

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

As I stand here and preach every Sunday, I can almost always tell that you're listening, at least to one degree or another. Many faces are turned toward me, I see smiles, frowns, nods as I share. There is an exception however and that's when there's a baby or a little one sitting with mom and/or dad, maybe grandma or grandpa. Then I can see that the faces of those beside and behind the little one are focused on that little one. I admit, the sight of a baby, a small child, most any child makes me smile, often distracts me, even when I'm in the pulpit.

I enjoy the excitement of parents-to-be, parents expecting another baby, would-be parents going through an adoption process, and grandparents as they tell me about what they are doing to prepare for the new arrival, cribs, car seats, all kinds of stuff. I like the baby showers people have for new arrivals. And scheduling baptisms! Then the follow up, classes for parents with infants and toddlers, talking about how to share Bible stories and teach little ones to pray.

Hearts, homes and arms are ready, eager, anticipatory and expanding in the love for children, starting with those as yet unborn. So I ask you to keep this thought in mind as we continue our conversation, as you hear Jesus say: "Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as little child will never enter it." I've thought about this a lot over the years, pondering, ruminating, chewing on it. I remember my sense of anticipation of Christmas and Easter when I was a child, not just knowing I was going to get gifts and candy, but also my thoughts of Jesus' birth, and Easter, certainly not know what it all meant, but believing absolutely, without a shred of doubt, know with all the certainty a small child could have that God was here in a miraculous, mysterious fashion. I recall my mom teaching me to pray, she sitting on my bed, I'm standing beside her, in front of her, she's teaching the "now I lay me down to sleep" prayer, and the "here's the church, here's the steeple" litany that we would always do before praying. I know that even though we prayed "if I should die before I wake" I had no fear of dying because I knew the Lord my soul would take.

The disciples spoke sternly to those bring little children to Jesus, and Jesus was indignant when he heard of it. You and I can relate to the parents bringing children to Jesus, and to a certain extent, perhaps to the disciples interfering, maybe thinking Jesus was too important to be bothered. But the truth is that ancient society, including Jewish society didn't have the affection for children that we do. To appeal to our hearts and wallets, aid societies often picture children, politicians will be shown with children their own or better yet the children of voters. Children like women back then derived their status from their relationship to adult males. Sons were a blessing from God simply because their arrival insured the continuance of the family for at least another generation. A boy reached adulthood at 13, and no matter how you search you're unlikely to find examples of sympathy for the young, comparable to that shown by Jesus.

So what's the message here? Were these little children toddlers or what? The Greek word translated as "little children" is a diminutive, it means very young children as in infants. In the gospel of Luke, our gospel writer calls them "infants" (NRSV 18:15) sometimes babies in other versions. Now here's the thing, we think "young children" we think sweet, innocent, loving, playful and so on. But the words used by Mark and Luke both suggest children younger than that, well below the age of accountability, in other words, helpless. If we think Jesus is commending the children for their innocence, playfulness, or even purity, then we have to think that acceptability in the kingdom of God depends on similar virtues. But the truth is, these children were powerless, overlooked, dispossessed by society in general, they bring no credits, claims, clout, cash to the table. They have nothing to bring, all they receive is on the basis of grace, sheer neediness, not through any inherent merit. Jesus took them in his arms and blessed them, when we baptize infants, Jesus is taking them in his arms and blessing them.

Jesus' touching people, healing forgiving and blessing, lepers, the lame, the blind, the dead, is a tangible expression of God's unconditional love for the unclean, for foreigners, for children, for women, and yes for adult males too. His touch brought healing and blessing but it was also a blessing in and of itself. Jesus surprises us and transforms us by opening our hearts to the poor, to immigrants, to the dispossessed, to not just our own children but to all children. We bring nothing to the table, but Christ crucified meets our empty hands and fills them and expects us to share his faithful love and mercy, by welcoming all to the common life we share in Christ Jesus. AMEN