

Sermon for 3 October 2021 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore
Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost/World Communion Sunday
Scriptures: Job 1:1; 2:1-10; Psalm 26; Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12; Mark 10:2-16
“The third time”

For three weeks in a row, Jesus has talked about children. Are we dense? Was he making one point, or several?

Something stood out, or we wouldn't have it written down.

In my new preaching style, I'll ask you. What's your take-away?

(Time out for responses).

In all history, it's only the past 150 years or so that people have organized to keep children out of the work force, ever. Public education is almost as new as women voting. People have been Christian for 2,000 years, but it's taken this long for this early fact about Jesus to become a policy, a legal requirement. That's why I titled my sermon, “The third time.”

Human beings are bright, but they don't always hear well. They don't listen ... This is one reason we keep using Scripture in church. The Bible isn't perfect, and it talks out of both sides of its mouth ... but if we don't use it, we wander even farther from basic ideas that mean everything, about God, and hope, and justice...

In today's example, a child is held up as the ideal new member ... right? “People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them, and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, ‘Let the little children come to me; do not stop them, for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.’ And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.”

This is the same Jesus who told us last Sunday to pluck out our eye if it offended us.

This is not just “gentle Jesus, sweet and mild.” This is kingdom language here. This is how the world is being rebuilt, now that God's rule has come close enough to breathe down our necks, and to send Jesus himself into captivity and a quick doom as an example of what happens to trouble-makers in the Roman empire.

Do we need children to stay alive as a church?

That hurts, doesn't it. We haven't had many children for a long, long time. What's wrong with us? People don't even bring children to us to be touched.

I don't know. I don't want us to get off point here, and start feeling bad about Bethesda because we don't have a Sunday school. These are new times, and you can't manufacture the social conditions that gave us Sunday school when this neighborhood was young, or regrouping after WWII, or again when Clo and Susan Smith were young parents and this was a moment when young couples were making their first investment in a home, or still living with their parents, in this Northeast Baltimore area. We've got different challenges, different gifts and a different country.

These scriptures about children, and the clear message that Jesus paid attention to them a certain way, talk about how life operates when you're open to its gifts.

What kind of power built the church after Jesus left? What lasted? What stood out? Were these children well-behaved?

As far as we know, they came in all shapes and sizes, and even though children generally haven't been talked about or paid attention to in history ... either grown-up history or general history ,, they surely had their moods and characters, and they certainly lacked power, money, security by themselves.

What, then is the point we might make of Jesus' moment with them here in the body of Christ this day?

(More pause for responses).

All right. Keep notes on this. We're in a new day. Church is small, not socially powerful, dependent on public acceptance, and vitally important to the few who, like us, keep coming. We've got a lot in common with the children in these Bible verses and these distinct memories of the first, formative years of its growth and development. Having come a long way towards recognizing the importance of these powerless, little, but clearly important members of the first associations around Jesus and the energy, the Kairos, the Spirit in them, how do we honor Jesus' attitude, his advice, his insistence, his acts with them? Not when we had a big Sunday school, but now. For the next couple of years; the next five years; what would we like to see and pray and plan for in the next ten years based on this scripture?

Add one more thing: Spend a little time thinking about what will happen if we DON'T treat children like Jesus recommended. Translate that into budgets and health care and cross-racial, sexual, all those boundaries between and among us. Then sit down, in this fellowship, not a year from now, but now, applying that wisdom to our life together.

This is a group thing. Everything about these scriptures is people relating to each other and to those outsiders who try to come in.

Three times. Three Sundays. Almost daily, it seems.

And one more thing. We call this World Communion Sunday. It's a nice idea, from about 100 years ago. A bunch of Protestant churches thought it would be helpful if, at least once a year, they all had Communion on the same Sunday. I put it to you that Communion is far more basic to our fellowship than one Sunday together a year. The point of Jesus sharing bread and cup with his closest friends at the very moment of his arrest is more fundamental than we've ever preached. This is a token Sunday that deserves bigger emphasis than we give it. I don't say how. That's for another discussion. That's for our prayer in this new day we're living together. Just look upon our options, as we've been looking upon Jesus' words about children, and prepare for history, in Jesus' name and Spirit.

Amen.