



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA

Rev. Scott E. Schul

20th Sunday after Pentecost: October 7, 2018

Sermon Title: "Let the little children come to me!"

Sermon Text: Mark 10:13-16

In forgotten little rural villages, in sprawling urban cities, on rickety fishing boats, and along dusty sunbaked roads, people had been talking about *that day* when Jesus chastised his disciples and shocked everyone by welcoming little children. The news had spread like wildfire when it happened, but even thirty years later the story had been told and re-told so many times that nearly everyone could recite it from memory. One of the disciples – Mark – thought the story was so important that he decided to write it all down, to be preserved forever.

Why was this story so noteworthy? Well, in it Jesus turned the tables on every notion society had about the worth of children. When the disciples rebuked the people who had the audacity to trouble Jesus with mere children, the disciples were acting in accord with the norms of their society. Children were just a small step up from mere property.

But if children were so undervalued, why were all of these people bringing their little children to Jesus? Were those parents enlightened in their understanding and appreciation of the worth of *all* people, even the smallest and the most vulnerable among us? No; in that era of limited life expectancy, I think those parents hoped that Jesus might bless those kids and help them survive the dangers of childhood and grow into adults who could work the farms, cast the fishing nets, tend the family business, and maybe someday care for their elderly parents. At best, those children were valued for what they might *someday* offer, and not for their *inherent worth*.

And so in that context, Jesus's favorable attitude toward children is really remarkable. But remember that this account was written from an adult's perspective. What if it had been written by one of the children whom Jesus blessed? It might go like this: "When I was five, I had no idea who Jesus was. All I knew was being hungry and scared. My parents had so many worries and so much work. I just tried to stay out of their way and not cause any trouble. But something changed when Jesus came to town. I remember seeing a look of hope in my mother's eyes that I'd never seen before. She rushed me and my sister to the meeting place where Jesus was. The adults were yelling at us to stay away and move back, but mother kept pushing us forward, always forward, toward Jesus.

"Finally he silenced all the adults and motioned us to come to him. I don't remember what he said that day, but I remember how safe, secure, and loved I felt when he lifted me up. I felt so warm inside. He blessed me and then looked into my eyes for what seemed a thousand years. I'll never forget those eyes. Thirty years have passed since that day, and I've been a follower of Jesus ever since. I never before would have believed that one person and one day had the power to change someone's life forever."

It's true, don't you agree? A caring adult can make a decisive difference in the life of a child. I heard a few examples of this as we studied this Gospel lesson in our staff meeting. For example, Peter Horn is a true blue Cubs fan to the bitter end because his grandfather spent hours and hours watching Cubs games together with him. Cindy Fritz is just as crazy about baseball – but in her case it's the Baltimore Orioles. Baseball is something dear that she and her father have always shared. I too was given the gift of time and attention by adults in my life. My grandfather and I used to sit for hours on his porch swing, watching people and enjoying time together. My dad used to take me on handyman jobs as his “gofer.” I'd fetch tools, sweep up, and climb a ladder here or there. That's about all I was good for at that age, but what wonderful memories. And how can I ever forget sitting next to mom at church, singing hymns together on Sunday mornings? The kind and patient time and attention given by parents and grandparents made a huge impact on my life.

We pass down all sorts of things to our children, grandchildren, and even children who are of no relation to us. They *hear* what we say. They *watch* what we do. And regardless how young they are, they have a way of putting all those observations together and figuring out what *really* matters to us. What will the children in your life remember about you? Will it be the sports teams you rooted for? The restaurants you liked? The vacations you treasured? Or will they remember how much you loved Jesus, how much you loved the Church, and how important God was in your life?

Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me; do not stop them.” Jesus forces us to wrestle with hard questions. Are we bringing the little children to Jesus? If not, why not? Is it a matter of time? Is it a matter of money? Or is it really a matter of priorities?

Maybe you don't have children or grandchildren, or maybe they live far away. That's OK. We have plenty of children here at Grace who don't have any local family. You could bless them. Or maybe you could invite a neighbor family to worship here. *Don't underestimate the difference you can make.* For example, consider a woman named Mary Wahlberg. Back in 1946, Mary noticed a little girl who never went to church. So Mary took a risk and boldly requested permission from the parents for that little girl to attend Sunday School so she could learn about Jesus. Mary even arranged a weekly ride for that little girl. That little girl grew up in that church and eventually her parents and several other family members joined that congregation too, a church called Tabor Lutheran in Kane, PA. You see, that little girl eventually became my mother. Mom passed along to me the gift of faith that Mary had given her. Without that gift, I probably would not be a pastor today. I stand before you today as the product of someone who went out of her way to make sure one little child was brought to Jesus. Do you think it made a difference? I sure do. Someday when I meet Mary Wahlberg in heaven, how can I ever adequately thank her?

Over the last five to ten years, it's my observation that God has been providing a very special invitation to this congregation. Our Lord is drawing more and more people here who have not been raised within a church community. They know there's something missing in their lives. They sense an emptiness but they aren't sure how to fill it. What they *do* know is that here at Grace they're able to feel a wholeness and holiness that has evaded them. They are

coming. And they are bringing their children. Friends, it's not just our *job* but our very special *calling* to help the children come to Jesus. And so we invest in a range of youth and family ministries, including today's Fall Festival, so that the Gospel can be taught, relationships can be fostered, and lives can be changed. But no program is as powerful as the love and example of a faithful adult. Each of us has an opportunity and calling to *proclaim* the faith, *teach* the faith, *live* the faith, and *pass on* the faith because that faith has the power to transform lives.

We're not like the people of Palestine 2,000 years ago. We know that children have inherit worth, value, and dignity. We know how crucial it is for us to ensure that every child has good food and quality medical care, so that their *bodies* can be *nourished*. We know how important it is that every child be provided with high quality schools, so that their *brains* can be *stimulated* and *trained* and their imaginations *unleashed*. But while we invest so much time and money in caring for their bodies and brains, why are we so hesitant to provide for their souls? Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them." Those words might be even more important and even more challenging today than they were 2,000 years ago. But that is our call, and by God's grace *we will fulfill it*. Amen.