**March 12th, 2023 Service**

**Scripture:**

Matthew 19:13-15

13Then little children were brought to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and pray, but the disciples rebuked them. 14Jesus said, “Leave the little children alone, and don’t try to keep them from coming to me, because the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.” 15After placing his hands on them, he went on from there.

**Meditating on the Scriptures**

**Message:** “The little children”

Just last week, I was at my brother’s house for a meal with the rest of our family, and my niece, who is just three years old, was very disappointed to hear that we had not gathered for a night of singing worship songs. She can often be heard singing “Here I am to worship” which is a particular favourite of hers, and was quite upset that the rest of us didn’t have the same plans for the night that she did.

I’ve often found, contrary to what we often believe, that children are at least as capable as we are of having deep faith. I believe it is a gift that God gives children. A reminder to those of us who are older and more mature that we can’t look down on those who are younger, or less experienced in the faith than we are. It’s a reminder to us as well that ultimately, our faith is a gift from God. We can’t claim full ownership for it (although we might like to), and perhaps that’s where the beauty of childlike humility lies.

We explored a few weeks ago about how Jesus reminds his disciples that the Kingdom of heaven is open to those who humble themselves, and take the position of a child. Because Jesus’ kingdom doesn’t work like most kingdoms. It’s not about gaining power, but using what power we have to serve others. It isn’t about storing up treasures for ourselves, it’s about caring for others with whatever we have been given. It isn’t about lording our position over those we have authority over, it’s about humbling ourselves to work for the benefit of others.

And children are a wonderful picture of this for us, because they are completely at the mercy of others. Their humility doesn’t lie in a falsely low sense of self worth, but rather it lies in the reality that they are, for the most part, powerless. They can ask, and beg, and cry, but ultimately the decision isn’t up to them. In a world that is so caught up in our own right to do whatever we want, Jesus reminds us that the kingdom of heaven will be filled with those who listen to the loving words of their heavenly father.

When I was quite young, about two or three years old, my family lived on the west coast of BC in a small First Nations reserve called *Bella Bella*. We lived underneath the hospital, which was right on the shoreline of the Pacific Ocean, which is known for it’s cold temperatures, and rougher conditions than our own Atlantic.

My father has always loved to be out on the water, and would invite my siblings and me out on canoe trips, even when the weather wasn’t exactly calm. And while my two older brothers were sensible enough to prefer the warm and safe conditions of our home over the cold and choppy seas outside, I was quite game to join. Now, most parents wouldn’t take their three-year-old out onto rough waters in a small canoe, with the nose of the canoe bouncing several feet up in the air, but my father was not most parents.

He had made a small paddle that I could hold at the front of our seventeen-foot Coleman canoe, while he did the heavy paddling at the back. I remember asking him years later whether he was worried about me, but his response was simple. He said that he wasn’t worried because he could trust that when he spoke, I would listen. And because I listened to him, I was safe, and had some wonderful adventures that few others did at that age.

Now, all these years later, I listen a little less when we go out, because I’d like to think I can make my own decisions. But there was a beauty and a security to trusting that dad had my best interests at heart, and that I could trust him completely.

I was reminded of that, because I think that is part of what Jesus is reminding his disciples of: the humility to listen. The humility to recognise that God knows better than we do, and that it is God that will ultimately make the decisions in the end. There is a wonderful sense of security in that. The security that we have our part to play, but that it is God who has the final word.

When we forget that, we forget who God really is. And we begin to lift ourselves up instead of lifting God up. We take ourselves a little too seriously, and think more about what we want out of God than what he is asking of us.

The disciples are so caught up in what they think Jesus should be doing, that they miss what he actually *is* doing. The little children are running to him, and he has open arms that are waiting to bless them, and love them. The disciples were so focussed on what they wanted that they didn’t ask Jesus what he wanted. They probably thought that they were doing Jesus a favour, getting rid of some pesky kids who wanted to bother him while he had real work to be doing. But that isn’t how Jesus saw it.

And that is an important thing for us to remember. Not just in the abstract sense. But in a practical, everyday kind of way. It’s part of why you may have noticed some changes to the sanctuary in the last few weeks. We have brought the kids to the front, and given them ways to join us in worship that may be different from ours, but is no less pleasing to God. As they take care of their babies, or draw pictures, or create stories, or join in singing, or bring their offerings of their favourite toys to the front- they are worshipping with us.

And with them here at the front, it helps them to see and to be a part of what we are doing as well. They can see, and join in a way that they love. Jesus interacted differently with the children that came to him than the adults. He prayed for them and blessed them, he wasn’t as concerned about them learning the parables, or talking quite so much- he knew that would come in time. But he wanted them to know that he had time for them, and that he was praying for the very best for them. And they loved him.

The children are trying to come to Jesus because he is the kind of person that they are drawn to. He made time for them. He must have smiled and laughed with them. He likely played with them, and found joy in their imaginations and honesty. I’ll bet that some of the best questions Jesus was asked were from children. I know that’s been my experience.

As adults, we often become so worried that we should already know the answer, and we’re afraid to look like we don’t know what we’re doing, and so we don’t ask. But the irony is, that because we don’t ask, we end up not knowing! I worked at Camp Seggie for many years, and still speak there in the summers, and many of the most meaningful questions I have ever been asked have been from children. When we try to dumb things down, or expect nothing from children we rob them, and ourselves of the wonderful faith that they possess. It’s okay to admit that we don’t always have the answers.

One of the truly beautiful things about our practice as Presbyterians, along with many other denominations, is that we are able to recognise and include the faith of children right from the first beatings of their heart. As a congregation, we baptise children to show that we recognise that they are a part of the church, which means that they are a part of the body and family of Jesus himself. We bring our children to God from their earliest moments, and claim his blessings, while recognising both our faith and theirs.

This was recognised right from the beginning of the church, when Peter spoke to the crowds at Pentecost and said,

““Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. 39 For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.” – Acts 2:38-39

It is no small thing to refuse to allow children to be a part of the church through baptism. Every time that people try to separate, or turn children away from Jesus, or look down on their faith, Jesus has very strong words for them. Jesus doesn’t just say that children can be a part of the Kingdom of Heaven, he says that unless we become more like children, we won’t be. Children are not an optional extra, they are vital to Jesus, which means that they are vital to us as well.

A little later in Matthew’s Gospel, we read about another interaction between Jesus and children. Jesus is healing people and doing wonderful things in the temple, and Matthew writes,

“But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the wonderful things that he did, and the children crying out in the temple, “Hosanna to the Son of David!” they were indignant, 16 and they said to him, “Do you hear what these are saying?” And Jesus said to them, “Yes; have you never read,

“‘Out of the mouth of infants and nursing babiesyou have prepared praise’?””

– Matthew 21:15-16

The children know who Jesus is, but the religious PhD’s miss it entirely. Over and over and over, Jesus points out not just that children *can* be a part of his kingdom, but that they are, in many ways, closer to it than we who are older are. It’s why we also welcome children to join with us in the Lord’s supper. When we celebrate “communion” we don’t do that without children. It is a family meal, and the whole family is invited. Jesus invites all who trust in him to come and join, and so we do too. Jesus tells us to eat and drink in remembrance of him, and we want our children to hear and to remember. How could we turn away children when Jesus welcomed them?

It is not enough to avoid being unwelcoming to children, we must make sure that what we do includes and welcomes them as valuable and faithful members of the church. This starts out in the world, by sharing our faith, and inviting questions and conversations from our children, grandchildren, nieces, nephews, and friends. We need not force or coerce anyone, but we also should not hide our faith, or feel the need to pretend it is not at the center of our lives.

Within the church, we must also make sure that the ideas, needs, and preferences of all ages are listened to and considered. A recent study showed that the single most important indicator of whether younger people will stay in church is that they have a connection and friendship with at least one member of the church who is a generation or more older than them. I know just how important that is. I was very blessed to grow up in a church where there are still at least a dozen people who are older than me who I count as close friends and mentors.

It’s vital that we build those relationships. When people are not listened to, or included, they know that they are not valued. And if they are not valued, they find another place to become involved. It is important that we consider the different, and often subtle ways that we might be turning away, or rebuke children, because it matters deeply to Jesus.

While this is a challenging reminder to us, it is also a great comfort and joy. When we humble ourselves and accept God’s way instead of our own, we recognise that we are God’s children. And that means that we can come to Jesus with the same beautiful confidence and joy that the children in our reading did, and be sure that Jesus won’t let anyone or anything get in the way.

That’s why Jesus is just as concerned that we welcome children to come near to him today as he was then. He says “Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them! Because the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.”

Thanks be to God!

Let’s pray.