

Beloved Community: We Need Everybody
Matthew 18:1-5, 10-14; 19:13-15
October 15, 2023
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18 ¹At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”

² Then he called a little child over to sit among the disciples, ³ and said, “I assure you that if you don’t turn your lives around and become like this little child, you will definitely not enter the kingdom of heaven. ⁴ Those who humble themselves like this little child will be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. ⁵ Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.”

¹⁰ “Be careful that you don’t look down on one of these little ones. I say to you that their angels in heaven are always looking into the face of my Father who is in heaven. ¹² What do you think? If someone had one hundred sheep and one of them wandered off, wouldn’t he leave the ninety-nine on the hillsides and go in search for the one that wandered off? ¹³ If he finds it, I assure you that he is happier about having that one sheep than about the ninety-nine who didn’t wander off. ¹⁴ In the same way, my Father who is in heaven doesn’t want to lose one of these little ones.

19 ¹³ Some people brought children to Jesus so that he would place his hands on them and pray. But the disciples scolded them. ¹⁴ “Allow the children to come to me,” Jesus said. “Don’t forbid them, because the kingdom of heaven belongs to people like these children.” ¹⁵ Then he blessed the children and went away from there.

...

God be in our listening,
God be in our understanding, **Amen.**

...

A lot of times when adults tell these stories to other adults we romanticize children. Children are full of wonder. Children notice everything. Children love wholeheartedly, with a deep sense of justice. Children love to play.

And of course, all of that is true and beautiful. But also, everything has a flip side.

- Children are full of wonder. Which means they ask endless questions, which is endearing—until it’s not.
- Children notice everything. Which means they move through the world more slowly, which is a great change of pace—until you’re trying to get somewhere at some specific time.
- Children have a deep sense of justice. Which is amazing—until they call *you* out.

- Children love to play, all the time. Which is delightful—until it's time to go to bed, or be serious, or have a clean, orderly space.

If nothing else, kids have a knack for bringing what adults might call chaos.

I get where the disciples were coming from. Like every adult I know who has ever cared for a child, I have hidden in the bathroom for inordinate amounts of time just to get a moment of peace. Jesus is very important and very busy, and we don't want to bother him with a bunch of shenanigans.

But to Jesus, they're not a bother. They're the point.

Kiddos, hear that: to Jesus, you're never a bother. You're never annoying. You're the point. You're the ones who we should be learning from.

One of the saddest things I have experienced in church is that almost everyone I know, clergy or parishioners, who is involved in nurturing children has had someone say to them in the same breath, "I want to see our church grow! We need some young families!" and then, the same person say, "Man, those kids are so noisy, so distracting. Their parents should keep them quiet or take them out."

Y'all.

The gospel call here isn't all sunshine and puppy dogs and singing Jesus Loves Me. It's hard. Genuinely welcoming children is a challenge to all our cultural values of efficiency, and strength, and independence.

Children need stuff. All the time. And they express those needs. They need help. They can't do everything for themselves. They slow things down. They do not contribute to productivity, to getting things done, to getting ahead. They seem to actively work against it.

And we need that. Jesus pushes the point. He doesn't just like kids. He doesn't just want to include them. He wants adults to imitate them.

What if we were to do that? What if we were to act our shoe size, not our age? What if we were to acknowledge we have needs? What if we were to give up the lie of being pulled together, put together. What if we were to ask for help. And slow down. And loosen our grip on our measures of success. It *is* inconvenient. It *is* inefficient. It *is* scary to ask for help. But just imagine. How tender could we become?

Current work and thought around disability and neurodivergence, different ways of thinking, makes these same points from different angles.

A great deal of the physical and psychological suffering that goes with physical disability is caused not by the disability itself, but by the rest of the world—built environments we're reluctant to adapt, patterns of communication we privilege over others. To folks who are temporarily able-bodied these are too often thought of as complications, extra

steps. The truth is, most of us who are temporarily able-bodied are terrified of the dependency and vulnerability that comes with disability.

And having a brain that thinks differently from what is considered typical, having autism or ADHD or dyslexia or Down Syndrome, can make it difficult to function in what we think of as productive society. But a great deal of the suffering is caused by ideas of how we *should* think.

Little Albert Einstein was apparently a handful. He had epic meltdowns, resisted potty training, ignored anything or anyone he found boring, and didn't speak his first word until the age of three. His teachers despaired of his ability to learn. He still had a hard time talking at age nine. And our world would not be the same without him. His brain was apparently busy with other things.

A beloved community needs everybody. Everybody. Slow and fast, big and small, running and rolling, so-called normal and not. And it's not that there's some "us" that deigns to include those poor "thems." There is no us. There is no them. We need each other.

People who do not fit the norm of being high-achieving, competitive, productive, entirely self-sufficient, physically fit and conventionally attractive bring tremendous gifts. Not just in their strength—which is amazing—but also in their weakness and need and so-called disruption.

I have been fortunate, like many of you, to spend time with people with dementia who tell the same stories over and over again, and so often they are stories of gratitude. Several of you who are older tell me every single week that you are grateful for your children, or your ancestors, or your deceased spouse. It never gets old. Please don't stop. I wish what came out of my mouth was an endless repetition of gratitude. Maybe when I grow up, I'll be like you. We need you here. You offer gifts.

I once had the opportunity to welcome a new member into the church whose name was Ruagie. Ruagie had Down Syndrome and refused to be baptized. It wasn't clear why. Maybe fear of water. Maybe someone had told him he couldn't because he couldn't say the "right" words. But he wanted to join the church. So, he came to session like everyone else, and when it was his turn to share a statement of faith, he said four or five times, "Jesus loves Ruagie. Jesus loves Ruagie. Jesus loves Ruagie." Is there really anything else to say? You're supposed to be baptized to join the church. Every rule book says so. But that session voted unanimously to welcome Ruagie anyway. We needed him. His testimony was essential. I want to grow to be more like Ruagie.

And children? Yes, children slow things down. I have been sorely tested hiking with children. It can take two hours to cover a mile. I want to get somewhere. Get to the top of the mountain. Joseph, more than once, has had to say, "You sure preach a lot about resisting productive, efficient culture. Want to try that now?"

And yes, children can be noisy and disruptive. It has happened more than once that when leading worship, I have been interrupted. It's happened during the prayer before

communion when more than once I've heard a young child yell, "I'm hungry!" That so-called disruption is a better prayer than all the fancy words I was heaping up. I wish each time that I'd just stopped right there and said, "Amen." We're hungry, Jesus. Feed us.

What if we were as tender with ourselves and each other as we are when we wipe a child's tears from their cheeks? What if we admitted our needs? What if we let ourselves fall apart into each other? What if we let care be reciprocal, back and forth? Would we grow softer? More tender? More Christ-like? We'd be slower, yes. And probably less successful according to the world's logic. But maybe, just maybe, we'd find the kingdom of heaven.

~ Sarah W. Wiles, 2023