible, during this story Jesus says, "Suffer little children to come unto me." (Luke 18:16a)

In college a friend told me that when she heard this story as a little girl in church, she heard that word 'suffer' and thought Jesus was saying that being around children was like suffering, that he thought children were bothersome annoyances who were not worth his time. And so from an early age she believed that Jesus didn't like children, that being a child was *bad* in God's eyes, and that Jesus and faith and the church and the Bible were for adults – something she could only fully experience when she stopped being a child.

The words we use matter. Our children are listening. In the version of the Bible that we use today, Jesus says, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them, for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." (Lk 18:16-17) Far from saying that children are some sort of nuisance or distraction, instead Jesus says they're valuable, that they're part of God's kingdom, and even that they have something to teach adults about faith and trust.

We don't understand how provocative and ridiculous these words would have sounded to the people around Jesus. We've grown up with quotes like, "a little child shall lead them," and "out of the

mouth of babes,” and many of us know that children have a unique innocence and a wisdom. Our culture considers children to be precious.

But in the first-century culture Jesus was speaking to, children didn't have much value. They were considered unimportant and often overlooked. That's probably why the disciples tried to keep children away from Jesus – thinking that such a wise and holy person was too busy or too important or too righteous to be troubled by children.

And I think this frustrated Jesus. This wasn't the first time that he had spoken to his disciples about children. Earlier they had been arguing about which one of them was the greatest and Jesus tried to teach them by bringing a children into their midst and saying, “Whoever welcomes this child in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me; for the least among all of you is the greatest.” (Luke 9:48) He was trying to teach them that true greatness is about serving and caring for those who are considered to be the *least* by the standards of our world. He was trying to show them that the kingdom of heaven is different from what we know, that it's a place where children are welcomed and loved and cherished.

But obviously the disciples didn't get it the last time, because here they are, trying to prevent children from coming to see Jesus. And so Jesus tries teaching them again, hoping that this time they will finally understand.

God loves children, and they have a special place in his heart. God does *not* see childhood as something negative, or think that children are annoying. Imagination and curiosity and silliness and questions and a sense of awe and wonder is something to be *encouraged* in our children – especially here in the church – and *not* something that needs to be suppressed or silenced or fixed. God loves and values kids for who they are. Not as objects of amusement, not in some condescending manner, not to

be treated with 'kids gloves,' not as future adults, not because of their potential, but as human beings to be taken seriously here and now. Instead of telling children to grow up and be more adult-like, in today's reading Jesus tells us adults that we should be more like children. It's surprising, but as our confirmation students told me this past week, "God never does what you expect."

Since God loves children, part of our calling as a church is to love and care for children too. You probably don't need me to tell you about times when churches have failed in this calling, or to shine a spotlight on the ways churches have harmed or exploited children. The church needs to be a safe place for children to come and experience Jesus, and it's utterly shameful that instead the church has sometimes pushed children away from Jesus in lasting and harmful ways. At the very *least*, welcoming children – as Jesus commands – means keeping them safe, and providing a safe place for children to grow and thrive and learn.

This year our congregation took some important steps to help make our church a safe place for children. After months of hard work by some of our members, this summer our church council approved a new Children and Youth Protection Policy. It requires all church employees and volunteers who work with children to have extensive background checks and training about preventing, seeing, and reporting abuse. It guides classroom rules and events that happen away from church with our young people. If you're in the middle of the background checks and the training, I know it's work, but keep going. It's worth it, because it'll help to keep our children safe, and make sure our church continues to love and care for our young people.

These words Jesus spoke this morning encourage us to recognize that children are people of faith just as much as adults. A child's faith is just as important and valuable and *real* as an adult's faith. Our children are disciples and followers of Jesus *now*. Not when they're older. They don't have a junior

membership in God's kingdom or in the church, they're a part of our community of faith *now*, with their own gifts and skills to offer.

It's *good* for us to have children leading in worship, glorifying God and teaching us. It's *good* to have children in our pews who are loud and antsy, who wander up to the baptismal font to peer into the water with curiosity and wonder, who stand on their seat so they can see. Children aren't the future of our church, they *are* the church, here and now.

Could you sense how powerful it was recently when Aedan Brophy served as an usher for the first time? Did you recognize how amazing it was a few weeks ago when Owen Folk helped to lead worship, and again today as Andrué Herold serves as an acolyte? Did you realize that it was a holy moment when Eva DeMonte held out the cup and said, "The blood of Christ shed for you"? Were you paying attention when Ayden Herold jumped in to serve as lector without any warning or preparation recently? These are things to celebrate, for we're seeing the kingdom of God in our midst.

In fact, Jesus says that children have something to teach adults about faith.

And I think that's because nobody *trusts* quite like a child.

From the very beginning of their lives, children depend on parents for everything - for the roof over their heads, their next meal, for clothes and diapers, for safety and security, for care and love. A child's whole existence depends on their parents, and so they learn to trust that someone will provide for them and take care of them. Children have an innocence and faith about them, before the world teaches them to worry and fret, before they've learned hate or prejudice or suspicion, before they've been educated about the things that divide and separate us from one another, they have an incredible capacity to simply *trust*.

And that's what faith is. It's *trusting* that through Jesus, we are forgiven and loved. It's *trusting* that God cares for us and will continue to provide for us and watch over us. Adults have a way of making faith so complicated – we're tempted to make it about us, we're conditioned to think forgiveness and salvation is something we earn, but we can't, we can only receive it in faith, trusting in God. It's hard for adults to trust. But it's easy for children. And so this morning Jesus says that if you want to understand the kingdom of God, if you want to understand faith, if you want to understand *trust*, then look to our children.

This week I was reminded of how much our children have to teach us when I saw a video of President Obama speaking at the United Nation's Leaders' Summit on Refugees. Most of you probably remember the image we saw on the news last month of a five year old Syrian boy named Omran Daqneesh. On August 17th his home was bombed by an airstrike, and this poor little five year oldboy was pulled out of the rubble and sat shocked in the back of an ambulance, his head bloody, his body covered in dirt and ash. It was a heartbreaking photograph, and unfortunately Omran's story is similar to millions of others.

As President Obama spoke to the UN this past week, he shared a letter he received from a six year old boy named Alex who lives in New York. It turned out that Alex had seen the photograph of Omran too, and he decided that something had to be done. He wrote the president to tell him that he wanted Omran to come and live with him and his family. "Since he won't bring toys," Alex wrote, "I will share my bike and I will teach him how to ride it. I will teach him addition and subtraction. My little sister will be collecting butterflies and fire flies for him. We can all play together. We will give him a family and he will be our brother." Six years old.

May we all have such a child-like faith. Amen.