



“These Little Ones”

Matthew 10:40-42

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Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

Jesus’ disciples were probably trying to be strategic. He’d appointed them his assistants and they took the job seriously. Jesus was a big man on a large mission. He had no time for distractions. They decided to manage his time and ministry to free him for his mission from God. After all, if your boss is saving the world, his time is precious.

The crowds were a constant challenge to ministry efficiency. People wanted to be near Jesus, and parents wanted him to bless their children. I imagine it was something like the rope line when the Pope is in town. Parents hold their children out for a blessing from a religious leader.

A group of parents, children in hand, made their way through the crowd toward Jesus. The disciples, like security guards everywhere, blocked the way. The story in Mark says the disciples “sternly rebuked” the eager parents.

Jesus overheard the disciples and, Mark tells, he was indignant. He ordered his disciples to permit the children to come to him. He added, “The Kingdom of God belongs to people who are like these children.”

It’s a radical and rather astonishing statement, don’t you think? Children are the model for the Kingdom of God! Jesus doesn’t point to a seasoned veteran disciple and say, “this is what I want your lives to look like.” He offers a child for our imitation.

Then Jesus took the children in his arms, put his hands on them, and gave them his blessing.

Ever since, the church has been blessing children. We bless our children in sacred rites: baptism and confirmation. We bless them informally by making them an important part of the life of the congregation.

My boyhood church had no special program for children during worship. We stayed with the adults and worshipped with them. Once I was at my grandparents over a weekend. On Sunday at their little Brethren Church, I went with the children to Children’s Church. My grandmother was in charge. Children did the entire service under her supervision and coaching. Children led the entire service. Children were ushers, prayed the prayers, and took up the offering. An older child gave the lesson. I was included in the church in a new and wonderful way.

In all we do for and with our children, we are laying hands on their souls in significant and powerful ways. That’s important to remember at Plymouth as we experience a “baby boomlet” and as we watch our children’s ministry grow beyond what most of us expected.

In our gospel lesson, Jesus refers to “these little ones.” That little phrase is often on Jesus’ lips and usually refers to children.

Later in Matthew (Chapter 18), Jesus overheard his disciples arguing about who was most significant in the new community being formed by Jesus. I imagine Peter would argue that since everything rises or falls on leadership, he and other leaders were more important to the organization than others. Matthew, a new member of the band and a former businessman, might have insisted that financial people like him were indispensable to the community. After all, every organization depends on finances to continue. And so the argument continued.

Jesus took a child, stood the child in the middle of his disciples, and said children are the model for the new community. “You must become humble like this child,” he said. A child doesn’t work out of a resume. Children are honest; they know they are dependent on others. Children are comfortable with who they really are and seldom attempt to be anything more. Children have refreshing lack of pretence.

In all the conversation about the late Tim Russert a few weeks ago, several themes recurred. One was that Russert’s faith informed everything he did. The other was that he never forgot where he came from and who he really was. He became somebody in the corridors of power, but he never confused that power with his real identity. He remained who he really was. He was always the blue-collar boy from Buffalo.

Be like that, Jesus said. “And,” he continued, “whoever receives a child receives me”! That is a remarkable statement. How we treat children is revelatory. It reveals what is in us and is, therefore, a test of character. You can tell a lot about a person by how they treat children.

“Be very careful how you treat these little ones,” Jesus goes on. “If any of you cause a child to stumble, you deserve a millstone hung around your neck and cast into the sea.” That is serious! Of course, the clergy child-abuse scandal of the past decade springs to mind. And it should. Those who permanently damage a child deserve severe justice and forfeit their right to lead Christ’s church.

But Jesus’ warning refers to ordinary church life too. We adults, this congregation, are making permanent marks on the souls of our children. Our words and behavior make an imprint on tender lives.

A church I served built a new educational building. We placed a gymnasium at the center of the structure especially for our children. A well-meaning man in the congregation often chased the kids out of the gym after church. He feared they would damage the new gym! The kids watched for him, and on spying him coming, ran from him. My children still talk about him. They can laugh now and, thank God, there were a host of wonderful adults in that congregation whom they remember with admiration and affection.

Buddy Smith was our neighbor when I was a boy. He was a member of our church and the father of my best friend, Paul. Buddy, a native of Arkansas, taught all us boys how to eat watermelon and shoot the seeds with our thumb and forefinger. He taught us how to play baseball. He joked with us, included us, and was a friend to every kid in the neighborhood. When he died, his obituary had a remarkable paragraph which said that Buddy Smith was the friend of every child in our town for two generations. All of us had a Buddy Smith story. He marked my life.

That little congregation had a host of other adults who laid hands on my soul. Mrs. Bounds, my Sunday School teacher, is a favorite memory. Mrs. Burkett was the only single mom in the church – remember this was the ‘50s! She had twin sons who were the object of serious intercessory prayer in the congregation. Mrs. Burkett raised horses and on

many a Sunday afternoon, she invited me to her place where she taught me how to ride a horse. Adults included us, affirmed us, trusted us, and told us we were significant in a thousand ways. They saw Jesus in us and treated us accordingly.

That is precisely Jesus' point. These little ones are a precious gift entrusted to families and congregations.

Jesus' use of the term "these little ones" is broader than children. In our Gospel Lesson, Jesus calls his disciples "little ones" who gave and received hospitality. A "cup of cold water given and received" was a profound sign of hospitality in an arid land. When we extend hospitality to each other, we are doing the work of God, Jesus says.

Later in Matthew (Chapter 25), Jesus speaks of cups of cold water again. This time instead of "these little ones," he says cups of cold water given and received in "my family" are, in fact, divine gestures. Hospitality given in the family is hospitality given to Jesus himself. In God's family, we learn to see Christ in each other and, therefore, treat one another in new and transforming ways.

In the new community, hospitality teaches us to see things in a new way. When we are hospitable we spend our time and energy looking out for others in the community. We don't focus on ourselves or our group in the community. Hospitable congregations put out the welcome mat for everyone, understanding God calls us to treat everyone the way God treats them.

Hospitable people live with arms outstretched in welcome and hearts open to all. Hospitality will not allow us to turn in on ourselves. Hospitality lies at the heart of genuine community. Hospitality is a test of Christian/community character.

Last week Gloria's second cousin and her husband came to visit. They stayed in the parsonage while we were away at Plymouth for the NACCC conference. They decided to come to church last Sunday.

Of course we asked them how that went. They told us they didn't identify themselves. They simply came to worship God. They couldn't believe how warm and friendly you were to them. You welcomed them, invited them to coffee hour, and treated them as honored guests. Just what Jesus expects of us!

Jesus extends the meaning of "these little ones" to include the poor, the outsiders, the marginal. He was operating out of a long Jewish tradition as old as the Law of God. At Sinai, right after giving the Ten Commandments comes a long conversation about life in the community and life in the world. Exodus 23, our Old Testament Lesson, describes the social ethic of God's people.

"First of all, tell the truth," Moses declares. Honesty lies at the heart of a real community. That includes never talking down one another.

"Do not show partiality in the marketplace or in the courts. Treat the rich and the poor with equal grace. Justice must be extended to all. Make sure that equal justice is afforded to your enemies, to the poor, and especially to the aliens in your land. Remember you once were aliens.

Be generous to the poor and the aliens. Make sure they have enough to eat and drink. Make sure they get fair treatment in your community. Treat them like I treat you."

In other words, extend God's hospitality to everyone. Receive all with open hearts, arms, and pocketbooks. Remember each person bears the image of God stamped on their soul and deserves to be honored as a beloved creation of God.

Jesus adds, “Remember, you disciples are Christ-bearers in the world. And remember a cup of cold water given to ‘these little ones’ is an act of hospitality to me.” That is an astonishing and revolutionary ethic.

Such small gestures of hospitality often have impact far beyond our knowledge, even our imagination. Those dear people back where I grew up have no idea the impact they made on me and the other children in that community. And the ripple effect of their hospitality continues in the lives of all of us and the influence we have on our neighbors.

Sometimes small gestures of hospitality change the world. The congregation I served in Boston made a strategic mission/hospitality decision. In partnership with the Christian relief organization, World Relief, and in partnership with an association of churches in the West African nation, Burkino Faso, we built wells in more than a dozen villages.

The decision was strategic because that part of Africa is draught ridden as the Sahara Desert creeps south. Those wells saved lives and entire villages. The wells changed lives and villages too.

Several of us from the church traveled to West Africa to see what we had done. The village, Koro, is near the border of Mali. It is remote and poor. No paved road serves the village.

A small but growing church lies at the heart of the village. They built their well in the courtyard of the church. On the well they inscribed Jesus’ words, “A cup of cold water given to one of these little ones is a cup of cold water given to me.”

The well is transforming that village. The water is a source of life. It supplies a large garden with nourishment.

We met with the church elders. One of our delegation asked the obvious question. The village is largely animist with a few Muslims and this small church. “Do you share the water and food with your non-Christian neighbors,” he asked.

The elders conversed among themselves with puzzled faces. “Of course,” they answered. “Jesus told us to share food and water with those in need.” No wonder the church is growing!

We gave. They gave. Only eternity will reveal the ongoing consequences of a gesture of hospitality that became larger hospitality extended to “these little ones.”

That is very good news to people like us to whom much has been given. By the grace of God, we are changing the world! Thanks be to God.

Amen.