

1 Peter 2:1-3

Mark 10:13-16

October 3, 2021

World Communion Sunday

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

TEACH YOUR PARENTS WELL

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

In March 1970, Crosby Stills Nash & Young released their now certified 7x platinum album, *Déjà Vu*. Their second studio album produced three Top 40 singles — “Woodstock,” “Our House,” and “Teach Your Children.” Graham Nash wrote “Teach Your Children” when he was a member of The Hollies, but that band never recorded it. He said he was inspired to write the song after seeing a photograph by Diane Arbus called “Child with Toy Hand Grenade in Central Park.” In the photo, the child holds the toy weapon and looks angry. The song cautions parents and elders to “teach your children well . . .”

But the song has a second verse and chorus that reverses the plea of the first verse:

*And you, of tender years
Can't know the fears
That your elders grew by.
And so, please, help them with your youth,
They seek the truth before they can die.
Teach your parents well,
Their children's hell will slowly go by,
And feed them on your dreams,
The one they pick's the one you'll know by.
Don't you ever ask them why,
If they told you you would cry,
So just look at them and sigh,
And know they love you.¹*

Use your imagination for a minute. Picture Jesus gathering the little children around him, putting his arms around them, and blessing them by putting his hands on them. Now, imagine Jesus looking the little children in the eyes and saying, “Teach your parents well.” The disciples and the parents and the other bystanders would be shocked, surprised, maybe dismayed and offended. The disciples tried to keep the parents from bringing their children to Jesus in the first place. The parents brought their children to Jesus to be blessed, but probably not to be held up as examples of who will enter the kingdom of God. And the bystanders, if they didn't automatically reject Jesus,

would probably scratch their heads at another counter-cultural teaching. Can you imagine little children teaching the adults anything? And teaching them well?

But why do we need to use our imaginations and look back 2,000 years? Even if Mark's story doesn't include Jesus explicitly saying to the children, "Teach your parents well," that's the message he sent when he put his arms around them, blessed them, and said, "Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." (Mark 10:15) That message is as counter-cultural on October 3, 2021 as it was in 33 A.D. We sophisticated adults know how the world really operates. The dreams of children and youth often times die hard. They'll eventually find out the hard way. Am I right?

That's exactly why we need to hear this story from Mark's gospel about Jesus blessing the children. How often in our actions and our attitudes do we mirror the disciples who tried to keep the little children from Jesus? Don't get me wrong! We love the idyllic picture of Jesus blessing the sweet, innocent, naive children, because that makes us feel good and comfortable. But guess what? That's not what this gospel story is about! According to *The Message* translation of this story, "The people brought children to Jesus, hoping he might touch them. The disciples shooed them off. But Jesus was irate and let them know it: 'Don't push these children away. Don't ever get between them and me. These children are at the very center of life in the kingdom. Mark this: Unless you accept God's kingdom in the simplicity of a child, you'll never get in.'" **Jesus was irate [at his disciples] and let them know it!** Because, once again, the disciples were setting their minds not on divine things but on human things. The disciples measured being a faithful follower of Jesus in terms of rank and importance and achievement. They were just using the benchmarks of their day and age and culture. Sounds familiar, doesn't it?

I've already asked you to imagine Jesus gathering those children around him and saying to them, "Teach your parents well." Now, imagine Jesus, still embracing those little children, looking up at his disciples and the parents of the children and the bystanders and saying, "Truly I tell you, let your children teach you well." On July 30, 2016, Pope Francis spoke to a huge gathering of young people who had come from around the world for World Youth Day 2016. An article dated August 1 began with these words: "Aware of the risk of being called naive or being accused of spouting platitudes, Pope Francis called on young people to model for adults the paths of mercy and respect, and then demonstrated what he meant." The article then quoted from Pope Francis's message to the youth of the world: "Today we adults — we adults — need you to teach us, like you are doing now, how to live with diversity, in dialogue, to experience multiculturalism not as a threat but an opportunity. Have the courage to teach us that it is easier to build bridges than walls. We need this."²

In the spirit of today's gospel story and in light of Jesus's message to the disciples and the parents and the bystanders there that day, we could paraphrase the Pope's message to the youth of the world and preach it to ourselves: "We adults need the children and youth to teach us. Let us have the courage to be taught that it is easier to build bridges than walls. We need this."

At the end of worship this morning, we're going to sing the beloved hymn "Jesus Loves Me." I'm guessing most everybody knows the first verse by heart:

*Jesus loves me! This I know,
for the Bible tells me so.
Little ones to him belong.
They are weak, but he is strong.
Yes, Jesus loves me! Yes, Jesus loves me!
Yes, Jesus loves me! The Bible tells me so.*

But what about the second (and final) verse in our hymnbook?

*Jesus loves me! This I know,
as he loved so long ago,
taking children on his knee,
saying, "Let them come to me."
Yes, Jesus loves me! Yes, Jesus loves me!
Yes, Jesus loves me! The Bible tells me so.*

Somehow we have sentimentalized that song, to the point we think it's just for children to sing in Sunday School or Vacation Bible School. But the note in our hymnal teaches us otherwise: "Few songs of faith have supported people from cradle to grave like this one. The great theologian Karl Barth said that its opening two lines were a summary of all that he had learned." "Children of faith" doesn't depend on your chronological age. In the New Testament, new believers are often referred to as "children," as in our epistle lesson, "Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation." (1 Peter 2:2) But John reminds all of us, "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are." (1 John 3:1)

I think the problem is, we confuse "childlike" with "childish." When Jesus put his arms around the children and blessed them by laying his hands on them, he commended their "childlike" faith, not their "childish" faith, to his disciples and the parents and the bystanders. As one Bible commentator explains it, "Only those will enter the kingdom who receive it as does a little child, who make no claims, unselfconsciously assuming their utter dependence, and are not concerned about rank, status, and self-image"³ — not like those disciples who rejected Jesus's teaching about picking up their cross and following him, who argued among themselves about who was the greatest, who asked, "Grant us to sit, one at your right and one at your left, in your glory." (Mark 10:37)

Over the years, from time to time, people have said, "No offense, but sometimes I get more out of the children's sermon than I do your regular sermon!" No offense taken! That's fine with me, but let me ask this of you: When you listen to the children's sermon, don't just listen to what I say. Pay attention to what the children have to teach

us. Sure, what they say makes us laugh sometimes (and might make some parents squirm from time to time — been there, done that!). But the children's sermon is no "childish" thing. They often get it — this faith thing, this trust thing, this depending totally on God — and accept it a lot more eagerly than we adults do.

I watched a one minute video of an interview with Frederick Buechner. When asked about this gospel story about Jesus and the children, he summed it up with these words: "Be open, be open, be open." Then he shared this example. "Suppose I told you (talking to the interviewer), 'There might be a pot of gold over there in the corner.' You wouldn't get up and go over to look. You'd probably think, 'Uh-oh, senility is setting in.' But if you were a five year old and I said, 'There might be a pot of gold over there in the corner,' you'd get up and go look, even if there wasn't a pot of gold in the corner. Then Buechner gave this description of a childlike faith: "Be open to all possibilities. Don't write things off as impossible because that's what the world says."

As someone has pointed out, the disciples tried to keep the children from receiving a blessing from Jesus. Jesus taught the disciples that they needed to learn from the children how to be blessed. Nothing has changed 2,000 years later. We disciples need to learn the same lesson. Both the Old Testament and the New Testament teach us that "nothing will be impossible with God." (Genesis 18:14; Luke 1:37) Let us have the courage to be taught well by our children and youth, so we too can be open to all of God's possibilities.

Let us pray: O God, may our only strength today be that of faithful obedience, as children who gather around Jesus in the work of your kingdom. Amen.

NOTES

¹Crosby Stills Nash Young Teach Your Children at www.passthepaisley.com

²Cindy Wooden, "Teach your elders well: Pope calls youths to be models for adults," August 1, 2016 at www.catholicphilly.com.

³M. Eugene Boring, *Mark: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), p. 290.