

Sermon Text: Matthew 18:1-10

A little girl was traveling on a train with her father, and as she looked out the window, she said, “Look, Daddy, a horse!” Then again, “Look, Daddy, a cornfield,” and then, “Look, Daddy, a cow going into a barn,” and then, “Look, Daddy, a pond with puddle ducks!” The father was just reading his paper, and he mumbled, “Unhunh, unhunh, unhunh,” and finally, embarrassed, he turned to the other passengers around him, and he said, “Please don’t mind her. She thinks everything is wonderful.” Children are so refreshing, and rejuvenating, and enlivening because, with just a little effort, we can catch a glimpse of the world through their eyes.

Floating downstream on a tube on vacation this past summer, I saw a little boy yelling, “Look at me, Daddy, look at me, look at me!” All he was doing was flailing away in the shallow water, pretending to swim, and his dad wasn’t looking. I wanted to scream a curse of righteous indignation, “Man, look at the boy! Do you think he’ll be that excited forever, just to have your attention and your approval?”

I wish I could get down close to the heads of little children, and see as they see, as I used to see, the wonder and the possibilities of this huge and beautiful, but sometimes terrifying place. When I was a child, I felt close to God. I felt God all around, but then I was taught to feel otherwise. When I was small, I remember the world seeming filled with God and with life and with possibilities. I remember the holiness of seeing my breath smoke out of my mouth on a cold winter day, and thinking there must be a fire inside me. I remember childlike logic and wonder. I also remember that church, although church did teach me the basics, church did not feed my wonder at life and God just everywhere, and church is wrong if it knocks the mystery out of God, and church is wrong if it puts out the fire. Of course, life itself has a way of pushing childlike wonder aside.

I have a confession to make. Truly. There was a time when I sincerely worried and fiercely prayed concerning the little children, poor and starving throughout the world, the little children caught up in wars or used in wars as shields or as human bombs. There was a time when it brought me to tears and anger on almost a daily basis, and then I remember, I got married. I had my own children, and they became my focus. My job was to keep them safe, to develop their minds, their muscles, their talents, their consciences, their souls. I will admit to my shame, that somewhere between pastoring and preaching and raising children and being married that I went long stretches of time without much energy left over for outrage or worry over the children of others. It is so easy to change the channel! It is so easy to be distracted by the next big game or the next big thing or just change the subject! Anyway, cynically, we rationalize, “Isn’t it their parents’ jobs to take care of them?” and “Yes, I should love my neighbor, but who is my neighbor? Those children across the seas? Across the country? Across the tracks?” Isn’t it too much to care for everyone? So we say.

Since the birth of my grandson, Eli, though, I feel as if I have come full circle. I realize that I will not always be around, and I don’t know what country in which he will end up

or in what economic situation or where he will live or whom he will marry, and I find myself once again worrying and praying for the whole world and for Eli's generation, wherever they are born, into whatever circumstances, because they will all define what kind of world, what kind of life, my grandson will have. Gone is my selfish, rationalized, can't I just be the best dad and leave it at that? No. I must leave the world a better place. You must leave the world a better place just as Jesus left it a better place for having lived and having loved and having taught that God is trustworthy, a waiting father with arms open. Now, children of God, we can look over our shoulder from God's embrace, which we claim, and see that God is looking beyond you even further down the road to others, others who have not yet come to themselves, others who have not yet seen any evidence of God or love in the world. Jesus said two things about children. He said if we trust in God as a little child trusts its parents then we get it, and we stand in the middle. By this I mean, when they, little children, are very small, we are God-like to them. We are giants bringing food and changing diapers and giving blankets and medicine and keeping them safe from harm and comforting them from fears and bad dreams. How can we love that much? We lift up our hands to God, just as they lift up their hands to us. We say, sometimes, Lord it is too much, help me care for my children and help me pray for and worry over children in other houses and other lands. Yes, on your own, it is too much. We need God's help, God's spirit to love as Jesus loved. Didn't Jesus ask the question, "What good is it if you love those who love you back? Don't the pagans do the same? But you are my children, and you are to care for your own and for those who treat you badly and for those you'll never meet and for those who suffer and cry in distant lands you'll never ever see. You know that I love them, too." God says do what you can. Combined with the trust you have in me, do what you can to make the world a better place for all children. That is what I did when I sent my son. You see, God knows because of the cross that the world is a dangerous place for children.

This is unpleasant, but if insurance tables are correct, Main Street United Methodist Church will lose one-half of its membership in the next 20 years. One-half! You say, but Jim, I thought you were going to tell cute little fuzzy stories about children. My point is about children. Knowing that we are going, what will we leave behind? Knowing that we are passing through, what will we leave behind? No one generation owns this earth or its resources or even the money we accumulate in the bank. We cannot own anything. Why? Because we die. This became clear to me last week as my brother and I sat with my mother, and we planned our parents' estate, and we planned above us for our parents, and we planned below us to the next generation beyond, and no one generation owns this earth or its resources or even the money we accumulate in the bank, however, we have the power, while we are living, to show whom and what we value. What will we leave the children? Not just in our wills, but what will we leave the children as a culture? What will we leave the children in the priorities of our laws, of our education system? Great entertainment, where is it? Great novels, where are they? Agreed upon manners and customs, or from politeness to policy, these things take shape as we live them, and then we leave them to our children. Have you noticed, and I am two-thirds through my sermon, have you noticed that I haven't mentioned the great foundation of the Ten Commandments, upon which, Jesus' teaching of love of God and love of neighbor were expanded all the way to love of enemy? I have hardly mentioned Jesus. Imagine a

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sermon that takes this long to focus on Jesus! Here’s my question. In your homes and honestly in your conversations or in your gatherings, how often do you mention church or Sunday school where the children learn of the Ten Commandments and about loving God and neighbor or Jesus’ parables or loving and forgiving enemies or the way Jesus pictured God as a father, waiting, with arms open, waiting and watching down the road for his wayward children to come home? Somewhere in between recreation and entertainment and sports and studies and college and right friends and right dates and right mates and right investments and right companies to interview with, somewhere in there, have you told and taught and showed your children that you believe in a God who is like a waiting father with arms open, ready to reach down and lift up and embrace any wayward child who manages to stumble home with hope in his heart? Have you given that to your children? Have you willed that to your grandchildren? Have you shown by acts of will that you believe that in your heart and shown that in how you use what God has given you? It’s not too late.

We have a fine facility, and we are going to continue to push, even harder in the coming years, the importance of Christian education because if our children do not get it here, they may not get it at all. God left us a legacy, and we have accepted it and embraced it. Let us leave this world and this church better than we found it. Let us share the treasure of the love God has put in our hearts. Let us take out and pass around the peace, which passes all human understanding. If we have no peace to share, then let us come in just a few moments to this altar rail, whether broken or bitter, whether bruised by life, come and kneel with faith, expecting and believing that God will meet us here. “Children,” Jesus said, “Come unto me.” Trust as a child does, reaching up with tiny, urgent arms to be lifted and held close. The Bible says, “Put not your heart in princes.” It occurs to me that governments can pass laws, but they cannot promote compassion. Compassion comes from the heart, and hearts connected to God are where compassion comes from most truly. There is an old Chinese proverb that says, “If there is goodness in the heart, there is beauty in the character. If there is beauty in the character, there will be harmony in the home. If there is harmony in the home, there will be order in the nation. Where there is order in the nation, there can be peace in the world.” First, compassion in the heart. We are among those who believe that the teaching and the touch of Jesus Christ changes and grows a heart in that direction. Teach and touch, and pass on the compassion of Christ to children and to grandchildren and to others you meet who are seeking meaning and comfort in this world. Jesus said let the little children come to me, do not shut them out. Let the little children come to you. Let the children see in you the transforming power of Christ, and so let go of anger, and let go of blame and judgment, let go of anxiety and despair, let go of the desire to manipulate and exploit. Let go of fear of self-image and haughtiness and vanity. Do not cause them to stumble. Do not cause them to stumble by bad example, which drives them away from God. Do not cause them to stumble by no example of faith, which sets them adrift in a world without knowledge of God. Do not cause them to stumble by passing through this world without a thought to the generations far and near who will follow. Leave the world a better place than you found it. Children everywhere are reaching up for someone trustworthy. God has reached down to us, and we have found God trustworthy, now let us be a blessing in return, and reach down to those who seek someone to trust. Amen.