

I began my calling to ministry as a director of children's ministry – way back in 1982. I went to seminary (where I met Hallack) in order to be ordained as a pastor to children and their families – a rarity in those days (maybe still?) And a key reason is that I believed then and still believe today, is that we often miss the gifts that children bring to the church. We know it's good to have children in our faith communities yet we often tell them what they need to be like in order to be accepted. We tell them how to behave in order to belong. I'm speaking in broad generalities for I have been part of churches that welcomed children and I delight in seeing this happening at Maplewood. This message is the culmination of over 40 years of seeing how we as a culture and also a faith community, view children and how I've grown in my appreciation of children myself.

Here is the passage for today: Mark 10: 13-16

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

This is the word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Please pray with me:

Loving Savior, you took the little ones into your arms and blessed them. You admonished your disciples when they tried to stop them from coming. Open our minds and hearts today as to how we can follow

your lead to both welcome, honor and protect the children you bring to us. And guide us to how we might be like them.

We trust in Your Spirit's guidance this day, Amen.

Children are "political orphans," that is, they have no political power and so they are at the whims of the adults who do. This is not a new phenomenon and it was even more true in the time of Jesus. In that day, children were seen as a destructive waste of time. A rabbi of the time wrote that "chattering with children" was as dangerous for the learned man as sleeping in and drinking during lunch or spending time with common people. Jesus counteracts that message by elevating children, by becoming angry when the disciples try to send them away.

In today's passage, Jesus demonstrated his love for children and must have startled his disciples in the process. This story is in all three of the synoptic gospels followed by the story of the rich ruler who goes away sad because he can't give up his possessions in order to follow Jesus. Quite the contrast from the little children who come to him willingly, without trying to prove their worth. In all of these gospels, the word for how Jesus was feeling is translated indignant but the same word is translated angry in other passages. It is how the 10 disciples felt when they heard James and John were trying to get special treatment from Jesus. It is how the chief priests and the scribes felt when they heard the children crying out "hosanna to the son of David" and it is how the disciples felt when Jesus was anointed with a very costly ointment. All of these stories are about the deep feelings when something we hold to be true is challenged. In all these instances the Greek word *eganaktesen* (ah-gan-ak-tey-sen) is often translated angry but in my translation all the gospels translate it in this passage as indignant. Which sounds softer to me...I think Jesus was angry. In fact, in Mark 9 he says that if any of us put a stumbling block before one of these little

ones that believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea. That sounds angry to me! And notice that he doesn't say children who need to be taught to believe in me...he says "that believe in me". Jesus is telling us that children have what we need – a simple faith in him.

This has been my experience with children over the years and has only deepened over time. I first came to appreciate the gifts that children bring – their openness, honesty, curiosity, acceptance, playfulness, wonder...I could go on and I'm sure you could add more. I believe that we're naturally born with these gifts and the world knocks them out of us. I **don't** believe that children's minds are a "blank slate" at birth and all knowledge comes to them through experience. This was proposed by John Locke in the 1600's and influenced much thought about children in the years to come! In our Old Testament reading for today, young Samuel heard the voice of God calling, even when Eli couldn't! Children can and do experience God in unfiltered ways. My experience is that even newborn infants have an understanding that is deep and wordless, spiritual.

Working with babies at Children's, I came to recognize a certain look in the eyes of babies that didn't have long to live. With some of them, I knew they had a terminal diagnosis and sometimes I would see it in a baby that looked to have a good chance of surviving their illness. And when they did die, I would remember that look that I'd seen in their eyes. I mentioned this to a neonatal intensive care nurse at Swedish and she exclaimed, "I've seen it too! It's almost like the look of a baby that has finished nursing – there is a sense of fulfillment." As if the baby knew from the beginning that their life would be short. Perhaps you've seen the deep wisdom of a baby when you look searchingly into their eyes? They respond to that wordless connection – they know when you are totally present to them and are connecting spirit to spirit.

This is one of the ways that my view of little children has expanded. This has been my signature sermon over the years and I have preached it in a number of settings. Hallack asked me if I would prepare it for Lent and so I've been looking at the past sermons and realized that it has evolved, as have I, over the past 40 years! Thank God, right?! It used to be titled, "will our children have faith?" taken from a book of the same title written by John Westerhoff in 1976. The last time I preached it was 10 years ago and I morphed it to "do our children have faith?" And today I felt it more fitting to title it "like a little child." Suffice to say that my view of children in the church has grown and yet some things I still feel as strongly as I did in the 80's when I first read Westerhoff's book.

What I appreciated about his take on children in the church was his critique on Christian education and the ways that our programs were failing to pass on the faith. Westerhoff's evaluation was that it was broken because it was attempting to do what a whole ecology of institutions had worked together to accomplish. In the early 20th century, communities were formed around a Protestant culture, the family was essentially stable with extended family around, schools were parochial which taught moral and religious lessons, church was the center of community life and most socialization happened there. As these institutions diversified and communities became more porous and education more secular, families became more mobile and smaller...passing on a particular Christian lifestyle became much more difficult.

Let me stop right here and say that I am not advocating that we try to go back to the good ole days and replicate these institutions from a misguided sense of nostalgia. The good ole days weren't good for a lot of people and I don't think homogeneity is how God intends for us to live. We are a beautiful tapestry of diverse cultures and people groups

that can learn and grow together without a need for one group to dominate or rule over another. Little children are a beautiful example of accepting others, that is, until they learn from the adults around them to discriminate.

What Westerhoff opened my eyes to, was how much we rely on education and teaching to pass on faith. A lot of churches at the time were really focusing on having professional education programs. I majored in Christian education and have served in many churches where the emphasis was placed on **educating** better so that children would have all the **knowledge** they needed as they went into the world. I even served at a large Presbyterian church that sent out a three-year plan for covering all the major stories of the Bible (age appropriately) that children would cycle through. It was intense! And it assumed that it was our job to download all this material to the children of our church. And that this download would somehow pass on our faith. As we look at the steady decline of many Christian churches, we know that what we taught did not turn out the way we hoped it would.

Even back in college and in those early years of ministry, I knew that Christian education was not enough. I realized that we were missing out on an important aspect of the children in our faith communities. I became convinced that we need children in our midst as much as they need a faith community in which they can interact, be loved, and realize their gifts. I went to seminary to try and communicate this vision. I have tried to say that we need a ministry of the child (not to the child). Over the years, I have tried to hang onto this calling and this vision and share it, even when most of the churches I was called to serve wanted children to be seen and not heard. Taught but not engaged. Sent away from worship rather than invited into it.

The book I read in college that opened my eyes to this was called *The Ministry of the Child* and the author talked about his experiences with children in worship. He was so convinced that children can be led by the Holy Spirit that he encouraged parents to let even little ones wander during worship. He tells a beautiful story of a two-year-old wandering up to sit beside a woman who had just been diagnosed with terminal cancer. He saw (from his view in the pulpit) how this little child brought a comfort to her that no one else had been able to. In my experience, in some churches, even the slightest noise from children caused discomfort. At one church a toddler was making little booping noises with his mom and in a quiet moment, a member of the church clapped three times, pointed at the mom and child and then pointed at the door. These are two extremes and I'm glad to say that many churches fall more into the welcoming one than the rejecting one!

I feel my need to advocate for children even more than I did in the 80's. Today we see how the decisions of adults impact their lives yet they have no political power. In our country, youth who can't vote often lead the way in fighting climate change and sensible gun laws. Issues that impact them today and even more in the future yet their voices are drowned out as the fight over power is fought with fear mongering. Too many evangelicals are more concerned with maintaining power over than working together to create a more just and equitable world. This is to our shame and one of the reasons many young people have no interest in organized religion. We have all been painted with this broad brush of judgmental hypocrisy.

While we can't change what happens in other congregations, we can (and do) have a say in our corner of the world. We can be a faith community that welcomes the children like Jesus did. We can delight in their gifts, listen to them deeply, invite their perspective and value their presence. We can learn from them and play like them as a way of

imagining a better world for them. We can vote for them in ways that say we know you are inheriting a world that has many problems but we are doing what we can to help you with it. We can speak out for them as Jesus did.

While preparing this sermon, I remembered a book called “Too Small to Ignore” written by Dr. Wess Stafford. Wess is the President Emeritus of Compassion International and wrote his book in 2007 where he shares about his experiences growing up in a village in the Ivory Coast of Africa. He is a great storyteller and talks persuasively about the intergenerational aspect of living in that small village. His advice to all of us who value children in our midst is to get into their world by playing with them and learning from them (first of all) and then invite them into our world where they can have a meaningful part in what is important to us (secondly) and then to merge the two worlds – to become a friend to children and let them be a friend to you. This will take a mutuality of relationship where all are valued for the gifts they bring to the community.

In the last church where I served children and their families, we tried a new way of doing Vacation Bible School. Instead of buying a curriculum, we chose a theme based on 5 biblical stories (for example, stories by the seaside) and the big group was where we told the story, sang songs, prayed and worshipped together. Then the children would choose an activity that sounded interesting to them and would join the adults who had a love for that particular activity. One group (for example) would create a wood working project (such as a boat) to help the children build, another would do a science project that helped the little ones understand more about the sea, one group loved to teach knitting so we didn't try to make it fit the theme – we just knew that spending time together learning to knit and building relationships was an end in itself. The point was to get to know one another while doing

something they all enjoyed. Someone once asked me how this was teaching the Bible story (like so many VBS curriculums aim to do) and I said it doesn't have to! It was more of a vacation community builder than a school. The children and the adults alike shared how much they enjoyed this time together and I delighted in their joy.

As I talk with parents of young children, I hear their longing for community and for a place where they can be supported in the daunting task of parenting. They often feel disconnected from their extended families (either by distance or estrangement) and they are weary from all the hats they wear. Having a place where their children are welcomed, loved, supported without feeling like they're supposed to take on the responsibility of carrying the church forward, is a huge gift. They talk about going to a church and feeling overwhelmed by the unspoken words of "thank God you're here – we need you!" What they do appreciate is having someone else who will share their life of faith in a natural way. In a give and take kind of way. In a "we know these days are hard and we want to support you and love your children however they show up! We are glad you're here but we don't expect you to save the future of our congregation. It is just good for us that you're here with us today." I believe **that** is the message **this** faith community expresses and I'm glad to be a part of it. I delight in seeing children welcomed without a stumbling block in front of them and so I thank you for being this kind of church. May we be so even more in the days ahead. Amen

Benediction: Fellow Followers of Jesus: may the love of Christ that fills all our hearts, including the most vulnerable among us, lead us to a deeper way of living out our faith together. May our example of community draw others to the One who says "let the little children come to me for to such belong the kingdom of heaven." And let us grow more and more to be like them. And all God's children said, Amen