

Welcoming Children and Welcoming Jesus

Matthew 18:1-6, 10-14; 19:13-15

Steve Hollaway

Harbor Church

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Do we want Jesus in our church? Of course. We gather in his name. We sing songs to him. We pray that he would show up and speak to us.

Jesus will never push his way in where he is not welcome, so we cultivate a spirit of welcoming Jesus into our midst. But we sometimes forget what Jesus said in Matthew 18:5—“Whoever welcomes a child welcomes me.” In Mark and Luke, he goes on, “and whoever welcomes me welcomes God.”

When we welcome children into our lives and into the church we are welcoming Jesus. Children are not a priority way down the list after we make sure we have worship services for adults, a nice building, a reasonable budget, and good fellowship. The way we treat children is the way we are treating Jesus.

You heard the stories from Matthew. First Jesus’ disciples are arguing about who is the greatest, even though Jesus has just called them faithless and perverse—and told them that he is going to be betrayed and killed. They are still counting on the kingdom coming and want to know which of them will be in charge when that happens. Jesus stands a little child in the middle of the group and says, “Unless you change and become like this little guy, you aren’t even going to be in the kingdom at all. It’s not about greatness; it’s about humility. You have to understand that you are helpless, that you are dependent, that you will always be marginal and powerless in this world. So the way you treat the weakest ones like this kid, the ones with no power at all, is the way you are treating me. If you welcome the weakest, who can’t do a darn thing for you, then you are welcoming me into your midst. If you save your welcome for the powerful and people of influence and big givers, then you are locking me out of the church.”

The second story is about parents bringing children—even babies—to Jesus so that he might lay hands on them and bless them. Jesus’ disciples no longer saw themselves as his students but had graduated to seeing themselves as his handlers. “Don’t bother Jesus; he’s too busy for this nonsense.” This was a time when children were not permitted in the Temple or the synagogues or even in pagan temples. Children were seen as a nuisance in adult life, especially by men. Jesus was about bringing in the kingdom and changing the world. Why should he spend time with children who couldn’t understand the kingdom anyway?

But Jesus scolded the disciples. “Have you forgotten what I said? The kingdom is made up of people like these children—the poor in spirit, the meek, the hungry and thirsty, the powerless and dependent.” Then Jesus put his hands on the heads of the little ones and gave them the blessing their mothers wanted. I wonder if Jesus didn’t have a little conference with his disciples after the mothers left. “Let me repeat: If you’re not humble enough to welcome children, you’re not humble enough to welcome me or God’s kingdom. If you think you are too important or too busy for children, you are too important or busy for God.”

I don’t hear this being said to just one or two of the disciples who had been labeled “children’s workers.” I hear this being said to all followers of Jesus. If you don’t welcome children into your life and into the church, you are not welcoming Jesus or his kingdom, because it is a sign that you are not yet humble enough to receive him or his salvation. You find nothing in Jesus’ sayings—or the whole Bible—to suggest that teaching children is for specialists. In the

Old Testament the parents have a special responsibility, but it is also the responsibility of the tribe and the nation, the whole people of God. In the New Testament it is the job of all who welcome Jesus, the whole people of God created by grace, the whole church.

In the movie we watched Friday at Soup and Song, *Tea with Mussolini*, there was a little boy named Luca who was the secret illegitimate son of an Italian businessman. The father was not involved in the boy's life but paid his English secretary to teach Luca English so he might become a proper English gentleman, for the sake of his career. But the father refuses to take the son home with him and sends him back to the orphanage from which he has run away. The secretary sits with the boy at the orphanage receiving room, but cannot bear to see him return to that life, so she takes him home. But what happens after that is remarkable. There is a group of old English ladies living in Florence, and they decide as a group to take Luca in, to be the village it takes to raise a child. It was a picture of welcoming a child—and thereby welcoming Jesus.

In our church in Kentucky, once the word got out in the neighborhood that the church was a welcoming place for children, the children came all by themselves—first to the children's Bible club program on Wednesdays or to the after school hiking program, and then to church on Sunday morning. It was a very different setting from this one, but we had 50 to 60 children on Wednesdays, mostly unchurched, most poor, many from single parent families and many—to use the old word—"illegitimate." The thing I miss most about Kentucky is the children without fathers or stable home lives who would greet me with hugs and want to sit with me at supper.

One cute-as-a-bug first grader—he reminded me of Dennis the Menace—took a special liking to me and was especially persistent, coming early so he could sit in my office with me. At one point I told Tanner he could follow me around the church while I did some of the tasks to get ready for Wednesday night. He could be my personal assistant. Well, that did it. From then on, Tanner called himself my personal assistant, even introduced himself that way. He started coming on Sunday mornings and sitting next to me on the front pew. Once he tried to stand up with me to preside at the Lord's Supper. He refused to go to Children's Church with the other kids after the children's sermon. It was his job to stick with me. It was my job to make Tanner feel welcome and important to God.

I'm not looking for another personal assistant, although it occurred to me Thursday at our Scout meeting that Mac Brown might well apply for the job. What I am looking for is a way to get the word out to Block Island that the church is welcoming to children because Jesus is welcoming to children—and we want Jesus in our church. It's not enough to sell the image that the pastor is welcoming to children; it has to be the whole church. And that requires significant numbers of church members involved in activities for children they are not related to, just because Jesus' love is in them.

Thursday after school we had informational meetings for children and parents who might be interested in scouting groups under the sponsorship of Harbor Church as what the Boy Scouts call "the chartered organization." The church will have control over the direction and values of the groups and the right to name or veto adult leaders. It's a way to reach out to children and families who would be unlikely ever to visit on Sunday morning. We didn't know what to expect. But I'll tell you what happened at 3:00—we had fifteen boys 4th grade or younger, along with many of their parents, in the basement, and another ten girls that age upstairs in the fellowship hall with Girl Scout staff. The boys organizations are getting started in June, while the girls will start in September.

I know we didn't put out a lot of effort to push this event with church members, but you can probably guess how many church members were present among the roughly fifty bodies

gathered on Thursday afternoon? One: Lila Del Padre, who is not only a parent but a person who is committed to reaching out to children and youth who are not part of the church. You don't have to be young to love these kids. They would love to have an extra grandparent to be in relationship with. We're going to have a cookout in June at the Boy Scout campground on the island, and I want you to think about whether you could be a representative of the church at that event, and more importantly, a representative of the welcoming Jesus.

This Friday we have a classical and jazz guitarist coming to perform at the coffeehouse—Kyle Schofield from Concord, New Hampshire. When Kyle was 8 or so, living in New Jersey, I got a call from his parents. They asked me to come talk to Kyle. He had been asking a lot of questions, so they had agreed to let him visit the church, and now he wanted to talk to a pastor. Dad had a graduate degree from Cornell in physics and had explored Eastern religions and Native American spirituality. Mom was raised Catholic, but had become more of a hippie and free spirit as a young adult. Kyle had no real church experience. I sat in their living room and explained the gospel to Kyle, using the little booklet, *Steps to Peace with God*. He immediately wanted to accept Christ as Lord and Savior. I was thrilled. After we prayed, I got up to leave. Mom and Dad asked “What about us? Can we do it, too?” So I went over the Christian message with them, too, and they prayed to ask Christ into their lives. They went on to become key ministry leaders in our church and good friends to this day.

There is absolutely nothing more important that we can do as a church than to welcome children and to help them to understand that Jesus welcomes them into his life. Those who have been teaching in our Sunday School understand that, but this is not a job for specialists. This is a job for the whole church and for every Christian. You will be asked soon to help with Vacation Bible School August 1-5. You need to do that for the sake of your soul and your relationship with Jesus. You don't have to be able to run and jump or pick up children. You just have to be able to welcome them, and by doing so welcome Jesus. If Jesus has gotten through to you about the nature of his kingdom—that it is not power or status or money that matter in his kingdom—then you will see the value of getting down on the level of the children and seeing them as persons of infinite value. May we respond to Jesus' call, humble ourselves, and serve the little ones who are precious in his sight.