

Scripture: Luke 18:15-17

Sermon Title: "Love of Children"

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As we do on Sunday morning, many churches have a moment for the children in their midst to receive a special message like we do each week- it is a time that is focused on the children. When I was in college, I saw a number of churches do these moments in different ways, and there was one that I will always remember. In this one particular church, every time there was a children's message and the pastor invited the kids in the congregation to come forward, the piano would begin to play and the congregation would begin to sing a simple song with such a sweet tune - and the lyrics, which were inspired by our scripture reading this morning, said simply this - "Let them come, let them come, let the children come to me. I have time, I have time, said the savior tenderly. Let them come, let them come, do not turn them away. I have time, let them come, let them stay." Every week the congregation would sing this as the 3 or 4 children in the pews came forward out of the 100 people who were there in worship that morning, a small percentage of their gathered community, yet the entire congregation in their singing helped to make that moment special for the kids.

That memory of the congregation singing this song has always stuck with me as a constant reminder that making space for young people in the life of the church, no matter how few there may be, making that space and that time is important and holy work. It is important work that the entire congregation takes part in, by making the space and setting the tone of welcome, no matter how many or few children are there.

In our scripture reading this morning from the Gospel of Luke, Jesus reminds us of this importance. The disciples, for reasons that are unclear and are never revealed in the gospel, were upset that children were being brought to see Jesus. Perhaps they thought the message of Jesus was too hard for little children to understand, but then again, the disciples didn't really always understand it either. Or maybe they thought the focus needed to be first on the adults who were coming. We don't know what the disciple's

motivation was for sternly ordering parents to not bring their children to Jesus. But of course, Jesus would have none of this attitude and he told the disciples, “let them come. Do not stop them.” And when I picture this moment in my mind as Jesus embraces the children, I see him creating a safe space for them. A place of loving embrace. A place free of fear. A place of acceptance and welcome where the presence of Jesus can be experienced in powerful way. That’s what I envision when I hear Jesus welcoming the children – a vision of safety and security and a place to grow.

Making this happen in our world today remains to be so very important. Particularly in this month of October and today as we wear purple and are mindful of the impact of domestic violence which affects both adults and children, I hear of this safe and embracing place that Jesus is creating for the children and it just reminds me of how important it is to help create more spaces like that. In a world where, according to the Maine Coalition to End Domestic Violence, 1 in 15 children report seeing domestic violence among their parents and of those who witness this, 1 in 3 are also victims of domestic violence, we are reminded of just how important it is to be like Jesus and to help create those safe places of loving embrace for the children around us. This is one reason for why the call to love our children is so vital as we live out our faith.

Now, Jesus does not only create that safe place for the children and in turn calls us to do the same, but he takes things one step farther when he tells his disciples, “whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” Basically, Jesus says pay attention to what the children do and learn from them – yes, you disciples learn from the children. Yes, adults take some time to learn from the children around you.

So, with this example that Jesus gives us, how do we live this love of children today? I know, and I feel like I need to name that when we start talking about children in church, many begin to lament that there are fewer kids attending church and so there are few kids who get to experience the welcoming space we strive to create in our faith communities and those warm, embracing places like Church School. And with fewer kids in church, we don’t have as many children in our midst to learn from. These

realities can be hard to acknowledge as the landscape of church has shifted over the years.

Yes, things are different now, particularly when we consider how children and young people engage the church. However, that doesn't mean the call to love our children is any less vital. It doesn't mean that we shouldn't still create those safe and embracing places like Jesus did or that we shouldn't still learn from young people. What it means, I believe, is that we must begin doing so in some new and creative ways.

I give thanks that we as a faith community are already embracing some of the new ways that we may be called to love the children. Yes, we may not have a youth group here, but we can still support the faith formation of youth in our world by hosting service trips here at the church each summer and, when we show hospitality, we create welcoming spaces. We support the faith formation of young people when, in volunteer hours or in financial support, we help sustain the ministries of Pilgrim Lodge. Yes, there may be fewer children in our Church School and even in our wider community, but we can still help create safe spaces out in our community as well. Whether it is providing for the needs of children or helping to nurture caring and safe spaces around town, the call to love children remains. The example that comes to mind even right now is around Halloween. For a number of years now, there has been a big celebration down on Federal Street for kids and families, providing a safe place for Halloween fun. This year, there were some questions over whether this celebration would be able to take place for a variety of reasons. That's when some faithful friends in the community stepped up, including several of us from the church, to make sure that such a safe place continues to be offered. Sure, it has nothing to do with faith necessarily, but it does show a love for children – by nurturing safe fun for our kids.

Times have changed as they do and we, I believe, are embracing the changes by being open to how the Holy Spirit is still calling us to do what Jesus did in the Gospel of Luke – create safe space, encourage faith formation, and to listen and learn from the children and youth in our communities. And in these changing times, there is still much more to

be discovered. There are still more ways to do these things and to embrace more fully the love of children. What can we do? What do you see? Let God's spirit move through you as we do this work together.

Beloved People of God, times have changed and how we live out the call to love children is changing too. And while we continue to embrace the blessings of Children's messages and church school here in this place, we too open ourselves to the ways in which God is leading us into new opportunities to love – into new ministries that bring folks into the love of Jesus – a love that creates safe spaces, a love that teaches us how to live love, and a love that listens to what the kids and youth of today may have to teach us about what it means to enter and to live the kingdom of God. May we be open to it all as we embrace where we are, and dream of future days yet to unfold – days filled with love for our children. So be it and may it be so. Amen.