

Call to Worship

Mark 9:36-37; Psalm 127:3; 147:13

Jesus reached for a little child, placed him among the Twelve, and embraced him.

Then he said, "Whoever welcomes one of these children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me isn't actually welcoming me but rather the one who sent me."

Because God secures the bars on your gates, God blesses the children you have there.

No doubt about it: children are a gift from the Lord; Today we celebrate the blessing of Children!

Prayer of Invocation

Just and compassionate God, you call us to be agents of your justice and your caring in this world. Open our eyes wide to see the children all around us. Turn our hearts toward them with love that meets them in their need, and inspire our minds with ways to effect justice on their behalf. Amen

The Word

Mark 10:13-16, Proverbs 22:6, 2 Timothy 3:14-15

People were bringing children to Jesus so that he would bless them. But the disciples scolded them. **When Jesus saw this, he grew angry and said to them, "Allow the children to come to me. Don't forbid them, because God's kingdom belongs to people like these children."**

I assure you that whoever doesn't welcome God's kingdom like a child will never enter it." Then he hugged the children and blessed them. **Train children in the way they should go; when they grow old, they won't depart from it.**

But you must continue with the things you have learned and found convincing. You know who taught you. **Since childhood you have known the holy scriptures that help you to be wise in a way that leads to salvation through faith that is in Christ Jesus.**

Living the Word

There isn't large amounts of scripture that talk about the children, but the ones that are there, some of which we have shared this morning, tell us of the importance of children. In at least two places we have examples of Jesus gathering the children to himself – hugging and blessing them.

Children of Biblical times had a more fragile beginning than today. According to Jewish custom, the time when a child is weaned is cause for celebration. A weaned child has survived the fragile stage of infancy and can now eat solid food rather than breastfeed from his or her mother.

In Genesis 21:8, we read, "And the child grew and was weaned. And Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned." Though Hagar laughed at the celebration (Genesis 21:9), Isaac's parents considered this event an important occasion. They had a son who had survived the most difficult stage of childhood and could now eat on his own.

High infant mortality rates existed in ancient cultures. One reason for large families was the fact that many young children did not live to adulthood. Because of the risks that infants faced, the celebration of a child's weaning was a natural and important part of the culture. If a child had developed beyond the need for the physical support of a mother, then he or she had reached a new stage of life that greatly increased the likelihood of good health.

In Biblical times, as in most societies up until the fairly recent past, young children would have played, but would have been expected to make themselves useful as soon as they were old enough, helping out on the farm or in the house or in whatever trade the family followed.

Proverbs 22:6 "*Train children in the way to go.*" This would have included teaching a work ethic through chores and errands, as all hands were needed to accomplish the difficulties of life at that time. But more important I believe that it refers to teaching the scripture and traditions of a faith in God.

To ensure their prosperity, growth, and longevity as the people of Yahweh (God), Israel's mandate was one of education. Diligently teaching their children to love God, and to know and obey his statutes and ordinances (Deuteronomy 6:1-9).

I have a clear memory of standing in the living room of my Great Aunt Ruth's house with ladies sitting in a circle and myself singing for them what Great Aunt Ruth had spent the morning teaching me.

"Oh Be Careful Little Eyes What You See" (complete with the shaking of finger).

Oh, be careful little ears, what you hear, For the Father up above, is looking down in love... Oh, be careful little mouth, what you say... Oh, be careful little hands, what you do... Oh, be careful little feet where you go...

Did anyone else learn that song when you were young? I don't remember a verse about the heart, but there was a verse about other parts including 'Oh be careful little mind what you think...' As a child, how would I have known how to do that?

In my mind's eye, I saw this larger than life God shaking his finger at me and watching to make sure that I wouldn't make a wrong step in life. I never could connect that with the Father up above who was looking down 'in Love.'

Child psychology has come a long way in understanding easier and better ways to work with children. Now it should be different. No shaking fingers, but a sharing of ideas through the minds of children, with a guide or teacher.

Questions like 'If you hear someone crying, what might you do?' 'Is it a good thing to call someone a name?' Then a variety of answers from all ages, none of which are discounted, yet some gently re-directed.

We were taught in Sunday School, part of Christian Education, that 'this is the way it is' as we were given as children all of the 'correct' answers. Now we have Christian Faith Formation where the children can process their own answers, hear optional answers from others and grow their faith and understanding with the help of the Holy Spirit.

The old way works well for teaching colors, letters and numbers, and it wasn't necessarily wrong – in truth most of us who learned everything in that way, turned out OK. But sometimes it was scary. There are new ways for a new time. Faith formation is experiential. I was taught to sit through the lesson and then we could do an activity – that doesn't work as well today. With all of the stimulations our children have today, they can multitask - better than we can and they become bored if things are moving too slow.

This week I watched a video as children asked and answered questions while they were using wires to make a cross out of sticks and glue feathers to their project all at the same time. One of the Vacation Bible Studies I attended with the children a number of years back had these Biblical verses for the week, from the book of Proverbs, also pointed to the ears...

"Listen to counsel...that you may be wise." Proverbs 19:20 "Trust in the Lord with all your heart." Proverbs 3:5 "Death and life are in the power of the tongue." Proverbs 18:21 The hands..."Commit your works to the Lord." Proverbs 16:3 And the feet..."He who walks with wise men will be wise." Proverbs 13:20

Mark 10:14, Jesus said. "God's Kingdom belongs to people like these children." Why would he say that? Jesus here reminds the disciples that one enters the kingdom only by receiving it, in complete dependence on God.

He wants us to know that to receive and enter the Kingdom of God is not obtained by justifying ourselves in what we do, but to be ready to accept God's grace, God's unconditional love for us, just as a child does when they turn to their parent, with a pure heart.

Children may not know what the Kingdom of God is all about. Yet they may know that they are loved by their caregivers and can trust those who feed them. We try to define everything in realistic terms, even though the Kingdom of God is many things, some of which are a mystery.

If we can turn to God and trust God's love and care for us, we begin to live into God's unfolding Kingdom of peace, love and justice.

As we watch the children with all of their energy, I remember something we used to say during the 1970s: 'If we could harness their energy we could solve the energy crisis!' Honestly, now I am glad that we didn't try. Without the tether, as they run free, we can be blessed as we feel their ability to stay spiritually healthy, while growing in their own faith, with guidance, not demands.

This week the COVID news was: what do we do about school? How do we keep our children safe in a room full of busy children? What is the daily risk? How do we keep them safe and yet help them to get the education that will stimulate them and get them in and through adulthood?

With all our heart and with all of our mind, let us pray for our children. For the body of Christ, that we treat every child as made in God's image; that we welcome every child as Christ welcomed the children, and that we bring good news to the poor that Jesus announced.

For our nation and our leaders, that they will have the wisdom and courage to change what is unjust and recognize that until all the children are educated, we have not finished the job; that until every child is safe and well, none of us are safe and well.

In a world where children hunger and starve, where they sicken and die, where they face bullets and bombs, where they know the exile of prison and refugee camp, we must find ways to help protect and defend them. And that for ourselves and our community, we will let our eyes weep over injustice, our hearts burn with determination, our voices speak out to demand change, and our hands move to make a difference.

On this day we celebrate the blessing of the children, let us pray for their innocence in a time when they have to depend on their family, teachers and decision makers to keep them safe from physical harm; let us pray for our nation's more than 14 million children in poverty, may we use all that we have and all that we are to raise up the next generation.

For all who have died, especially those who died too soon and too young, those whose lives were cut short by poverty, for all these things let us pray.