Let the little children come to me. Do not hinder them. The kingdom of God belongs to them. Luke 18:16

Let the Children Come to Me

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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Luke 18:15-17

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Chris and I were in the Boston area this past week. I participated in the board meeting at Gordon Conwell Seminary. Also, we visited with our son, Andrew, his wife, Becky, and their three children who live north of Boston. Our grandson Luke will turn nine this summer. I had a flashback of Luke when he was three years old. We were sitting in church. It was a Sunday when Luke and his family were in town and I was not preaching. Luke was sitting in my lap and someone on our pastoral staff, I don’t remember whom, was leading us in prayer. A portion of our prayer time was devoted to silence. Luke’s whisper, loud enough for others to hear, broke the silence when he said, “What do we do now?” As we closed the prayer by reciting the Lord’s Prayer, Luke said loudly, “Hey, Pop-Pop. Some people don’t have their eyes closed.” Later in the service, after we received the morning offering and the choir sang the anthem, as one of our pastors prepared to give the sermon, Luke let out with the words, “Are we done yet?”

Life would be boring without kids. Their inquisitive nature and youthful exuberance brings so much joy to life. It was a masterstroke when God invented kids. How appropriate that we get to talk about children on Mother’s Day.

Today, we come to the story of Jesus blessing children in Luke 18. Some people sentimentalize this story. Granted, it’s an endearing moment for Jesus to gather little children in his arms to bless them. Yet do not miss how radical and counter-
cultural are Jesus’ words and actions to first century listeners.

Our story begins innocently enough. Parents bring their children to Jesus for him to bless them (18:15). The disciples rebuke these parents for intruding on Jesus’ time. The master is too busy to bother with children at a time like this. Maybe they thought children’s ministry was beneath Jesus.

Mark, in his parallel account of this same story, tells us that Jesus becomes indignant with his disciples (10:14). The disciples’ rebuke of parents warrants a rebuke by Jesus in return. I detect anger, righteous anger, welling up in Jesus.

Jesus puts them in their place: “Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these” (18:16). Jesus is not delivering a children’s message to kids. He is talking to adults about the intrinsic worth of children. Don’t you dare treat children like second-class citizens! The kingdom of God belongs to them.

In the first century Greco-Roman world, children were held in low esteem. They occupied the bottom rung of the social ladder. The practice of infanticide, of leaving handicapped or unwanted children outside to die, was widespread and legal in the Greek and Roman world.

This is what makes Jesus’ declaration about children so unconventional. In verse 17, Jesus summarizes his teaching on children with these words: “Truly, I tell you, anyone who
will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will not enter it” (18:17). Anytime Jesus prefakes his remarks with “Truly, I tell you,” it’s the equivalent of saying, “Pay attention. What I am about to tell you is really important.” Jesus has chosen little children to illustrate what it is required of adults in entering the kingdom of God.

Matthew also includes in his gospel account this same bless the children story. In Matthew’s version, Jesus concludes this way, “Whoever humbles himself as a child is greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (18:4).

In the story preceding Jesus’ encounter with little children in Luke’s gospel, Jesus tells a parable about a Pharisee and tax collector. While people hold Pharisees in highest honor, tax collectors are viewed with disdain as being scoundrels and thieves. The Pharisee in our parable praises God that he does not resemble this despicable tax collector. He fasts twice a week and gives away a tenth of his income to people in need. This tax collector, by contrast, cannot even bring himself to raise his head to God in prayer. He laments, “Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner.” Jesus concludes his parable with the words, “I tell you, this tax collector, not the Pharisee, went home justified.” The final words Jesus speaks connected to this parable set the table for this ensuing story about children: “For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted” (18:14).
So what difference does this sermon make in my life? Two applications come to mind. The first application corresponds to humility and the other application addresses the spiritual needs of children.

The first—humility. Those who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted. Jesus does not exalt children because they are self-consciously humble. Children manifest humility without even knowing it.

In verse 17, the crucial word is receive—“Truly, I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will not enter it.” Children receive whatever their parents give them. They receive from their parents without feeling indebted to them. They receive food, shelter and clothing freely—no questions asked. Dependence comes easily to children.

The humility Jesus extols in this passage more closely resembles self-forgetfulness than any attempt to practice humility. C.S. Lewis said this about humility: “Humility is not thinking less of yourself; it is thinking of yourself less.”

Chan Gailey is a former professional and college football coach. He coached for several pro teams, most recently the Buffalo Bills and New York Giants. In the college ranks, he coached at Georgia Tech and Troy State.
Nearly 20 years ago, while Chan was head coach at Troy State in Alabama, he was preparing his team to play in the Division II College Championship. Several days before the big game, he was on his way to the practice field when a secretary told him that he had an important phone call. (This was before the days of cell phones). Since he was already preoccupied with preparations for the big game, he asked her to take the message. She responded, “But coach, it’s *Sports Illustrated.*”

“I’ll take it,” he said. As he hustled back to his office, he imagined what it would be like to have Troy State featured in a premier sports magazine like *Sports Illustrated.* He visualized a three-page spread or, better yet, his picture on the cover. If I get on the cover, he thought to himself, should I put forward an action shot or formal pose. His mind raced with possibilities.

“With a sense of anticipation, he picked up the phone in his office. The person on the other end of the line asked, ‘Is this Chan Gailey?’

‘Yes, it is,’ he replied confidently.
‘You’re the coach of Troy State, aren’t you?’
‘Yes, I am,’ he said with a tone of anticipation.
‘Well, this is [so-and-so] from *Sports Illustrated.* I’m calling to let you know that your subscription to *Sports Illustrated* is about to expire. We’d like to know whether you are interested in renewing your subscription.’”

Coach Gailey, concludes this story with the observation, “You are either humble or you will be humbled.” Those who will not receive the
kingdom of God with childlike dependence will never enter

it.

My second application concerns the spiritual needs of
children. If children’s welfare is this important to Jesus, it
must have priority for his followers also.

The myth that perpetuates in church circles is that it’s the
church’s role to impart Christian values to children. Some
parents drop their children off to Sunday school with the
expectation that its our job as staff and volunteers to
inculcate faith in children. We play a critical role, to be sure.
Yet, the primary responsibility for the spiritual development
of children belongs to parents and family members. Parents
are their children’s most important spiritual teachers.

Children are naturally curious about spiritual matters. It is
not too far-fetched for them to conceive of a Supreme Being.
They understand implicitly what it means to be created by
God. They take to faith like metal to a magnet. It’s our job
as parents and family to maximize their sense of wonder and
intrigue while they are young.

Parents and family cannot go about nurturing faith in
children haphazardly. We must attend to it diligently.

Sometimes people tell me they want “to expose my
children to church.” When people talk this way about
exposing children to
church, what comes
to my mind is the
practice of
immunizing
children. When we
inoculate children
against a disease, we
give them a small dose of the virus. This allows them to build up immunities against the virus, yet not in sufficient quantity to actually contract the illness.

The same thing happens when parents expose children to church. Parents bring their children to church, enough to expose them to religion in mild forms, yet not in sufficient quantity to produce faith in them. They experience just enough religion to be inoculated against the real thing. If we want our children to believe, we must immerse them in the faith.

Do we expose our sons or daughters to academics, music or sports? Not on your life, especially so in highly competitive Northern Virginia. We totally immerse children in these activities. The same principle holds for faith. If we make faith a priority, it is likely to stick. If we are hit-or-miss about it, don’t be surprised if they discard faith in later years.

Two applications: First, a commitment to provide for the spiritual needs of children. “Let the children come to me. Do not hinder them. The kingdom of God belongs to them.” Second, a willingness to humbly receive the kingdom of God like children. “Truly, I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.”

“Humility is not thinking less of ourselves. It is thinking of ourselves less.”