

September 20, Proper 20

Sermon

One of my fondest and earliest childhood memories is sitting on my grandfather's lap. Grandpa came across as a tough, crusty older man. He smoked unfiltered Homerun cigarettes, up to three packs a day. As I would sit on his lap, he would tell me stories about life (I especially remember the stories about his playing baseball as a young man and about him growing up on a farm). As I got older, one my great treats was Grandpa allowing me to light his cigarettes with his Zippo lighter. Today, Grandpa would probably get in a lot of trouble for allowing me to do that. But of course for me, what mattered was getting to be with my grandpa, having his attention, and being sure of his love.

And like I said, Grandpa was pretty tough. He had been a wholesale liquor salesman before prohibition. He loved to fish and make things from wood with this hands. He had also been very hard on my dad when he was growing up. Grandpa was not a perfect man. But something about him changed as he grew older and his relationship with each of his three grandsons was something that we all valued.

I am not sure how or why Grandpa changed. Time has a way of changing hearts, I know that, even with tough men like my grandfather. Perhaps Grandpa had read the Scripture, like the Gospel from Mark that we just heard—that last part in particular about little children. We tend to frame the story with too much sentiment today, like it is a sweet Hallmark card scene. But in Jesus day, and really for most of us in our world today, it is a radical statement about life and power and love.

Jesus' disciples, especially in Mark's Gospel, are so human. We're told they were doing what people—and maybe especially what men—do. They were talking trash, bragging, and jockeying for position about who would be in charge alongside their leader Jesus, who was on the verge of becoming the new king. Jesus caught them in this so human conversation and, like Jesus would do, he used it as a teachable moment. Jesus wanted to give them a powerful reminder of what his kingdom was about.

You see, in Jesus' day, children were loved, but they were also relegated to the back of the house. Generally, they were cared for by their mother or grandmother or some older sibling. Men were busy with more important things—like talking by the city gate, like we heard described in the reading from Proverbs. Not to say men weren't (and aren't) busy. What men do is important; our jobs do matter. But what Jesus was pointing out is that even if you are a close follower of the Son of God and a future leader of his movement, it is important to realize what all our work is for—to care for the children God loves.

You can see how we continue to miss that point today. Often it is still men who are missing it. Just consider the presidential debate last Wednesday. Men (and one woman) spent

hours telling the nation why they should be president. Some of that is perhaps a necessary part of our election process. But I bet a lot of their comments sounded like the disciples' conversation. And you can't help but wonder if they are really missing the point. If Jesus came on that stage, would he bring a little child and repeat his lesson for these leaders?

Leadership and power and work are all potentially good things—if we remember what they are for. Too often, we can get so caught up in them that we forget they are means to the end in Jesus' kingdom—whatever leadership and power we have and work we do is for the greater good of caring for children and other people who need what society can provide for them. That type of love is the purpose for whatever we do in life. A doctor, a lawyer, a business executive, a politician—any powerful person today must be accountable for how what they do serves the children that God loves.

So we can learn and apply this lesson at different levels. Personally, for those of us who are parents or grandparents, we need to remember our own children. This is not to make us feel guilty, but to point us to the truth that Jesus taught his disciples-- children are a gift and God expects us to care for them with the same reverence and care we give as we serve God. If life has gotten too busy for us (and for our children), let's look for ways to do something like Grandpa did for me—just have them sit in our lap and pay attention to them (I do not recommend the cigarettes and Zippo lighter).

Beyond care for our own children, it is a central Christian value to love all children. We can do this in many different ways. In and through our congregation, we can support and value the ministry that Julie and her teachers do in our preschool and Sunday school. We can offer to be a mentor or other helper with Sylvia in her important work through Mentor Me. We can be a part of our ministry at the Children's Center at Lee Arrendale State Prison, in which we help support the relationship between incarcerated mothers and their children. We can learn about and support the ministry of the LAMB Institute that cares for children in great need in Honduras. These are four main examples of how we are connected to ministry with children today; and we still have room to grow as a community of faith in the future.

And as important as all these ministries are, we also need to remember God's priority for children in how we evaluate the people who want to lead us. What do they say about children? There is not just one way to address our many challenges—the role of families first, faith communities, schools (public and private), and after school programs, and so many important issues. Do the people seeking to lead us understand? Do they have ideas and passion connected to care for our children? Or are they just jockeying for power like Jesus' disciples?

One final point from Jesus' lesson to his disciples. Jesus embraced this little child and let us know that how we treat a child reflects how we truly feel about God. The love we see someone give to a little child also tells us about the love God has for each of us and all of us. When God sees us, God does not see our outward success, whether we might be a doctor, a lawyer, business executive, or a politician. God really doesn't care much about that. God also

does not see our failures—our sins, our busyness, our neglectfulness. God sees us—each and every one of us-- as God's beloved child.

All the love and forgiveness and hopes that human parents have for their children reflect the love God has for us. God loves us so deeply. God sees past our defenses and our limitations. God sees in us the potential that was lived to its fullest in Jesus Christ, the Son of God. God's child made human did so many amazing things—healing and teaching and enduring an unjust death to redeem a broken, sinful, and power-obsessed humanity. And as important as all these mighty acts are, Jesus also knew why he did them—to reveal God's love to all God's children and to give us the grace and example to follow.

That is what matters-- because God so loves us, God calls us to love that way, too.
Amen.