

For Our Kids

Matthew 18:1-6; Mark 10:13-16

It's good to be back after a break following a magnificent Christmas season. A big thank you to Pastors Larry and Ellis for their messages the last two weeks. They were terrific! I was with a group of pastors this week and one of them said to me, only half-jokingly—how jealous he was of our staff. And I can see why. We are blessed!

For the last few months we have been asking, “What if our church was known more for what we’re FOR than for what we’re AGAINST? The world knows what we are against. What are we FOR? Well...we’ve said that we are FOR our city. We want to champion the communities in which we live. And we are FOR our neighbors. Jesus said, “Love your neighbor”...and the 58 dots on that map out in the lobby representing your neighborhood gatherings...tell me that you ARE working to love your neighbor well.

Today as we launch a new year I want to talk about something else we are for: Our kids! What does it look like when a church is 100 % “For Our Kids.” If you have kids at home, this obviously matters to you. But I hope it will matter to every grandparent, and every great-grandparent, and every adopted grandparent or aunt or uncle in this extended Chapel Hill family.

For much of the fall we talked about the Greatest Commandment. Jesus said, “You shall love the Lord you God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength...and your neighbor as yourself. The greatest commandment. Today I want to talk about the “greatest” person. Who is the GREATEST person in the kingdom of God? Or to bring it home, who is the greatest person in this church! It’s an odd question, but let’s grapple with it.

First you’d have to define “greatness.” Does it mean spiritual maturity or wisdom or authority or influence? If so, you might think that one of our elders would fit that description. Or one of our deacons. Or an influential layperson. Or even a pastor. Who IS the greatest in our church community?

I ask this odd question because it is the very question the disciples asked Jesus. “Lord, who is the greatest in the kingdom of God?” “Right here...right now...who’s number one? Who would sit at the right hand of your throne.” This isn’t the only time they asked this. The disciples were often jockeying for power; jockeying to be Jesus’ favorite. But here, they decide to GO FOR IT. Make Jesus pick! WHO IS THE GREATEST!

And this is what Jesus did. We are told that Jesus called a child to him, “...put him in the midst of them and said, “Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the

kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” Matthew 18: 1-4

In Mark’s version, there’s more: (10:13-16)

And they were bringing children to him that he might touch them, and the disciples rebuked them. But when Jesus saw it, he was indignant and said to them, “Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.” And he took them in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands on them. Mark 10: 13-16.

We don’t know who Jesus chose as his sermon illustration, but I’ll bet it was a moment they never forgot. Maybe THEY were little uncomfortable, surrounded as they were by adults. But in that moment, Jesus elevated that child above every adult present... above every one of the disciples...even above any rabbi who might have been listening. The word “rabbi” means “my great one.” But in that moment, even the “great ones” weren’t great. It was that little child who was great.

Now let’s be clear what Jesus was NOT saying. He was not saying that a child is greatest in the kingdom because she is spiritually pure. Nowhere does the Bible teach that. In Psalm 51 David wrote, “...I was brought forth in iniquity...” In other words, we are spiritual rebels from our first breath.

Now...that might seem harsh, especially when we think about the precious babies we baptize. But, think about it: every baby is UTTERLY self-centered. How many of your little ones ever said, “Mom needs sleep; I think I’ll hold off crying for a couple more hours.” Or, “My little sister wants to play with my toy so I will happily give it to her.” Or “It doesn’t matter that I didn’t get ice cream after dinner; I’m just glad my brother did.” It’s never happened in the HISTORY of humanity... (OK...maybe once or twice. But not often!) Jesus is NOT exalting children for their spiritual innocence.

Why, then, does he call them “greatest in the kingdom?” The hint is in verse 4: “Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” In order to understand this teaching, you must understand the culture of the time. In first century Palestine, children were no more than adults-in-waiting. They had no rights, no voice, no influence. Childhood was never romanticized. Some of us were raised in a time when “children were seen and not heard,” right? Well, at the time of Jesus, they weren’t even supposed to be seen. Kids were to be kept out of the way, out of sight, out of mind...so that the adults (really, the MEN) could go about their important adult work.

And ESPECIALLY in the religious realm. Children, like women, were kept away from the rabbi and religious leaders who were doing their important spiritual work. The idea, then, that Jesus would use a child as an illustration of spiritual greatness ... was unthinkable. And, by the way, unprecedented. We have NEVER found another ancient example of rabbinical teaching of this sort. It was revolutionary.

Frankly, I doubt anyone in modern America would blink twice. OUR culture idolizes children...an unhealthy trend, by the way, to which I will speak in a few weeks. But when Jesus placed that child in

their midst, he was drawing attention to the LEAST admired, LEAST influential, MOST helpless and MOST humble of persons. A child had no rights, no standing. They were utterly dependent. And of course, they KNEW it! Every child KNOWS they are small; KNOWS they must rely on adults to take care of them. They are helpless and humble.

Last week I was in Orlando for a pastors' gathering. One morning I went running. There were a number of homeless folks on my route. At one point, I approached a disheveled homeless man who was walking toward me. As I passed by... he looked at me and said in a very loud voice, "And I thought I was ugly!" So...that was humbling! (By the way, he WAS ugly!)

This teaching of Jesus WAS humbling. He was saying, "If you want to be spiritually great, you must be humble." And this is important: Humility is not BEHAVING AS IF you are small or dependent or needy... (GET THIS)...true humility is recognizing that you ARE small and dependent and needy. In comparison to God; his, greatness and glory ...we ARE...every one of us... puny. And like a small child is utterly dependent upon the grace of her parents, WE are utterly dependent upon the grace of our heavenly father.

This flies RIGHT in the face of American religion. American religion says if we behave ourselves and do more good stuff than bad, we will earn God's favor and move up the spiritual pecking order. But the radical teaching of Jesus... that flies in the face of American religion...and EVERY OTHER WORLD RELIGION...is that ONLY when we recognize our smallness, our neediness, our dependence upon the Lord...only THEN can we become great in his kingdom. When we are small, then we are great.

Why are we FOR kids as a church? Because...we need them! When we imitate their humble approach to God, they help us enter the kingdom of heaven. But we are ALSO FOR kids because they need US to help them enter the kingdom of heaven. They depend on us to find their way to Jesus. Let me show you what I mean from the Mark passage.

Mark 10: 13 And [the parents] were bringing children to him that he might touch them...and the disciples rebuked them. Even though rabbis normally didn't trouble themselves with children... somehow parents sensed Jesus was different. They had seen the healing power of his touch. They wanted that for their kids. They wanted Jesus to touch and bless their children!

What a wonderful instinct! It is still true today. Even parents who are not religious instinctively know that getting their kids close to Jesus is good for them! Even if THEY don't go to church, parents drop their kids off because THEY want their children to have a touch from Jesus. And by the way, kids are OFTEN the reason that parents return to Jesus. I spoke to a man last week who said, "Our kids are the reason that got us here. They aren't what KEEP us here... but they GOT us here."

This is WHY it is essential that a church think carefully and invest strategically in its ministry to kids. It's why we invested in security for our children's wing. It's why we remodeled the chapel with color and sound and brilliant video screens. It's why we hired Paul Hargreaves as our new Children's Ministry director to lead our great staff. So that WHEN parents bring their children to Chapel Hill for a touch from Jesus, they'll get it!

Of course...the disciples DIDN'T get it! They were locked in that mindset that a rabbi didn't have time for kids. Not only did they prevent the parents from doing this, they REBUKED them for trying. "What do you think you are DOING pushing your children toward Jesus? He doesn't have time for this nonsense. He has more important things to do than bless your child. Get them out of here!" The disciples thought they were protecting Jesus.

But did you see his response? "...he was INDIGNANT and said to them, "Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God."

INDIGNANT! That is the ONLY time in Mark's gospel that word is used to describe Jesus. In other words...HE...WAS....TICKED! Can you imagine the withering stare Jesus directed toward his disciples? "Don't you DARE keep those children from me. You bring them TO me!" Can't you see Jesus kneeling down...and a MOB of kids bowling him over? It is one of my favorite images of the Lord. "He took them in his arms and blessed them, laying hands on them."

I want to be that kind of a church, don't you? How many have heard of the 4-14 window? There are studies that suggest that of the adults in church who claim to be Christians, 80% of them made a commitment to Jesus between the ages of 4-14. 80%! Put another way, IF WE DON'T get kids into the church and into a relationship with Christ before the age of 14...the odds are 4 out of 5 that they never will!

Parents...if those statistics are true...or even close to true... how might that inform the spiritual decisions you make for your kids? When I hear parents say, "I'm going to let my child grow up and make their own spiritual decisions".... it drives me crazy! You would never let your kid decide whether to eat well or go to bed or go to school or visit the doctor. You make those decisions FOR them because that's what it means to be a parent! How can you abdicate leading them in the most important decision they will ever make...the decision to follow Jesus? (And honestly, I often hear that from parents who don't really know WHAT they believe about Jesus. A good starting point for spiritual parenting then, would be to take Alpha and figure out what you DO believe!)

And parents, if the 4-14 window is real, how might that influence the way you spend your weekends? Sports are wonderful and formative; but if you regularly choose sports over Sunday school...are you depriving your children of the influence that will shape them for eternity?

And grandparents (and adopted grandparents)...if you have non-churched adult children with kids, how might this knowledge shape YOUR efforts to get them in Sunday School? One man in my LifeGroup said, "If what you say about the 4-14 window is true, now I'm thinking as a grandparent, 'How do we go to our children and say, "We WANT our grandchildren in worship. I know you aren't going to church...but we WANT this!"

The spiritual nurture of children ought to be among the TOP priorities of our church. Like Jesus, we ought to EMBRACE our kids. And when we do, that means that we embrace mess, noise, bedlam,

change, disruption and expense. Many Christians struggle with all that...which is why so many churches have so few kids. I'll never forget the woman I approached for a gift to build our gymnasium. She said, "I don't want kids in my church. I like my church quiet." And MY response was, "Well...if you want quiet, go to the cemetery. The church is for the living!" Might not have been my most diplomatic moment... but I stand by what I said.

I recently spoke to a group of older adults regarding changes to make our church more welcoming to kids and their families. I said, "I want you to put on your Grandparent hearts. You PRAYED for your children...and for your grandchildren... to come to Jesus and come to church. You cannot PRAY those things...and then be unwilling to set aside any of your preferences for the sake of that child you claim to want sitting in the pew next to you." When worship styles, or musical choices or clean buildings... or serenity... become a higher priority than reaching kids for Jesus... church has become idolatry.

That is NOT who we are at Chapel Hill, thank God. It has never been who we are. I'm proud of your passion and commitment to kids. They need us in order to be brought to Jesus. We need them in order to be brought to our knees in humility. And this will FOREVER mean having to put up with the holy bedlam that comes when we obey Jesus' call to "let the little children come."

You know that saying, "Children are the church of tomorrow?" Do you know what I think of that saying? I HATE it! Children are the church of TODAY, just as certainly as we are! May God bless our ministry to kids...and may he flood this place with noisy, messy, disruptive little people eager for a touch from Jesus!