



Photo courtesy of Myers Park United Methodist Church.

Let the Children Come

By William H. Willimon

One day Jesus was teaching, everyone gathered round, attempting to pay attention (Mk. 10:13-16). Nearby, a couple of children scuffled in the dust.

“Can’t something be done about these children?” said one of the disciples. “Send them away. We can’t pay attention to you with the distraction of these children. Don’t we have a nursery for people like them?”

And do you remember what Jesus said? “Let the little children come to me.” And embracing them in his arms, Jesus blessed the children, saying, “The Kingdom of God belongs to children. Grownups have difficulty getting into a kingdom with such a small door.”

The event is told in all of the synoptic Gospels. Children, whom we tend to regard as distractions from the important work of the reign of God, were put by Jesus at the center of his realm. Biblical interpreters are agreed: In a day and a culture when children were on the bottom of society, less than full human beings, Jesus performed no more radical, countercultural act than when he put children at the center, making them the enactment of his good news. What Jesus said about children is similar to what Jesus said about the poor, the marginalized, and “the least of these.”

Just before I rose to preach last Sunday, the host pastor said, “And now the children are dismissed to go to children’s church.” The implication is that my sermon was for adults only so the children were excommunicated to go to their church. Was Jesus in error when he said that children have no problem entering the Kingdom of God; we adults are the ones with the problem?

The average age of my church is about 58 years old. The proportion of United Methodists who are under age twelve is in precipitous decline. Children’s Christian Education, judging from the sales of pertinent literature, is virtually extinct. We are therefore in violation of Jesus’ clear command, “Let the little children come to me.” One of the distinguishing marks of the church is the active presence of children. A gospel test for whether or not a church is Jesus’ church is the presence and involvement of children.

“I know you tend to get depressed after Annual Conference,” said one of my District Superintendents. “I’m going to give you a boost. Preach next Sunday at Trinity. The transformation that’s occurring there is sure to inspire you.”

So I made the trek up to the northern part of our Conference. Sure enough, I had trouble finding a parking place in the streets around this once moribund church. They had quite a crowd gathering for worship. I was amazed.

But the most amazing sight was yet to come: the first four pews were packed with children and youth.

“That’s a rare sight,” I commented to the pastor. “You have so many children!”

“Only four of those kids are related to anybody in the congregation,” the pastor told me.

“What? Whose children are they?” I asked.

“They belong to Jesus. He’s loaning them to us to help turn this thing around,” said the pastor as he busied himself with pre-service preparations. “We are almost blessed to be living in a state with such bad government and lousy social services. We cut a deal with the police in this county. When they go in to bust up a meth lab, there are usually children present in that horrible place. They can call us, day or night, and in thirty minutes we will have trained people there to rescue the children and provide them a safe place to stay until the courts can sort things out. We’ve got a family court judge who works with us too. We’ve got six families that are certified foster care parents. Two of those kids were threatened by their parents who told them that if they didn’t behave they couldn’t come to Sunday school! Our Sunday school is that good! We got it straightened out. Half of our kids are only allowed by the court to live at home with their parents if our church certifies that we are working with the parents properly to care for them.”

There with tears in my eyes.

As the procession into worship began, the pastor said to me, “Those children have given us more than we’ve given them. Like



Photo by Jamie Falter

(left to right) Faith Falter, Alicia Long, Amanda Justus, Sarah Falter, Colin Stuecken, Isaac Falter, Rachel Johnson, and Katelyn Johnson of Rader United Methodist Church in Rader, Missouri decorate cupcakes at Saturday School.

Jesus said, ‘when you receive one such child in my name, you receive me.’”

This culture is not child friendly. Only a tiny proportion of North American children have received any introduction or instruction in the Christian faith. God has blessed many of our congregations with a surfeit of older people who have the talents and the time to lead ministries with children. Any United Methodist church that is bereft of children, that has no program for reaching children and allowing children to reach us has yet to meet the theological criteria for church.

I can show you churches that tired of competing with youth soccer leagues that played games on Sunday—they have formed their own soccer league to play at times other than Sunday morning. I’ve visited churches with after-school tutoring and recreational programs for latchkey kids. In one of my congregations, a group of older adults gives a “Parents’ Night Out” every Friday night from six until ten. Parents bring children by for an evening of stories, games, and food. The size of their children’s ministry doubled in one year, confirming the dictum of our Conference Children’s Coordinator’s, “The easiest way to grow a church is with children.”

I appointed a woman who spent the first decade of her working life as an elementary schoolteacher to lead a small, declining church with a median age of sixty (that is, a typical UM church). Her first Sunday there she announced, “I am here to see if God can give this church a future.” She told them that the only way for a church to have a future is to be hospitable to children; the theological test for a church’s fidelity is how well it embraces the “least of these.”

What were they to do? She noted how the unused Sunday school rooms were a disgrace. A team of painters refurbished the rooms. The next Sunday, at the conclusion of the service, she gave an altar call and asked for people to come forward whom God had given gifts for children’s ministry. Three older women came and knelt at the altar. She consecrated them to lead the congregation into a new century, promising to equip these teachers, saying that by the next Sunday each of these teachers would prepare a great lesson and would be present to await God’s children. If no children showed up, then the teacher was to sit in the newly painted Sunday school room for the rest of the hour in prayer that God would lead the congregation to the children who could lead the congregation to Jesus. Then she charged each person in the congregation to bring at least one child with them to worship next Sunday.

A year later, that church is being reborn, confirming, in the pastor’s words, the truth of the biblical promise, “A little child shall lead them.” □



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