

Psalm 78:1-4

Mark 10:13-16

September 7, 2014

Christian Education Rally Day

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

TELL ME THE STORIES OF JESUS

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.

“Once upon a time . . .”

When you hear those words, you know you’re getting ready to hear a story.

“Once upon a time . . .”

We usually hear those words at the beginning of a fairy tale or a children’s story.

“Once upon a time . . .”

When you hear those words, you might think the story isn’t true. But that’s not necessarily true!

“Once upon a time . . .”

Those words could mean, “What I’m about to tell you happened one time . . .”

So, if you have ears to hear, listen . . .

“Once upon a time . . . 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.’ Then, gathering the children up in his arms, he laid his hands of blessing on them.” (*The Message*, Eugene Peterson)

Imagine yourself in this story. Where are you? Are you in a house with Jesus and his disciples? Is it crowded? Or maybe you’re outside, standing around in the shade as Jesus sits under a tree in the center of the village? What do you see? What do you smell? What are the people around you doing?

Imagine you are one of “the people” who brought children to Jesus. Let’s call them “the parents.” Where have you come from? Did you make a long journey with your children because you heard Jesus was going to be in the area? Or did he surprise you with his visit to your village? What are your concerns for your children? Is one of them sick, in need of Jesus’ healing touch that you’ve heard so much about? What are your hopes for your children? What are you thinking when you see all of the other parents crowding around Jesus? Are you afraid your children won’t get their chance to be blessed? Are you willing to be patient? Why do you want your children to meet Jesus?

Imagine you are one of the disciples. What are you feeling? Are you irritated with Jesus for “wasting” his precious time and energy on children? Are you overwhelmed by the size of the crowd of parents and children? Why did you speak so sternly to the parents? Do you just not like children? Or do you think Jesus (and you) has

more important and pressing concerns? Are you just trying to help Jesus with his time management?

How do you feel when Jesus is indignant and irate with you and calls you out in front of all of those parents and children? Do you wonder why in the world your teacher and master would take these little children in his arms and bless them?

Do you wish you could be one of those children in Jesus' arms?

Imagine you are one of the children. What are you thinking as your parents push you forward to meet this man you don't know? Look into his eyes. . . What do they look like? What is Jesus' smile like? How does it feel to have Jesus wrap his arms around you and give you a hug? Can you feel the weight of his hands on the top of your head? What does he say to you? "Bless you, my child"? "You are a child of God"? "I love you"?

Imagine the parents and children going home to their neighborhood or to the next village. What stories of Jesus do you think they told their friends and neighbors and families?

Imagine the disciples staying behind with Jesus and then continuing on their way to Jerusalem with him. What do you think they talked about among themselves as they walked along? What do you think they heard when Jesus said, "whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it"?

"Tell me the stories of Jesus I love to hear; Things I would ask him to tell me if he were here."

"Jesus loves me! This I know, for the Bible tells me so . . . Jesus loves me! This I know, as he loved so long ago, Taking children on his knee, saying, "Let them come to me."

What stories of Jesus, what stories **about** Jesus, tell you that Jesus loves you? What stories of Jesus do you love to hear? What stories of Jesus can you tell?

In your bulletin you will find a half-sheet of paper that says "Tell Me the Stories of Jesus." You'll also see that it says, "My favorite story about Jesus or that Jesus told is . . ."

I'd like for you to take a minute and write in the story of Jesus (his parables or teachings) or about Jesus (his birth, baptism, Transfiguration, crucifixion, resurrection) that you love to hear. You don't have to know the chapter and verse in the Bible. Just write down a brief description of the story. When you're finished, hold your piece of paper up in the air and one of the ushers will collect them all. In a minute, I'll share with you a few of the stories people have picked as their favorites stories of or about Jesus . . .

This fall I'm going to tell the stories of Jesus we love to hear. I can't guarantee I'll be able to preach on every story suggested today. My guess is, there will be some overlap in the stories you write down. My hope is, we will be able to tell and hear the stories of Jesus with fresh ears and open hearts.

Let's go back to today's story about Jesus and the children, and think about the question for the parents: Why do you want your children to meet Jesus?

On this Christian Education Rally Day, that's an important question for all of us to ask. Why do we want our children to meet Jesus? In a few minutes, our Christian Education leaders for 2014-2015 will be installed. These men and women are using their God-given gifts to tell the stories of Jesus, so our children can know that Jesus loves them. We will all be asked to pray for them, learn from them, and work with them as we nurture the children of our church family in the faith.

At this point, I could take the sermon down the road of arguing for children's rights, advocating for their place in the church family, and exploring any number of topics about children and church. But that's not the point of the story of Jesus we heard this morning. Even though Jesus uses the children as a teaching example – and does hug and bless them – he really focuses his attention on the disciples and what is expected of them – and any one of us – who want to have a relationship with God and enter into God's kingdom.

That's why verse 15 is the key to the story: "whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." The disciples try to keep the parents from bringing their children to receive a blessing from Jesus. Jesus says, "You need to learn from the children how to be blessed."

To say that we must "receive" the kingdom of God implies that God's kingdom comes to us as a "gift." How we receive that gift – whether or not we receive that gift – apparently matters very much, according to what Jesus tells the disciples: "receive . . . like a child." So, then, the point of this story of Jesus is "a childlike faith." I didn't say "childish" – uninformed, immature, even naïve. The Bible tells us "Jesus loves me!" The Bible also calls us to know what we believe, to be wise in the ways of God, and to study God's Word.

No, Jesus tells us to have a "childlike" faith – trusting, humble, and dependent. This story of Jesus today reminds us that this kingdom of God, this very faith that we have is, very simply, a gift that is offered to us by our Creator, Judge, Redeemer, and Sustainer.

Let's go back to the story of Jesus and the little children. Jesus was indignant and irate with his disciples because they interfered with his showing his love to the children. They got in the way because of their grown-up concerns and worries. That's not to say that all of our grown-up concerns and worries aren't legitimate or serious. However, as Jesus told his disciples that day, we need to see and hear and receive the story of Jesus for our own sake and so we can tell the stories of Jesus to other people.

So, we can't be thinking that Christian Education Rally Day is just for those in our church who are chronologically children. 1 John 3:1 says, "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are." We are all children who need to hear and tell the stories of Jesus.

So, those of you who are parents of the children in our church, look at all of the folks in our church who are dedicating themselves to telling the stories of Jesus to your children. There are 51 names listed on the back of today's bulletin of adults who are ready and eager to let your children know that Jesus loves them, in Sunday School and

LOGOS. We need you to bring your children to meet Jesus in Sunday School and LOGOS, that he might touch their lives and bless them.

And, those of you who are “parents” of the children of this church through the promises you make when they are baptized, look at the folks who are ready and willing and eager to tell YOU the stories of Jesus in our adult Sunday School classes. You’re never too old to hear the stories of Jesus and to hear that Jesus loves you! So, take advantage of the chance to meet Jesus in the stories that are talked about in the Joe Eaddy Class, the Margaret Glasgow Class, the Young Adult Class, and the Alternative Class.

It’s a bedtime ritual in homes everywhere – a child asks, “Tell me a story.” And the mother or father says, “Once upon a time . . .” We may think we’ve outgrown our need to have stories told to us, because we’re not “children” any more and we have more important things to worry about. But, just as parents tell their grown-up children, “You’ll always be my child,” so God the Father says to us, “You are my children.”

So, we can ask, “Tell me a story.” And what we’ll hear has been called “The Greatest Story Ever Told.”

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, you give us your love in Jesus Christ and call us your children. May we always receive your kingdom as your children, that we may receive your blessing. Amen.