

Sermon for February 17, 2019

“Jesus Spent Too Much Time With Children”

Matthew 18:1-5, Mark 10:13-16

Staunton Church of the Brethren

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Being a new Grampa sure is fun. Watching Anita Claire begin to stretch out and grow, with all her many facial expressions, and the way she calms you when you hold her – most of the time. Most of us value children today, but it hasn't always been that way. I had a seminary friend who would say he was going to have as many children as possible so that at least one of them was still around to take care of him when he got old. He said that's the way they do it in Africa. It seems funny until you think about. Survival rates of newborns wasn't always what it is today. It's a tragedy to us when a newborn doesn't make it, but throughout history it wasn't always that way. It was a tragedy to the mother and father, but not always surprising to the larger community. And so children didn't have as much value as we see in them today.

In 1st century Palestine, they were special to their parents, but children were also little more than little helpers. There were lots more chores in those days and children had to grow up fast and become little adults in helping around the house and caring for animals and working in the fields. More children meant more hands to help, but it was also more mouths to feed. Now if you were a Son, that changed things a little bit. The male heir was more special, though he still needed to earn his keep. We've all heard stories of how some children would be sold or rented out in order to pay for the necessities, or just sent off to live with relatives because they weren't affordable. And children were to obey their parents and not bother other adults. Don't speak unless you're spoken to; and of course they could be seen but not heard.

Some of this carries over to our day. We have varieties of attitudes about children. How often have we heard people talk about their taxes by saying “I don't want to pay taxes for schools, or childcare credits, or school lunches. I don't have children; or I don't have children in school anymore.” So we don't want an educated society? We want children to be second class,

hungry? There a lot of ways to show that children are still not respected the way that Jesus respected them. Jesus had a bad habit, though, of putting children first.

Just look at today's lessons. In Matthew the disciples are jockeying for position when they ask Jesus "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" Maybe its Peter or James or John. Maybe even John the Baptist who had already died. Or he could have said something about the one who is most faithful over their lifetime. I can't imagine any of them expected him to do and say what happened next. He called a child to his side and said, "unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." Become like a child? Does he mean child-like? Then he explains a little bit: "Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." Humble. "And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me." He goes on then to warn them about putting any stumbling blocks in their way; and do not despise one of these little ones.

In the Mark passage, people were bringing children to him, but the disciples ran interference, got in the way, and in fact, spoke sternly to them to stay back – a more typical cultural response - but Jesus became indignant. Indignant can mean angry, disturbed, pained and upset. Jesus got emotional over children. "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs." And he touched them, he took them in his arms, he laid hands on them, and he blessed them.

Any belittling of children prompted an instant emotional response from Jesus. He would have rejoiced had he known of Hans Christian Andersen's story "The Emperor's New Clothes." If you remember the story, the emperor gets swindled by weavers who claim to have the most gorgeous new clothes ever and convince the emperor of it, and yet they are non-existent. It's a child who eventually blurts out "But he hasn't got anything on." The honesty of a child, another thing Jesus called for. If you wanted to make Jesus angry, then, hinder or hamper or mock a child. I wonder if any of his attitude had to do with the stories from his own birth and early years, when Herod massacred all those children in Bethlehem trying to get to the new king of the Jews. The Prince of Peace came into the world amidst the cries of the innocent.

As I mentioned before, children didn't always survive their early years. In some ways they were a symbol of death because they were so fragile. Maybe that's also why Jesus valued them so highly. To care for a child was to look death in the eye. Jesus did that for everyone; he touched fragile people, dead people, the "walking dead" people, whether children or adults. And he treated children as if their relationship with God was just as important as any adult relationship. That certainly flew in the face of the Pharisees. I think some of his stories were geared toward the children hoping the adults would get it. You know, like our children's times here in worship.

Children were given new value. Jesus cared, and he showed it. Darrin Vick says, Jesus "treated people like children and children like people." I remember when our boys were small, like Anita Claire is now, we'd watch them in their crib after a day of crying and slobbering and pooping and eating and spitting up, and when you would have thought we'd been resting, we were in there making sure they were still breathing.

That's the way it is for God with us. Every day. God's relishes our presence. Not matter how much trouble we have been, or how much distress we have caused. God delights in us because we are God's children. So if you aspire to be great, make yourself humble and trusting and honest and caring. Like Mary sang when Jesus was still in the womb, "my soul magnifies the Lord. He has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate."

Another side to this is that our children can keep us humble. When I came home from work it wasn't "how was your day, Daddy?" It didn't matter what I had been doing, great or small. It was "come play with me, Daddy." A hospital called Evelina London Children's Hospital has a giant atrium that needs periodic window cleaning. But the contract with the window cleaning company has a special note: the window cleaners are required to dress up as superheroes. "The children in bed – many with grave illnesses – delight in seeing Superman and Spiderman dangling just inches away from them, on the outside of the glass."

Jesus shows us that we have a responsibility to our children. Likewise when we grow up, we have a special calling to remain humble and honest. I want to end with a song.....