

Mark 10: 13-16; Jesus Blesses Little Children

¹³People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. ¹⁴But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. ¹⁵Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." ¹⁶And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

Mark 9:30-37

Jesus Again Foretells His Death and Resurrection

³⁰They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; ³¹for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again." ³²But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

Who Is the Greatest?

³³Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" ³⁴But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. ³⁵He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." ³⁶Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, ³⁷"Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

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Welcoming Children

Mark 10:13-16; Mark 9:30-37

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I aspire to be a Mr. Rogers Christian. I'd love to be able to say that I am a Mr. Rogers kind of minister, but that seems like graduate level kind of work, and I'm not sure I've even accomplished the novice level of the first part yet. He took what he believed, probably directly from these passages from Mark, or the other similar scripture verses about ministering to children and then he built his life's work upon those premises. He welcomed children and brought them to the teachings of Jesus, and let that be the foundation of his ministry with a children's television show, Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood.

If you were on your computer on Friday, perhaps you were drawn in to the Google doodle of the day based on Mr. Rogers' neighborhood. I watched it in rapt fascination and realized that my understanding of Jesus' teachings is built upon the foundation of his words. Honestly. Truly. So much so that in my first years of ministry, I wrote to him about my aspirations – to be more like him. The amazing part was that he wrote me back. In it he said to me, "It was very touching to know that you heard God's grace and love in our Neighborhood and that you felt our Neighborhood was part of the inspiration that called you into ministry." He goes on to explain his own calling to doing the show, saying, "You might like to know that we have always believed that the children who benefit most from what we present are the ones who have already experienced a deep investment of love from their own families. I hope you can appreciate all the strengths that you brought to our program, from yourself and from your family, that have helped you hear our positive messages and use them in such a healthy way in your own

life.” The letter goes on as encouragement for my ministry, and I can tell you, that I’ve probably benefitted from that letter’s blessing in more ways than I can count.

As he has been an encouragement to many lately with the release of the documentary of his life, “Won’t You Be My Neighbor?” It seems like such a strange and refreshing alternative to the polarization of our own time and place that there are those of us who want him to speak his truth now, so that we can hear and be moved by it. Watching the movie made me pull my letter out of my file of important mementos, and lately I have been reflecting on its importance over the years. From now on, it will be in a frame in my office if you ever want to take a look at it.

It has taken me awhile though to realize that I have been growing into the very blessing I received from him in July of 1998. You see, I’ve never thought of myself as being “good with children.” I felt like a failure in my internship that was based in doing ministry with teenagers in Beaumont, Texas many years ago. I was terrible at leading the kind of games they wanted me to play. I didn’t know how to interact with kids that were not that much younger than I was. And the lock-in was a whole new experience for me having come out of a small church that didn’t do all the expected large church kind of youth ministry things. How could I be a Mr. Rogers Christian if children and youth are such a mystery to me? And in case you were wondering, kids have been a mystery to me ever since I was one.

But I do remember going, in spite of how terrified I was, to go visit the teen that was hospitalized for attempting suicide. And I remember walking alongside the teen who came out as gay to her church family in high school. And I’ve held babies as they have been baptized, and smiled as children pulled on the cords of my robe to get my attention. And I know the joy of watching my own children experience the love of God expressed to them through the kindness of

church folk who cared about who they are, and learned their names, and got to know what was important to them.

Maybe I don't have all the right words or play all the right games to be a good children's minister or youth pastor. That is **TOTALLY FINE WITH ME**. I don't sing camp songs, and I don't have much of a stash of art supplies or candy in my office. I'm being told now what phrases are "uncool" to hear your parent say when you are in middle school, and that's perfectly OK for me to be that parent who doesn't get just how far from cool I really am. I am fine being the Mom with an abundance of snacks and the willingness to steer widely away from the giggling of middle school girls. And even with the knowledge that I have never been and never will be called to that kind of specialized ministry, I am grateful for those who are. **AND** I have figured out what was true all along, the deeper lesson that Mr. Rogers was teaching that came directly from what Jesus was teaching: We are loved by God in our humanity, a humanity that starts from birth and never lessens throughout our whole lives long. It's not just about how much children like us, or if we can be the greatest pastor or friend to children ever. Nope. Not the point that Jesus was making.

Being able to welcome children is to acknowledge the frailty of human life. We are born into this world, and one day we will leave it. And it is also to acknowledge the amazing gift of human life. We are placed in this world to enjoy it as what has been freely given, and to experience the love of God in the exact same way, as a gift we don't have to earn or be greatest at something to merit.

This is countercultural. It goes against who world tells us we are or what people tell us we have to be. We are taught, even from an early, early age that we have to somehow earn the love of our parents, the accolades of our teachers, and be something in order to get that job, find

that spouse, or keep those friends. We come to believe that they only love us because we have done something for or filled a need for them. This is SO NOT TRUE. Remember that the disciples were ARGUING about who was the greatest among them when Jesus uses the example of a child to teach them. “See this child,” Jesus shows them. This child, who is not considered great, who at best, in those days, has some untapped potential, and at worst is thought of as an object. This child is to be welcomed, loved, every bit as much as you or me as adults. That’s news to most of us – unless we grew up in Mr. Rogers’ neighborhood. He taught what Jesus taught. Children, on their own, in the very skins of their humanity, are beloved by God and special.

It’s a lesson that can easily be forgotten. Kecelyn Santiago recently wrote an article for the Presbyterian Mission Agency telling about what can happen when children are not perceived as welcome. She tells the story of taking her 2 and 4 year-old children to worship on a Sunday morning, and even after being asked to and moving to the foyer with her kids, an usher told her as he was closing the French doors in her face, “Keep the children quiet because they could *destroy* the worship service.” She was hurt and left, not to return. But she also then made the connection that if children were something that could destroy the service, it probably wasn’t worship they were going to anyway.

I know that there are distractions that can happen during worship, maybe even during those times when we are thinking about what great Christians we are. We have been taught the idea that we are doing something uniquely special and approved of by Jesus by being quiet, somber, and put together. By adulting in ways that make us qualified and sanctified by our choices to earn God’s gracious blessing. I get it. That’s exactly what has been groomed into most of us as appropriate behavior in church. But let me tell you how I describe our worship service to

those who might ask, “What’s it like to worship at your church?” I ALWAYS say, it’s traditional, but not stuffy. We may follow patterns that have been around for some time now, and find ourselves comforted by some long held Presbyterian traditions. And yet, I am always amazed by how the Spirit can blow through our sanctuary with the sound of a baby’s laughter, or a train whistling during a time of silence. I actually love it when there is an interruption that makes it feel like I’m not up here talking from a stage, but deeply involved in a conversation that includes all the voices, yours, mine, and God’s.

Mr. Rogers chose not to do what the entertainment industry was doing to children when he began his ministry more than 50 years ago. The rest of the children’s television happening at the time were shows designed to capture attention with noise and stimulation, to sell products, and to keep children preoccupied. Instead, he studied children as a frequent visitor to the child psychology programs in the Pittsburgh area. Then, in his format, he chose to treat children as human beings, with dignity and value all their own.

We do the same when we value each and every one here as a person with dignity and value. We do that with our love and respect, with our welcome and encouragement, with the knowledge that there may be laughter, or tears, and human triumph and human failures. Being the greatest isn’t important to Jesus. Being connected is what’s important to Jesus. Love each other. Welcome children. Receive God’s message as innocently as children. You are loved. As you are. No conditions. No requirements. No exceptions. Amen.