

“Let the children”
Luke 18:15-17
Brentwood First Presbyterian
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Mike Magee

Introduction

Excitement, newness, and unconditional love. The whole world shines through the eyes of a child.

Scene 1 – People were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them

Everyone wants a blessing. And it’s traditional for parents in Jesus’ day to bring their one year olds to the rabbi for a blessing. Parents want their children touched and blessed. Can you see them? Everyone smiling, the children running to sit on Jesus’ lap? Can you hear them? They are singing “Sanctuary,” “Glorify thy name,” and “Awesome God.”

“Pastor, I want a blessing.” A child with high functioning autism interrupts a pastor during worship. The pastor at first ignores the interruption. But the autistic child persists. He keeps saying, “Give me a blessing.” Finally, the pastor says to the boy, “After worship, come forward, and I will give you a blessing.” So after worship, the boy comes forward. Turning his back to the congregation, he puts his hand on the head of the boy, and says, “Andrew, child of God, you are God’s beloved. In you God is well pleased.” After the blessing, he turns around to face the congregation, and much to his surprise, the entire congregation is lined up behind him, all waiting for their blessing.

Yes, everyone wants a blessing. But sometimes those in power want all the blessings for themselves.

Scene 2 – When the disciples saw it, they sternly ordered them not to do it

The disciples shoo them off. Literally, they rebuke and scold those who bring their children to Jesus. After all, Jesus is Jerusalem bound. He has important things to do. And 2000 years ago, babies and children possess no intrinsic value. They occupy the lowest rung of the social status ladder. They are not yet the age of accountability, whatever that is. Their faith is not mature, and they cannot be valued because of anything they have done. Children are to be seen but not heard. Investing time and attention to children brings no immediate dividend. The disciples say: “Shoo, go away! What do you think you are doing, inviting little children! Jesus is not for kids. Jesus is for grown-ups!” You wonder if in some way they are jealous of Jesus’ time. If they are worried the children might steal the show. They say children distract Jesus from important things. But you wonder if in their eyes the important things upon which Jesus needs to focus are themselves. The singing stops. Can you see the hurt look on the children’s faces as they leave in silence?

Thanks to advances in nutrition and preventative medicine, 1st world countries now have four generations: children, parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents. But it is hard on an organization both financially and spiritually to cater to all four generations. It is not good stewardship of resources. We say, “Find your niche and do not try to be all things to all people.”

But what would Jesus say? Jesus is radically inclusive. I believe he would say each generation needs the other. That a church cannot afford to focus exclusively on either nursing homes or playgrounds. Because both are important in the kingdom of God. Because both are important in the life of the church.

Scene 3 – But Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them: for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.”

Jesus calls the children back. Because the little children are the kingdom’s pride and joy. And receiving the kingdom is tied to receiving little children. Can you hear them laughing and singing as they return?

Alfred Lord Tennyson, in one of his poems, writes of his grandson worshipping a sunbeam dancing on his bedpost. For some adults, God’s great creation, the world, has lost its luster, and they tire of it. But children live in a world which is still shiny. Which still has a wet sheen on it. A world in which God is always near. Where on our church property can we go to see the faces of children today? How can we be more inviting to children today? Yes, Jesus calls the children back. Because the disciples have it wrong. Jesus is not just for grown ups. Jesus is also for kids.

For children, the whole world shines with a wet sheen. Morning has broken, like the first morning. Blackbird has spoken, like the first bird. Sweet the rain’s new fall, sunlit from heaven, like the first dew fall, on the first grass. Because God Baptizes the whole world with rain, giving it new life.

Scene 4 – The seal of God’s grace

Baptism is something you receive, not something you achieve. The mother of a friend of yours dies. You tell your friend you are sorry. Then you gave him a hug. A hug says more than words. Baptism is like that. It is both words and action. The result is a stronger testimony than words alone. The waters of Baptism are like God’s hug.

The language of science and accounting is mathematics. The language of religion is metaphor and symbol. And Baptism is rich in meaning. Rich in metaphor and symbol.

But how you may ask is the image of washing away our sins relevant to infant and childhood Baptism? Baptism is God's promise that no matter what we do before or AFTER our Baptism, what God did in Jesus 2000 years ago always washes away our shame. There is nothing we can do to add to what God in Jesus did.

Immersion is an attractive symbol. Dying with Jesus is symbolized by immersion, and rebirth with Jesus is symbolized by rising out of the water. But the *Didache*, a document written perhaps as early as 70 AD, written perhaps by the Acts church, says pouring was also done in the early church. And pouring is a good image for the reception of God's Holy Spirit. In Acts, Peter quotes the prophet Joel when he says, "I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh."

Grace is not just what you say at meal time. Grace is God's love, mercy, and forgiveness. Grace is God's favor. We do not Baptize ourselves. Someone else Baptizes us. We may desire Baptism, or we may request it for our child. We walk up front to the Baptismal font. But from the human standpoint, Baptism is a passive event. Baptism is something you receive, not something you achieve. It is like salvation. Salvation is also something you receive, not something you achieve. The writer of Ephesians says, "It is by grace you have been saved, it is not the result of works, so that no one may boast." God's love and grace is at work inwardly, and God's love grace gives us the outward sign of Baptism. Yes, Baptism is God's promise of salvation. But I believe Baptism is not a sign of OUR faith. It is a sign of GOD's faith. God always believes in us even when we do not believe in God.

Although God's action is primary in Baptism, the person being Baptized also has an expected response.

When Gabi and Sophie are Baptized, faith is offered on their behalf by Leah and Doak, and the congregation. Gabi and Sophie participate in the faith of the family, and cannot be excluded because they are too young to understand or accept the full knowledge of that faith. A child's Baptism before a full knowledge of understanding is a good reminder of the way God's love and grace comes to us. Whatever age we are, God calls us and works in our lives and hearts before we are aware of it. Before we love God, God loves us. And our first response to God's love is the faith expressed in the Apostle's Creed.

It is said that a wedding is not a marriage. A wedding joins a woman and a man, but a marriage is the faithfulness, goodness, and value that come through decades of forgiving and loving each other. A wedding is just the beginning of a marriage.

Baptism is like this. It symbolizes the beginning. As we said at Sasha's Baptism last month, it symbolizes the first installment of God's Spirit.

Our second response to God's love is to clothe ourselves in Christ. It seems to me that preaching in the early church, the Acts church, had two purposes: first to draw us into the waters of Baptism, and then to encourage us to live a life fitting our Baptism. Baptism is understood as an ordination to ministry in a church. We say on the front page of the bulletin, the members of our church are also its ministers. The word Messiah means "anointed one." At Jesus' Baptism, John anoints him with water, but God anoints Jesus with God's Spirit. Today we will anoint Gabi and Sophie with water, symbolizing that God also anoints them with God's Spirit. The waters of Baptism carry with them the promise that God will empower them with gifts to serve the church. Gifts like singing in worship. Leah and Doak, don't forget that Gabi's and Sophie's primary teacher in the

Christian faith will be you. It is your own life and actions that will be most influential. Church is not something you do because you HAVE to. It is something you do because you WANT to. And because it is something YOU want to do, it will be something GABI and SOPHIE want to do.

Conclusion

Is Jesus just for grown ups? No. We Baptize both playgrounds and nursing homes. People line up to be blessed. God puts a wet sheen upon the WHOLE world.

Glory be to God, Hallelujah, and all God's children say ...