

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

19th Sunday after Pentecost

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Text: Matthew 19:13-26

Title: “Precious in God’s Sight: Remembering Not to Forget”

At the luncheon following Harlen Holiday’s funeral on Friday, Monica Bedynton came into my study and told me there was a woman in fellowship hall who thought she knew me. Said she was from Kochville and remembered me as a little kid in the church. I had no idea who she was talking about so she told me to follow her which I did, and she led me to a table where she pointed to the woman. I approached the woman but really didn’t remember her. She said her name was Val Fishbeck. The name rang a bell but I was just a boy when she left that church and moved away. She said she thought she remembered that I was in the children’s choir. I told her I was for a short time but then Joan Guthrie, the director, kicked me out one day during practice in the sanctuary, and I never went back to the choir. Of course, I had to also confess that I probably deserved it because I was behaving badly and didn’t want to be there in the first place. I distinctly remember walking down the aisle of the church alone on my way out of the sanctuary after Mrs. Guthrie kicked me out of the choir. Now, of course, she is close friends with my parents, and I have reminded her of that day. We laugh about it now, but neither one of us thought it was funny the day it happened.

As I thought about that chance meeting on Friday and the conversation we had, it reminded me that the church can have a profound effect on a child’s life. But sometimes we forget that. Sometimes we forget, too, that there are children out there who are not as fortunate as I was when I was growing up in a home with parents who loved their children, made sure we had the medical care we needed, the food we needed, the clothing we needed, the education we needed, a faith community to which we belonged in order to grow into mature adults with families of our own. Sometimes we forget that a single parent bringing her children to church for the first time might be having a rough time after a break up and maybe her children are, too, which may be why there’s some noise in the sanctuary during worship. Maybe we forget or just don’t know what it’s like to be anxious about coming into a church where you don’t know anybody but you’re looking for some reassurance that God is trustworthy and able to supply our needs even when life is uncertain and painful. Sometimes we forget.

Sometimes we forget that there are children near us who are hungry. I received a call from the Auburn Elementary School several weeks ago. The person on the other end said they had two students who needed food. This was the first time I had received such a call as pastor of any church. Never—in my memory--had the school called looking for food for students. Parents, yes--even grandparents--but never the school. They wondered if we could help.

Sometimes we forget what children and some families might be going through. How then does being part of a faith community make a difference? What does God have to say about this?

In Matthew's Gospel we have this story of the disciples acting as gatekeepers for Jesus. Parents are bringing children, and they want an audience with Jesus. What they want is a blessing for their kids, for Jesus to put a hand on their heads and pray for them. What is compelling here is where this passage appears in Matthew's Gospel. Much of Jesus' ministry has already happened, and children were very much a part of the story. It begins with his own birth and then the massacre of the innocents by Herod. He begins his teaching and healing that included curing a boy with a demon and returning life to a girl, the daughter of a leader in the synagogue. He has preached the Sermon on the Mount and later taught using a child as a model as he proclaimed:

“Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me. (Matthew 18:2-5)

And then a warning comes:

⁶“If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea.”⁷ Woe to the world because of stumbling blocks! Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to the one by whom the stumbling block comes!

He has reminded them of God's overwhelming grace teaching them by asking

Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

He has taught them that God doesn't want to lose one of these little ones, not one lamb, and he has taught them about forgiveness and mercy.

As the scene unfolds, Jesus has just left Galilee where he has done all this teaching and healing and preaching. Jerusalem and the cross are not far off into the distant future but only a few short chapters away. His ministry is winding down. He has just responded to some tough questions by religious leaders about divorce and marriage when the disciples are engaged in their gatekeeping by keeping the children away.

Now you'd think they, of all people, would know better, right? I mean they've heard the teachings. They should know that children are deeply valued by Jesus. They've heard the millstone warning, too! And yet, here they are acting as if what Jesus taught had never been taught at all, as if it went right over their heads. So they weren't keeping the children away because they were new on the job or because Jesus had forgotten to tell them about the special standing of children. Maybe they'd experienced a child acting up in choir and they'd had enough. Maybe they grew weary of all the fidgeting in the pew as they were trying to listen, and their angry glare at the parent was all the stern

communication the parents needed in order to know that children weren't really welcome—at least not if they were going to act like children. Whatever it was that prompted their stern approach to the parents, the disciples had forgotten that Jesus wanted to be with children because—as he taught—the kingdom of heaven belongs to them.

The Harper Collins Bible Commentary says this about the kingdom of heaven:

“The phrase ‘kingdom of heaven’ is often used in Matthew and is synonymous with the phrase ‘kingdom of God,’ which is used in other Gospels and occasionally turns up here (6:33)...Either phrase refers to the reality of God ruling, a phenomenon not limited by space or time. In other words, the kingdom of heaven is not just the place where God lives, but is the sphere of God’s influence; it is found wherever and whenever God’s will is done. In Matthew, Jesus declares the accomplishment of God’s will to be on the brink of fulfillment. He frequently speaks of the kingdom as a present reality (11:2, 13:38), but he also instructs his disciples to seek the kingdom (6:33) and to pray for it to come (6:10).” (Page 869) Notes Mark Allan Powell in “Matthew” (*Harper Collins Bible Commentary*, James L. Mays, General Editor).

So the reality of God ruling has something to do with children, and perhaps to point that out, we hear Jesus’ interaction with a rich young man who apparently has everything he needs and more. He is in control of his life, has been faithfully religious in following all the rules, all the commandments. Yet, he seeks more than obedience. He wants eternal life, and what does Jesus tell him: “If you wish to be perfect, sell everything and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come and follow me.”

In the context of reminding the disciples of the role that children play in the kingdom of heaven, I can't help but wonder if Jesus is telling the young man that he needs to be vulnerable again. As children are so very vulnerable without wealth or power, so dependent on others to support them, care for them, nurture them, is Jesus telling the young man with wealth and a penchant for obeying all the rules that depending on God for your life and support and care is what eternal life is about? Is Jesus suggesting, “If you really want to experience what that’s like, what that means, then give everything up that keeps you in control of your own destiny and trust God completely with everything, just like a child trusts the adults in his/her life to provide what they need in order to live”?

The disciples forgot the special status of children as Jesus taught and needed to remember not to forget. The rich young man needed to remember not to forget that the means to eternal life is known in changing and becoming like children--not in acting childish--but by being as vulnerable and dependent as children in our trust of God to give us life.

So what can you do to remember not to forget? You can remember that how we treat children is how we treat Jesus and the One who sent him. You can remember that as a nation or even as a faith community that letting a child stumble over obstacles that we leave in their way whether it’s poverty or violence or a lack of early childhood care or by ignoring them or being unwelcoming results in our own

suffering. You can remember that the intention of the One we claim to follow is that all children experience blessing, all children feel valued, cherished, protected and welcomed. You can remember that you, yourself, as a follower of Jesus can have a powerful impact on a child's life in simple ways.

Yesterday, five people from this church went to Lansing for a day-long seminar, the focus of which was how to reach people we haven't yet reached not by manipulation or coercion, not motivated by any agenda, except to offer an authentic expression of God's grace and love. The keynote speaker told us the story of a young couple that came to their church very uncertain. They were anxious about coming. Didn't know anybody. Weren't really all that religious, but the mother said when they noticed people getting down to their children's level just to offer their children a genuine, "Welcome, we're so glad you're here today", they were hooked, and they've been part of that worshipping community ever since.

So, you can remember not to forget what it's like to be an anxious newcomer and welcome people graciously even if you can't get down to a child's level anymore because you won't be able to get back up. You can still provide a sincere "Glad you're here this morning."

You can also remember not to forget that there are children in our midst that need us. Remember not to forget to share from your abundance with the food pantry. Remember that phone call I received from Auburn Elementary asking for food. Melissa Grew made sure the need was met because we have a pantry from which we could feed two families.

Sometimes, it's the simple things you can do that make all the difference. Remember not to forget.

Because although we like to say in the church that the children and youth are our future, it's not true and it never was true. The children, friends, according to Jesus, are the ones to whom the kingdom of heaven belongs now, not 15 years from now, but now. And when we remember not to forget that, somehow in the mystery of God's Spirit, we are blessed ourselves by experiencing God in our midst.