

Eat, Sleep, Cry, Poop...Blessed

Luke 18:15-17

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ May 26, 2019 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

¹⁵ People were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them; and when the disciples saw it, they sternly ordered them not to do it. ¹⁶ But Jesus called for them and said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. ¹⁷ Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." (Luke 18:15-17, NRSV)

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Think of all the places you were not allowed to go when you were a kid. Can you remember? Maybe there was a certain room in your house, ironically called the living room, where you were instructed to avoid because not much living ever actually happened in there. At family gatherings, maybe you weren't allowed at the main table until you were a certain age? How many of us at some point found ourselves relegated to eating turkey and mashed potatoes at the card table in the back room? I remember that some stores frowned on the presence of children and if your mom or dad did take you into one of those stores you were sternly told, "Do not touch anything!". Some restaurants didn't want children to eat there, though most of those were places kids wouldn't want to eat anyway. No children's menu at most five-star restaurants. Even amusement parks – of all places – had restrictions. When I was little it seemed like all the best rides were off limits until you were taller than the sign outside the ride. A kid can only ride the Mad Tea Party so many times at Disneyland.

What about church? When you were a kid did you feel like church was a place that welcomed you? I was fortunate to grow up in a church that always made me feel like I belonged there. I don't take that for granted because not everybody has that experience. In some churches, like in some families, children can be treated like second class citizens, seen but not heard, shuffled off whenever possible to their own corner of the building so that the adults can carry on without the distraction.

What about God? When you were little, do you remember what you thought about God? Was God somebody you feared? Or was God somebody you were drawn to? When you were little did you have a sense that even though you were just a kid that God still

wanted you to be his friend, to come near to him, to speak up to him? Can you remember?

I ask all this because I want to help you picture the scene that we just heard read to us from Luke 18. Luke tells us that in those days there were all sorts of people who were bringing their children to Jesus so that he might touch them. To clarify, Luke uses the Greek word *brephe* here, a word which denoted newborn infants or even unborn children. In other words, these are not parents bringing their kindergarteners to have Jesus bless them. No, picture a couple with their newborn child, even just days old. Picture a pregnant woman asking Jesus to lay his hands on her to bless her unborn child.

It's not surprising that people were doing this. One of the marks of Jesus' earthly ministry was that everywhere he went he conferred personal blessing on those he met. This was especially true with the ordinary, even excluded, people of his day. He touched lepers that nobody else would dare touch. He touched prostitutes, an act people back then thought would make you unclean before God. He touched Samaritans. No Jew would touch one of these foreigners. Spit on a Samaritan, yes, but not touch one. One of the most distinguishing parts of Jesus' life on earth was this habit he had of touching those around him as a tangible expression of God's unconditional love for people everybody else assumed were not loved by God.

What would it be like for you if Jesus were to come near and touch you, just lay his hand on your shoulder, or on your head, and bless you? What would that feel like? How might that change things?

It seems natural to us that people would bring their children, born and unborn, to receive a blessing from Jesus. Most everybody wants God to bless their kids. What we need to understand is that it was different in those days. Not everybody would have thought this was such a good idea, because in the ancient world children were not highly regarded. In fact, the only value that people ascribed to children was the potential that one day they might become productive members of society, or that they might produce children themselves to ensure the family line would endure. Nobody could avoid childhood, of course, but people back then didn't celebrate it in the ways we do today. In fact, if you search all through ancient literature this might be the only example you will find where sympathy is shown to

the young.¹ Luke's account here, this simple act of Jesus blessing babies, was radically out of place in his day.

It is not surprising, therefore, that when these people start bringing their babies to Jesus the disciples turn into security guards and bouncers. Luke tells us that they "sternly ordered" them to stay away. And again, while that's shocking to us, even offensive to us, it would not have been either to Luke's audience. What would have been shocking is if the disciples had stood aside and let these people come unhindered to Jesus.

The other night I was out to dinner with Esther. In the middle of what was turning out to be lovely evening together, a child two tables over started acting up. She might have been two, maybe three, and she was fussing because either she wanted something her parents wouldn't give her or she didn't want to do something her parents wanted her to do. Either way, she was not happy and was letting her parents, along the rest of the restaurant, know about it. As the whining turned into crying, and the crying turned into a fit, I fully expected her parents to spare the rest of us by removing the little girl from the restaurant. It was time to take a walk. It's what I would have done 15 years ago. Not them. And suddenly, what had been moments before a nice enjoyable dinner with my wife took a turn for the worse. I'm not proud of this but it's true; I was irritated. That child in that state should not be here right now. That's what I was thinking. I even shot a glance to the young couple meant to communicate as much to them. It didn't work. And I'm somebody – I really am – who likes little kids. But in that moment I wanted that little kid out of there.

We're not told exactly why Jesus' disciples wanted the children out of there on that day. Likely they had bought into the status quo, that children had no value until they were adults and so somebody as important as Jesus simply shouldn't be bothered by somebody so unimportant. Beyond that, maybe they, like me that night in the restaurant, were simply annoyed at the noise and the distraction that comes when kids are around. For crying out loud, Jesus is teaching us here! We're trying to listen to what he has to say. Either put your kids in the nursery or go and sit with them in the cry room. We don't want them here.

Here's the error the disciples made at this point. They are presuming to know the mission of their master better than their master knows his own mission. If they were wise they would have first asked Jesus, "Lord, do you want us to allow these people to bring their babies to you?" They would have surprised at his answer, but at least they would have avoided the rebuke they ended

up receiving. We always get in trouble when we presume to know who it is Jesus wants to come near to him and who it is Jesus wants to keep at a distance. Christ is always going to be more hospitable than we are, and so we would be wise if we would learn from the mistake his first disciples made here, the mistake that so many other disciples down the line have continued to make right up to today. Do not stand in the way of anybody who wants to come to Jesus. Anybody!

Calling out to those who had been turned away, Jesus said to his disciples, "**Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.**"

It is at this point that many people make a common error of interpretation. When many of us read Jesus' words here we understand him to be lifting up children as a model to emulate. He *is* doing this, of course, but not at all in the way that most of us imagine.

This is not to say that there is not much in children to admire and even emulate. There is an innocence in children that most of us lose somewhere along the way as the world pollutes our minds and hearts with so much garbage. Unlike many of us, children are spontaneous in wonderfully unexpected ways. Kids generally know how to seize the moment, enjoy what is right in front of them rather than be so caught up in the regrets of yesterday and the worries of tomorrow. Children are generally honest, especially when they are very young. They say what they think. I heard the story of the little boy who, after the baptism of his baby brother, started crying. He cried all the way through the service. Well, when the family finally got outside his father asked him, "Son, why are you crying?" The boy replied, "The pastor said that he wanted us brought up in a Christian home but I want to stay with you guys!" Totally unfiltered. We admire that honesty in kids.

Perhaps above all we admire the humility we see in children, especially younger children. Pre-school kids don't think too much of themselves, as we tend to do. Or too little of themselves, as we also tend to do. C.S. Lewis once said, "True humility is not thinking less of yourself; it is thinking of yourself less." That describes children, doesn't it? They are just comfortable in their own skin, curious, open, teachable, willing to follow those who will lead them.

It's so easy to see why we imagine Jesus telling us here to emulate these qualities in children, and then telling us that if we do we will be the sorts of people who are ready to enter into the kingdom of God. Isn't that the way most of you have interpreted Jesus' words here?

¹ James Edwards, *The Gospel According to Luke* (Erdmans, 2015), 507.

Here's the problem with that interpretation. Who gets glorified in the end? Children, right. If this is what Jesus is saying here, that to get to heaven we need to take on the beautiful qualities of children, then we leave the passage especially impressed with children and those kingdom-like qualities we see in them: innocence, honesty, spontaneity, and especially humility. Now, if only we can make ourselves like children in these ways then we too will be people ready to enter into the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus even seems to say as much in verse 17 when he declares, **“Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.”**

Here's what I want you to see. Lifting up children in this way is actually a total contradiction of everything else Jesus teaches elsewhere, a contradiction of the very Gospel itself? Specifically, it's a contradiction of the parable Luke places just before this account in Luke, the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector which we explored last week. The point of that parable, remember, is that there is nothing in us that justifies us before God. Nothing! That's why the tax collector, who could only plead to God to let him off the hook for the terrible things he had done, could be justified before God in the end. That means that once we begin to think that there *is* something in us that makes us ready to come to God – innocence, spontaneity, honesty, and humility, for example – then we become the Pharisee in the parable who thinks he can justify himself before heaven.

Remember that Luke tells us that these are babies who are being brought to Jesus, some of them even still in the womb. That's a critical detail in the story. Think about babies. It's been a few years since we had babies in our house but the memories are fresh. What do babies do? What do they accomplish? A newborn actually accomplishes nothing more than a child still in the womb. They eat. They sleep. They cry. They poop. That's it. In fact, I remember how low a bar we set for praising our kids when they were babies. Your newborn focuses her eyes on you when you talk to her and you go nuts, as if she has just accomplished some great feat, demonstrated some remarkable skill. A few months later she rolls over on her own and you want to throw a parade in her honor. I don't get any credit for doing these sorts of things today and I am especially good at focusing on people when they talk to me. And you ought to see me roll over in my crib!

When it comes to babies, we even say things like, “Oh, he's such a good baby.” But what's the alternative? Never once have I heard somebody say about their child, “Unfortunately, he's not such a good baby. He doesn't ever do anything right.” In all seriousness – eat, sleep, cry, poop, that is all that these babies could

do and yet Jesus blesses them. What do you call that? I call it grace. Who gets the glory for that grace? The babies? No. The glory goes to Jesus.

Listen very carefully to me or you will make the same mistake here that most people make. *Jesus does not bless the children here for their virtues; he blesses them for their deficits.*² He is not telling us that we need to become like babies if we are ever to enter into the Kingdom; he is telling us that *we are like babies* and that if we can recognize this truth we then will be ready to enter in. Babies are an important model for us because of what they lack, not because of what they possess. No newborn or unborn child in the history of the world has ever won a race, or received a good grade on a test, or completed a chore well done, or even a made a single good decision. No infant has ever painted a masterpiece, or designed a brilliant invention, or cured a disease, or written a bestseller. They eat, they sleep, they cry, they poop, and still they are blessed. They come with nothing to offer and they are received and blessed nonetheless.

Now do you see the Gospel here? I have heard it said that if you want a picture of what it looks like to receive the Kingdom of God, watch a newborn infant nursing at its mother's breast. No child earns that blessing. “You've been such a good baby today so I'm going to feed you. You're so innocent, so honest, so spontaneous, so humble. You deserve this.” No, the child brings nothing except a willingness to receive what it needs. Who is the picture of love here? Who is honored? Who is the source of life? It's not the baby.

You may remember the quote that was on the front of the bulletin last week from the 14th century English ascetic, Julian of Norwich. She once wrote, “What does the Lord require of thee, but to stand before him silly, naked and homely.” Eat, sleep, cry, poop...in a way that's all we really have to offer the Lord. And maybe that's all he requires because it's all he knows we can offer. To recognize this is the first step toward the Kingdom. To keep recognizing this keeps us on that road.

There is, yes, a secondary message here to us about making sure that we do not stand in the way of anybody, especially children, who are trying to make their way to Christ. I'm grateful that this is a church much like the church I grew up in, a church that makes a place for children and youth at the table. There are always ways we can do a better job of this, of course, ways we still keep kids at a distance, perhaps without even realizing we are doing it. But the right spirit is here. I've seen it, over and over again.

² James Edwards, *The Gospel According to Luke*, 509.

And so we must continue to welcome children, even babies, into this space of worship. I had a seminary professor tell me to be grateful when you hear a baby cry during your sermon because you know then that at least one person out in the pews is still awake! We ought to love the cries and noises of kids in our midst. Furthermore, we recognize that our baptismal vows call us to share the love of Christ with *all* the children and youth of our church, not just our own. And so we learn and remember their names. We invest in their lives. We pray for them. We mentor them. We honor their leadership and insight. Yes, that is part of the message here.

But that's not the main message. The main message, once again, is that the littlest ones among us are the ones who, at least in terms of accomplishment, have the absolute least to offer. Eat, sleep, cry, poop. Yet Jesus blesses them nonetheless, not for their virtues but for their deficits. Whoever among us then can receive the Kingdom in this way, like a helpless child nursing at the breast of its loving mother, that is the person who gains entrance to the Kingdom in the end.

Let the children come to Jesus, and let us recognize that we also come with nothing to offer him. Praise be to God - Father, Son and Holy Spirit - who lets us come.

Amen.



The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Where were you not allowed to go as kid? Can you remember?
2. How about church? Did you feel like you belonged in church when you were a kid?
3. Read Luke 18:15-17 again. What do you notice? What have you never noticed before now?
4. Why do you think the disciples tried to keep these people and their babies away?
5. Once you realize that these are newborn and unborn babies here in the story, how does that change the message here?
6. What do you think Jesus means when he says that if we do not receive the kingdom of God as a little child that we will never enter it?

7. How do we receive the kingdom of God as a little child?
8. What would it mean to you if Jesus were to lay his hand on you and bless you? Can you imagine?

Table to Table Question

A question for kids and adults to answer together

What does Jesus think about children? What is it about children that Jesus wants us to notice in this story?