

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

Celebrating “Back to School” (2021-22)

Jesus Loves Kids...and Those Who Love Them

(Matthew 18:1-6; 19:13-15)

Introduction: The least of these...

In every society, you will find vulnerable people groups. And it would be easy to list groups that are commonly vulnerable.

The disabled, the poor, religious and ethnic minorities, widows and orphans are, sadly, just about universally vulnerable.

If these people aren't given help, there is a great risk that they will be taken advantage of. And how a society deals with, how it treats, these vulnerable people speaks volumes about that society.

That's the way it is today, and that's the way it has always been.

Today, as we celebrate kids and those who teach them on this “Back to School Celebration” Sunday, our particular interest is the treatment of children.

This past week, I conducted a brief internet survey of the treatment of children in ancient times. I uncovered some expected ugliness and some unexpected treasure.

For instance, I found a poem from ancient Sumeria (about 4,000 years ago) that encouraged parents to adopt children with

disabilities. The poem said that the gods had ordained a place in society for all, including the infirm.¹

And the earliest Babylonian culture encouraged adoption of orphans.²

There were plenty of examples like these, where kids were cared for in times past. But, of course, all was not sweetness and light for ancient children.

I read tales of atrocities against children,³ children given over to slavery,⁴ and of children being killed or deported during war.

As the most defenseless members of society, children were vulnerable to being taken advantage of by others. The same is happening in lots of places today, as it has throughout history.

And it has never been because children did or didn't do this or that. The treatment they have received has always been dependent on the character of the people who deal with them.

In thinking about this Sunday, one where we're aiming to celebrate kids and those who teach them, I decided that about the best thing I could do would be to explore a couple of scenes where Jesus talked about children.

So, that's what we'll do.

¹ Located in what is now Iraq between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. The Sumerian Empire dates from 4500-1900 BC.

² The ancient Babylonian code of law, The Code of Hammurabi (laws 18, 5-191) shows that formal adoptions came with a strict set of rules so the child could be fully integrated into the new family.

³ Including policies that allowed parents would drop their children off at a local dump, where they would be picked up - or not - by those needing slaves.

⁴ In the Ancient Near East, not every child slave was chattel. In cases of debt-slavery, a child could serve in another household to pay off a family debt and then return to their own family.

We're going to listen to Jesus tell us about the value and worth of children. And that will inform us about kids, about Jesus, and even something about life with Jesus.

Both of these incidents with Jesus and kids occurred near the end of His life.⁵

The first is recorded in Matthew, chapter 18.⁶ I think it's best to place this scene in Capernaum, Jesus' home base during the three years of His active ministry.

The scene opens with Jesus sitting by Himself, minding His own business, when His disciples approached Him with a question.

Jesus - "Kids are GREAT" (Matthew 18:1-6)

A Question About Greatness (v. 1)

[1] At that time the disciples came to Jesus and said, "Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"

That's a great question. But to be clear, the disciples weren't asking, "*How do we get to heaven?*" or "*How do I get eternal life?*"

They are asking about how to achieve greatness in the realm over which God reigns, here and now.

Their question is very similar to you or me asking, today, "*As a Christian, how do I best live under the reign and rule of King Jesus?*"

Now, we aren't surprised that they asked this question. There are other places in the Gospels where the disciples asked, essentially, the same question.

⁵ The timing prompts me to wonder if Matthew wanted to emphasize how important children were to Jesus by including these stories near the climax of His crucifixion and resurrection.

⁶ It's given right after a dispute about Jesus paying a temple tax in Capernaum. Matthew 17:24-27.

This issue of greatness seemed to be often at the forefront of their minds.

And I can only imagine that each one of the disciples who approached Jesus was hoping that the way he was doing things put him in first place in the race for kingdom greatness.

I find it striking that Jesus never scolded these guys for desiring kingdom greatness. He doesn't here and He doesn't elsewhere.

There was nothing wrong with their desire to be great in God's kingdom. But every time they asked, He directed them away from what they assumed about greatness into a whole different direction.

Here, in response to their great greatness question, Jesus called a child front and center.

Kids Point the Way to Greatness (vv. 2-4)

Making a kid the center of attention (v. 2)

[2] And He called a child to Himself and set him among them...

I'd love to know how old this kid is who is now standing in the middle of the circle of Jesus' disciples.

But we don't know how old he was because the term Matthew used in telling the story was an elastic word. The Greek word *paidion* can refer to a toddler all the way up to what we might think of as an elementary-aged kid.

Obviously, this kid was old enough to respond to Jesus' call and old enough to walk to Jesus. Beyond that, we don't know anything about him.

I'd also love to know what was going through the minds of the disciples when they heard Jesus call to a kid, "*Come to Me.*"

See, by this time, they have been with Jesus for most of three years.

And during that time, there had been numerous “Ah ha” moments with Jesus, and quite a few, “Uh oh” moments, too, when what Jesus did or said was very different from what they thought He was going to do or say.

I think when He called the child up, they got nervous. *“Here we go again. This is not going to be the kind of answer we were expecting.”*

If that was what they were thinking, they were spot on.

Become like kids (vv. 3-4)

[3] and said, “Truly I say to you, unless you change and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. [4] So whoever will humble himself like this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

Again, Jesus wasn’t explaining how to be eternally saved. He was answering His disciples’ question about how to be great, how to excel, in living under the rule and reign of God NOW.

His answer? Become like a child. Live humbly, like this kid. *“This kid is your role model for greatness in the kingdom of heaven.”*

What Jesus was saying to His disciples then, He is saying to us, now. Imitate kids.

No. Not in every way. And Jesus wasn’t idealizing children. Ancient kids threw tantrums, too. They went through the terrible 2’s, 3’s, and 4’s.

But in the most important way. Imitate children’s humility. This call to humility is an invitation to us to look in the mirror and ask:

Have I lost that sense of childlike awe and wonder before God?
 Have I become too concerned about how I am perceived? Kids aren’t.
 Have I become defensive when I’m not respected and taken seriously?
 Kids aren’t.
 Have I become pretentious? Kids aren’t.

When it comes to living under the rule and reign of God, kids point the way forward.

They accept that others are more powerful than they are. They own that they are dependent on others for, well, everything.

Jesus placed this kid on a faith pedestal. Want to be great? Imitate him.

Exult in the greatness of a God who is Almighty AND good. Revel in your dependence on God. Change whatever habits and mindsets and routines you need to so that you will be sensitized to the enormity of your need for what only God can provide.

Jesus thought so highly of kids that he held them up as models for spirituality. And then He spoke to how we who aren’t children are to treat those who are.

How to Treat a Kid (vv. 5-6)

Positively... (v. 5)

[5] And whoever receives one such child in My name, receives Me”

Try this.

Next time a child - of whatever age - enters a room where you are, stand, out of respect. Open your arms wide. Smile big. Recognize that greatness is before you. Welcome him or her as if it was Jesus Himself.

Give that child the honor that is due a paragon of spirituality. Accept them for who they are, study them and learn what you can from them while you are with them.

But for heaven’s sake - and for your own sake - make sure that you don’t ever do harm to a kid.

Negatively... (v. 6)

[6] but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it is better for him that a heavy millstone be hung around his neck, and that he be drowned in the depths of the sea."

Nobody wants to be tossed into the sea with a heavy stone tied around their neck. But Jesus says what will come our way will be worse if we cause a kid to stumble into sin, or to do harm to a child.

Jesus wants children to be treated well. To be loved and protected. At home. At school. At church. His heart is turned toward the vulnerable child because that little child models what it looks like to be great in the kingdom of heaven. And that's what Jesus thinks about kids.

Now, we turn to a second scene, found in the very next chapter of Matthew's gospel.

Time has passed and Jesus is not in the village of Capernaum anymore. He is now in Judea, closer to Jerusalem and closer to the Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday that will kick off the final week of His life.

During this season, He was followed by great crowds of people. (Matthew 19:2) There may have been lots of people present at this scene we're about to see, including, of course, His twelve apostles. This scene involves children, and it starts off happily.

Jesus - "I LOVE Kids" (Matthew 19:13-15; also, Mark 10, Luke 18)

A Tense Scene of Jesus with Kids (v. 13)

Some kids are brought to Jesus (v. 13a)

[13a] Then some children⁷ were brought to Him so that He would lay His hands on them and pray...

⁷ In the parallel passage in Luke, we find the Greek word "brephos", which usually refers to infants/babies, but can refer to small children.

Again, we don't know how old these children were. They could easily have ranged in age from two to twelve.⁸

They have been brought to Jesus by parents or grandparents or friends, or neighbors. And they have been brought for a purpose.

They want Jesus to bless these children. And blessing children was a time-honored tradition among the Jews.

One great example is the time when Grandfather Jacob blessed the sons of his own son, Joseph, Ephraim and Manasseh, by laying his hands on their heads and offering words of blessings. (Genesis 48) And there are lots of other biblical examples of adults blessing kids.

That's what's happening here. The adults wanted Jesus to place His hands on them, bless them, pray for them.

For some reason, the people who brought the kids suspected that this very important Man, this renowned rabbi, would take the time to stop what He was doing to spend time with kids. They expected that Jesus would pray for these kids.

And they were right - which shows that that they had figured out something about Jesus that His closest followers still had not.

What follows is cringeworthy.

The disciples are not amused (v. 13b)

[13b]...and the disciples rebuked them.

The disciples thought that those who had brought kids to Jesus had made a terrible mistake. They thought bringing kids to Jesus was inappropriate, that it was a bad idea.

Of course, it was just fine for Him to spend time with them, and with other adults. But not with kids.

⁸ Again, Matthew used the Greek word "paidion".

Well, besides showing their own exaggerated sense of self-importance, their rebuke shows that they still didn't "get" Jesus.

Notice that the disciples didn't bother addressing the kids. They only spoke to those who had brought them.

They rudely shooed them away. *"Get those kids out of here. What were you thinking? Jesus doesn't have time for children. He's a busy Man."*

Try to put ourselves in the shoes of the adults who brought the kids. Just imagine how bad they must have felt. And if there were kids there who were old enough to understand what was going on, what a soul-scarring experience.

But then, with the disciples' rebuke hanging in the air, while these children have been paused as they were approaching Jesus, Jesus spoke. To the disciples.⁹

Jesus Affirms Kids' Worth (v. 14)

The kids belong with Jesus (v. 14a)

[14a] But Jesus said, "Leave the children alone, and do not forbid them to come to Me..."

First, the positive, then the reversed, the negative. Taken together, it is an emphatic, *"By all means, whatever you do, don't stop these kids from coming to Me! Open the path. Let 'em come on!"*

This is the always welcoming Jesus, welcoming children.

He wants everyone to come to Him. No exceptions. Anybody. Everybody. Anytime. You and everyone you know.

Look through the Gospels and you'll see that He welcomed every sort of person who came to Him.

He welcomed a religious person like Nicodemus and a tax collector like Matthew, a zealot, a fisherman, a Roman centurion, lepers, former demoniacs, Jews and non-Jews, men and women, and yes, EVEN CHILDREN.

Jesus is every bit as welcoming today as He was two thousand years ago.

He welcomed me when I was a God-denying teenager, and He welcomes any kind of anyone else today who comes to Him.

Everyone is a somebody to Jesus. No one is a nobody.

Take Him at His word that He gave His life for you. Believe in Him and He will give you the priceless gift of eternal life, at no cost to you, because He paid it all.

There is nothing and nobody standing in the way of you coming to Jesus today.

But the disciples were standing in the way of children coming to Jesus on that day. And He wouldn't stand for it. He told them to let the kids alone, let them come to Him.

The kingdom belongs to those like kids (v. 14b)

[14b] But Jesus said, "...for the kingdom of heaven¹⁰ belongs to such as these."

So, picture this group of kids standing in front of Jesus. They've just been turned away by His disciples.

But Jesus gave them kingdom bragging rights. He said that it is people like them who will possess, to whom will belong, the kingdom of heaven.

Think about that...

¹⁰ Mark and Luke refer to "kingdom of God", not "of heaven".

⁹ Mark adds that Jesus was indignant at the disciples' rebuke.

God's kingdom belongs to people - people like children - who don't possess any particular skills or talents and who are not very resourceful. These small, young, weak kids are the epitome of kingdom of heaven people.

Why? Because as we saw earlier, they aren't full of themselves. They are humble. They are dependent on others for food, clothing, shelter, safety, and for every other need - and they know it.

These children are perfect pictures of something central to kingdom possessors. They trust.

That's why Jesus is crazy about kids. That's why He called out His grown-up disciples for hindering the children from coming to Him. That's why He rebuked them for rebuking those who brought kids to Him.

That's why He lavished them with love.

Jesus Blesses Kids (v. 15)

After the disciples' rebuke and the rebuke of the disciples, Matthew tells us that Jesus did what had been asked of Him, that He would "**lay His hands on**" the children.

But Luke (18:15) says that He had been asked to "**touch**" them, and that's a bit warmer. Mark (10:16) adds that Jesus took the children in His arms.

So, don't picture a light touch on the top of the head, and certainly don't imagine anything cold.

This was a strong, grown Man reaching out and grabbing an armful of kids and gently, enthusiastically, warmly wrapping His arms around them.

(I wonder if, as often happens when men hug children, the result was a wrestling match and/or a tickle-fest, but I digress...)

Eventually, the hug was over. Jesus sent the kids back to those who had brought them, and, **[15] After laying His hands on them, He departed from there** - His rebuked disciples sheepishly following.

Conclusion:

This morning, we're honoring and praying for kids who are going back to school and the teachers and other school personnel who serve these kids.

What I've wanted to do by looking at these two Gospel stories is to highlight how Jesus valued and loved kids.

So, we love kids, too. And we want to love, honor, and pray for them and the people who love them, day in and day out, all the school year long.