

Children of Promise

Children's Sabbath

Mark 10:13-16

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College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa October 23, 2016

You often hear people say, "Children are the future." While that may be true, a negative connotation can lurk not far beneath the surface. For **if children are simply considered to be the future, their important role and presence in the here and now can be diminished.** This applies to society, as a whole, and to the church, in particular.

You may be interested to know this is the official position of the Presbyterian Church (USA) as well, as stated in the *Directory for Worship* section of our Presbyterian *Book of Order*. Let me quote W-3.1004:

Children bring special gifts to worship and grow in the faith through their regular inclusion and participation in the worship of the congregation. Those responsible for planning and leading the participation of children in worship should consider the children's level of understanding and ability to respond, and should avoid both excessive formality and condescension.

The session should ensure that regular programs of the church do not prevent children's full participation with the whole congregation in worship, in Word and Sacrament, on the Lord's Day.

Not only is that something that I strive to follow and encourage, so has this congregation throughout the years. That is something we should be quite proud of and thankful for, because it's not something that every congregation strives to do. Whether in their singing, or their (very) active participation in our weekly Time With the Children, would you not agree that College Hill would be a lot less joyous place to be, and in fact more spiritually bereft, without the presence of our children and youth?

There's no better biblical justification for this inclusive approach toward children than in today's Gospel Reading from Mark, a story that's also found in the gospels of Matthew and Luke. We learn that **Jesus himself was delighted in children and demonstrated there is ample room in God's grace and inclusive love for children.** No one was unimportant to Jesus. For unlike the message given by some churches, whether consciously or subconsciously, no one is unimportant to God. Biblical commentator Dr. Ralph F. Wilson looks at it this way:

A ministry to children is important in and of itself since children are spiritual beings and can learn from an early age the truths of the Gospel. Jesus blessing the children shows his own respect for the spiritual life of children. We can do no less.

I would add that Jesus cared about their physical and emotional well-being just as much as their spiritual life. Jesus was not too busy or preoccupied to pause, bless and interact with children. He took time with and for children – and so should we! Since we are called to carry out the ministry of Jesus in our day and time, it is appropriate to continually ask of ourselves: **Are we also demonstrating a love that has ample room for everyone? Do our attitudes, words and actions demonstrate that no one is less important to us than anyone else, especially including children and youth?**

The cold, hard truth is in that ancient Middle Eastern society children were viewed as unimportant – almost as non-persons. The shocking part of this story, then, isn't that the disciples appear to be coldhearted by trying to keep the little children away from Jesus, it's that Jesus told them *not* to keep the little ones away from him. **We learn that it is always a mistake when people in positions of power hinder others from participating in or recognizing they are already an important and beloved part of the realm and household of God.**

As individuals, and as a congregation, that seeks justice for all people, including children and youth, we can't stop there. **The bubbles that we live in rarely intersect and interact with the deeper reality of what's going on in the lives of children in this country.** That is why we have decided to participate in this year's Children's Sabbath Celebration. Let me explain for those who are not familiar with this. This year marks the 25th anniversary of the **National Observance of Children's Sabbath**, resourced and promoted by the **Children's Defense Fund**.

This year's theme is "Children of Promise: Closing Opportunity Gaps." We are joining with thousands of places of worship all across the nation as together people of faith affirm that every child enters the world full of promise and potential. However, gaps in family income, early childhood development, and education widen over time making it far harder for some children to thrive, succeed, and fulfill their promise. On this day it is my hope that we **raise awareness and voice a concern about these opportunity gaps.**

Further, we are encouraged to explore how we might help in closing these gaps so all children have an equal opportunity to become all God intends them to be. We have already focused on some of these issues in our adult church school class by learning from the Oklahoma Policy Institute about the plight of children here in Oklahoma, specifically in the area of education. Perhaps you saw the front-page story in the *Tulsa World* that **our state wears the badge of shame of leading the nation for the third straight year in cuts to the primary source of state funding for public schools.** The policy director for the Oklahoma Policy Institute, Gene Perry (who led our adult church class), was quoted as saying, "Unfortunately we haven't seen any meaningful response from state lawmakers to reverse these cuts, and in fact they've cut even deeper."

From a faith perspective, budgets – any budget, including family budgets and our own church budget – are documents that reflect an organization's or individual's moral and ethical values. Therefore, those responsible must be held accountable. The legislative and executive branches of our state government, in my opinion, have contributed to the opportunity gaps for the children of Oklahoma.

Our adult church school class last fall was moved to commit, with the full approval of the ruling elders on our session, to take a bolder step. That's why we have encouraged those of you who are willing and able to volunteer to be a reading partner in one of our city's elementary schools. Several have indeed volunteered. And as you

know from a recent and very generous 5th Sunday Offering, we collected enough resources to provide uniforms for several dozen Kendal-Whittier Elementary school children, and to adopt the entire 3rd grade – providing their 5 classrooms with supplies for the year.

According to the Children Defense Fund, opportunity to thrive during childhood depends on many factors. If key factors are unavailable to children, the consequences for their development and success as adults can be dire. Poverty hurts children and harms their futures. **Too many poor children in rich America are denied opportunity for success when their basic needs are not met, and when they are denied access to high-quality development and learning opportunity beginning in the early years.** Marian Wright Edelman, President of the Children's Defense Fund, writes:

To close opportunity gaps so that every child can fulfill their God-given potential, we as adults and political leaders and as a nation need to keep our promise that every child is of equal worth.

Together we can and must change the odds for America's children with urgency and persistence. Every child should have an equal opportunity to succeed regardless of family income, race, disability, or zip code.

To level the playing field we need to close the opportunity gaps by ending child poverty *now* and ensuring every child a strong foundation for success.

College Hill is one of thousands of churches, synagogues, mosques, Baha'i communities, temples, and other places of worship around the nation celebrating the Children's Sabbath this weekend.

Let us pray this multi-faith weekend inspires congregations and religious organizations, including ours, to **work on behalf of children through prayer, service, and advocacy throughout the year. What's our next move to help others experience the realization they are children of promise?**

Amen.

Resource:

Children's Sabbath; Children's Defense Fund

Wilson, Dr. Ralph F., *Little Children Come to Jesus (Luke 18:15-17)*, Joyful Heart Renewal Ministries, JesusWalk Bible Study Series