

Rev. Julie Belman
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Mark 10:13-16

¹³People were bringing little children to Jesus in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. ¹⁴But 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. ¹⁵Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” ¹⁶And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

Legacy of Church

Growing up, I always equated “church” with family. I am a cradle Methodist on both sides of my family. Most every holiday memory I have revolves around church. Easter Sunday with my mom organizing the kids easter egg hunt following the Sunrise Service. Pentecost with my brother playing the handbells with the youth choir. 4th of July with my Dad in charge of the United Methodist Men’s cookout. Christmas Eve with my Grandparents Sunday School class in the church fellowship hall.

For a lot of people, church means family time, but I’d say my family took it to an extreme. I’ve sung Charles Wesley hymns in over 30 states because every vacation trip my family took included Sunday morning worship at the local Methodist Church. Each summer of my childhood, my cousins and I gathered for Grandparents Camp in Hendersonville, NC, and no one ever discussed our plans for Sunday morning; we all just woke up, got ready for church and piled into my Grandfather’s Buick. CHURCH is just what we *do*.

This Sunday morning tradition is certainly continuing for James, Ray, and Marlow, because they are preacher’s kids. Our family *has* to go to church. Every week, Travis and I map out what’s going on here at Bethel, so we can try to work in the other parts of our lives. We have no other choice but to set our lives around the church calendar, and the people around us have learned to accept it.

But what about the families who *do* have a choice? Those who do not *have* to come church?

- What about the families whose friends and bosses and coaches do not expect them to have a standing Sunday morning commitment?
- What about the families who are trying to balance church along with everything else?
- Who are trying to make church “fit” into the crazy and hectic lives they lead?
- What about the families who feel guilty that they cannot come to church more? Or give more? Or be more involved?
- What about the families who feel powerless against their own schedules; who *want* to be here at the church and be part of the community, but also want to provide extracurricular and athletic opportunities for their children, opportunities that often occur on Sunday mornings?

As a church, we can help these families. As a church, we are *CALLED* to help these families. In fact, I believe this is *exactly* what Jesus is calling us to do in the scripture that we read this morning from the Gospel of Mark. This scripture talks about receiving the children who had gathered around him that day. And I think upon first reading this text, we can feel really good, because we do this really well here at Bethel!

- We celebrate the children in our midst. We love them and pray for them and bless them.
- We give resources and ourselves to teach them in Sunday School and Vacation Bible School.
- We have a fantastic church preschool!
- We give our time, money and service to helping children in need through many missions and ministries, most especially, Family Promise.
- We baptize babies and promise, as a community, to always welcome them, embrace them and support them on their faith journey.

So feel good. BUT - don't get too comfortable. I think we can dig deeper. Even though Jesus was talking specifically about the children that were in his midst, I think that there is a bigger meaning and purpose to what he was saying. This passage is part of a broader narrative in the Gospel of Mark. Immediately before it, the Pharisees had questioned Jesus about divorce, asking if it was lawful for a man to divorce his wife. Rather than answering perhaps the way the Pharisees wanted him to – that it *is* lawful for a man to divorce his wife and leave her without money, status or power – Jesus *avored* women in his response, showing he believed women should be considered equal.

And *then* Jesus started talking about children!

So, let's think about this: In terms of who had power in the culture and society Jesus was living in, women (particularly divorced women) and children were pretty low on the list. And these were the ones that Jesus took favor on!!! Jesus cared deeply for the powerless. Jesus wanted to open his arms wide and welcome the rejected into his midst; Jesus wanted to lay hands on them and to bless them and to ensure them that there was a place in the world for them.

Jesus cared for the powerless and went out of his way to reach out to them. I would argue that, as Christians, we are called to do the same. As we send our children, teachers and administrators back to school, I want us to focus on the vital role church plays in the life of our families. And so in looking at our scripture today and how it shows Jesus reaching out to the powerless, I want to talk about families and how sometimes *they* struggle with feeling powerless.

And I want to talk about how we, as a church, can help them.

I would argue that families today often feel powerless against the craziness of the world that we live in. While the type of powerlessness they feel is different from the systemic powerlessness experienced by the children Jesus was talking about in this scripture, I believe the call to action is the same.

As a young Christian Mother, I spend a lot of time with young families, and I see them struggling in real and sometimes *impossible* ways. They often feel pulled in many different directions, lacking the time, energy and money to keep up with everything society is telling them they need to have & do. They have to constantly fight back against the ever-changing world of technology and social media. They have to make difficult choices surrounding family time because their Sundays are taken up by work, sports or other extracurricular activities. And they feel powerless... unable to find balance in it all.

But, my friends, hear the Good News: this is where the church comes in!! We can give power to the powerless!!! In this instance, giving power to the powerless means that we can help the families in our community who are struggling and feeling lost. We can empower our families by making sure they know that they are welcome here, at this church, no matter what their lives look like.

When we hear the call of Jesus to, "Let the children come to me," we need to respond by opening our arms wide and making sure our church is a safe space for ALL of our families to experience God's love, learn and grow in their faith and worship in a way that is meaningful, relevant and accessible.

When my Grandma Dot and I traveled to Switzerland, we worshipped at a Catholic Church in Lucerne, which is in the Lake Lugano region, about an hour from Zurich and two hours from the Italian border. And while we each got a lot of different things out of the experience, we both commented later how wonderful it was to see so many young families in the church. It felt a lot like being in our own churches back home. There was movement; there were small voices asking questions, babies crying, parents shushing and little feet pitter-pattering around the balcony.

Even though I was sitting in a Swiss Catholic mass, it all felt so familiar to me. And I loved it!! I loved watching a young family settle in next to an older woman with her head covered, who was clutching & kissing her visibly worn rosary beads. I loved watching the children kneel and stand and try to sing along with the hymns and prayers. I loved watching a young father frantically try to get his screaming baby out of the sanctuary during the homily. I loved seeing this church bear witness to Jesus' scriptural call, to open their doors wide so that everyone, regardless of their age, gender or life circumstances, could be on the receiving end of God's grace.

My friends, this is what I want for our church!!!

As a church, we are called to be a safe place for families to come and learn and worship and pray and grow in their faith. We are called to set good examples for them, to help them discern how to find balance and support them when their journeys are difficult. We are called to love them, and be patient with the chaos that they sometimes bring. We are called to adjust our calendar if something works better for their schedules. We are called to ask for their opinions, LISTEN TO WHAT THEY SAY, and be willing to CHANGE if there is a way we can better accommodate their needs. We are called to remember that *we* are at this church today, as adults, partly because someone embraced us in the church when we were children, and we want that legacy to continue.

It is not always easy to embrace a multitude of families in the church, and create a space where they can all come -- free to be themselves. But families need our support; many of them are overwhelmed; some even feel powerless. And Jesus calls us to reach out to the powerless.

As I thought about families in the church this week, I was reminded of a line from the Broadway Show *Hamilton*. It is from the scene where Alexander Hamilton dies; time freezes right before the bullet strikes Hamilton and he launches into a monologue, asking: *Legacy, what is a legacy? It's planting seeds in a garden you never get to see. Writing notes at the beginning of a song someone else will sing for me!*

As a church that is committed to serving families, we are touching lives in ways that we may never see or know. But we are also touching lives in ways that are real and powerful and grace-filled and life changing! So let us plant seeds. Let us celebrate families and support families and love families. Let us open our arms wide and welcome families into our midst, blessing them and assuring them that there is a place for them in this church.

And may *our* children one day tell the stories that we are helping to write in this church today. May it be so. AMEN.

LET US PRAY: Loving God, Creator of all things, form us anew in the likeness of Christ. Open us up to possibilities we cannot imagine, and free us from self-imposed limitations. Help us to explore the wonderful depths of faith, for wherever we go, you are with us. Give us ears to hear your call and the willingness to follow you to new places of faith. We pray for our church family. We seek to be faithful as we live out our lives here at Bethel. Draw us closer to you. In the name of Christ we pray, Amen