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“The Call to Care for Children”

Mark 5:21-24, 35-43

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Guest Preacher

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When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered around him; and he was by the sea. Then one of the leaders of the synagogue named Jairus came and, when he saw Jesus, fell at his feet, and pleaded repeatedly, "My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live."

So, Jesus went with him.

While Jesus was speaking, some people came from the leader's house to say, "Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?"

But overhearing what they said, Jesus said to the leader of the synagogue, "Do not fear, only believe."

He allowed no one to follow him—except Peter, James, and John, the brother of James. When they came to the house of the leader of the synagogue, Jesus saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly.

Having entered, Jesus said to them, "Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead, but sleeping."

And they laughed at him. Then Jesus put them all outside, and took the child's father and mother and those who were with him, and went in where the child was. Jesus took her by the hand and said to her, "Talitha cum," which means, "Little girl, get up!"

And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about (she was twelve years of age). At this they were overcome with amazement. Jesus strictly ordered them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat.

Mark 5:21-24, 35-43

Maybe the place to start on Children's Sabbath is to remember being a child.

I went back to my childhood church over the July 4th weekend and had an experience you've had too. The Sunday School rooms were smaller than they used to be. The most minor changes (new chairs in the sanctuary, a tree cut down, no donuts before the service started) were personal affronts to me. People were kind and introduced themselves then did double takes when I mentioned my name—most of us grow after we're nine years old.

Memories came rushing back, and I remembered that stage of starting to discover who you are. For me, for some time, that consisted of being a goody two shoes.

When the children walked up front for the children's sermon, I recalled participating in one about how music helps us when we worship, without prompting, my eight year-old self told a congregation that my favorite musician was Frank Sinatra, which delighted everyone over fifty. (it was also more out of place that Sunday, in Waco, Texas, than here in New York).

On the way out of the service, before I got to the car and drove off to a Sunday brunch: I saw an office supply closet and flashed back:

To late one Sunday night afternoon, decades ago, as I informed my parents I had a science fair project due the next day. As I looked into the supply closet, I pictured papier mache being formed into...something that wasn't a stereotypical volcano but probably should've been. Being a Goody Two Shoes and a tremendous procrastinator seem mutually exclusive, but they're not.

It's silly, but it develops into something dangerous. The same instinct that you develop the first time with a science fair project that's too much of your grade for your parents to let it be a lesson...that instinct can last into adulthood: it's the email you meant to send a day ago, you'll get to it after your next meeting. On this Sunday, children's Sabbath, it's painful to think about how much we're leaving up to the last minute with the youngest members of our society.

Too many of our nation's children don't get to eat at restaurants after church. And as I look around this room, I'd guess we have a lot of good memories of childhood. But that's not the story for many. It's easy to forget that in this way, we're the minority.

The beautiful, hopeful story of Jairus invites us to care for children even as the odds are steep, essentially impossible. The story calls us to trust in Jesus and realize a simple command, one I first heard and repeated as an eight year old: "Talitha cum. " - Get up my child.

But the procrastinator in me can't stop thinking about how there's story sandwiched in between. Jairus has waited too late.

Jesus has another, pressing priority that he attends to and when Jairus and Jesus arrive at his home they find themselves at a funeral. I find myself in Jairus's shoes when I'm at state capitols reading budgets that slash funding for school meals and can't stop thinking about what we've waited too late to change. "What if we'd asked sooner?" Jairus might say - we might say.

Right now, our country has children walking into classrooms, their lives shaped by the pandemic more than

we know. Children taking small, hesitant steps into daycare, pre-k, kindergarten, around children their own age for the first time, born into a world where they couldn't interact with their peers. We can't wait.

For the past few years, I have worked as a proponent for better early childhood policy. I took the job having some sense of its importance, but now, a refrain has been burned into my brain: The most important time is early. Our brains' ability to change in response to a situation never goes away, but it requires more and more effort the older we grow.

According to the Center on the Developing Child: from the ages of 0-3, one million neural connections are formed per second. After that period, the connections are pruned, some key ones made stronger, but others forgotten. The concept of "brain architecture" is hard to define and harder to track, but in it, the lines between cognitive, emotional and social capabilities are blurred, sometimes nonexistent. And three year olds who aren't cared for never catch up in any of those areas.

It's easier to start caring about our schools, than to care about children themselves. And every day we see adults in legislatures ("adult" sometimes seems like a generous characterization for legislators) who think about our children more the closer they are to being a part of the workforce. The early years are too easy to ignore.

Children are the poorest group in America—with children of color, children of single parents and children under 5 years old suffering from the highest poverty rates. One in six children under five are poor, and almost half of those children living in poverty are living in EXTREME

poverty. They face food insecurity and live without health insurance at higher rates than the population.

And we have trouble comprehending that. People's eyes tend to glaze over when any statistic asks us to do math in our heads, so sit with that statement: children are the poorest group in America. (pause, awhile) and ask yourself how? Why are we procrastinating? What are we waiting for?

The poverty rate for children doubled last year. During the covid-19 pandemic, both national and local politicians offered up solutions for keeping children fed. We enhanced tax credits. We kept schools open to distribute meals. And over the past few months, we have made the terrible decision that hungry children are an acceptable cost again.

You would do anything for your children. You know other parents feel that same instinct. So why are they hungry?

Because politicians aren't openly disparaging children. You don't score political points complaining about the food we give kids. Picture an attack ad on feeding children: "Tommy says he'll eat all of his carrots...but does he? Leaked photos suggest Tommy has left behind multiple pieces of broccoli. Do you, the voter, trust him with carrots? In this economy?" Yet we are attacking children through our policies.

Every time we think about big, political concepts, those visualizations stop short of describing who suffers the most.

We think about inflation: that catch-all economic idea that seems to only be understood by your political party – It has also hurt vulnerable families attempting to feed their children. Inflation may mean two meals a day instead of

three. It may mean one meal instead of two.

Internet access is a way to provide opportunity to everyone, but it's too expensive. It has become a bedrock for early learning, especially during the pandemic, and children's development suffers when the internet isn't available, especially in rural areas. Kids go to schools where legislators have mandated that every child be given a tablet that they don't know how to use.

The supply chain has made it tougher for your Amazon deliveries to arrive on time. The supply chain has also caused food insecurity to grow—and children to go hungry.

James Forbes said, "No one gets into heaven without a reference letter from the poor. "

Children are our poorest people. What would they write about us?

Plymouth has a history of paying attention to the needs of the world. This pulpit has heard leaders proclaim what needs to happen, and it has happened. And we can make a difference here.

New York doesn't currently have universal school meals, but there is a bill in the legislature advocating for it. Do you feel that there are better ways to spend the money than feeding hungry children? We're at a crossroads now, the stopgaps put into place during the pandemic are coming to a close. Is your representative on board with that bill? Are we on board to do what we can to protect children?

It's hard for kids in Cuthbert, Georgia.

Several years ago, I was in Cuthbert, talking to a man who wore many hats. He was a pastor, he was a professor and he had a truck so he ended up hauling whatever

needed to be hauled.

We were planning an event in which people would get excited to exercise their holy right to vote. In the months beforehand, their county had closed multiple voting precincts in a targeted, evil attempt to keep them from voting. The service was powerful: I thought that the ceiling might collapse from the joyful noise but the roof held, even if it didn't contain the singing and shouting and praise. There were children running around the lawn. The pastor gestured to them. We do this so they'll have a better life!

When we left, I heard something from that pastor: "Thank you—I hope that y'all come back. We don't see you very much in odd-numbered years. You tend to wait until there's another election. We need to do what's right all the time. "

A year later, an odd numbered year later, that pastor stood at Georgia's state capitol, a building with a golden dome for a roof (that didn't have to handle much joyful noise), and talked with state senators.

He said, "The farm bill right now is inadequate. We have kids growing up a stone's throw from where our state's food is being grown but they can't eat. "

The legislators in suits saw a man in a dusty baseball cap. They gave him the sort of look you give a wedding guest who didn't pay attention to the dress code. But there was a newly elected state senator, a young well-dressed woman who didn't look like she would know much about farming.

He told her, "This bill will affect families in my neighborhood and I'm not sure y'all are focused on that enough. "

She said, “I get that. And I can focus on it more, but right now I’m concerned as to how the bill affects food banks.”

“Food banks?” He said. “I hadn’t thought about that, but I’m glad you’re thinking about it. I’m glad we’re talking.”

They began to speak (two people who assumed they had nothing in common) and realized that they agreed that they should care for children. We’re not always sure what the right thing to do is, but that is always right.

Today on Children’s Sabbath, our text ends with Jesus telling us to give a child something to eat. We can do that, together.

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