

Sermon, January 1, 2023
Luke 18:15-17
“Let the Little Children Come to Me”

In today’s reading Jesus is traveling with his disciples in the region between Samaria and Galilee, on their way to Jerusalem. Obviously, his reputation as a healer and teacher has preceded him, drawing crowds along the way, and, in this particular instance, people are bringing their babies so that he might touch them. Now, I’m speculating here, but I think they were looking for more than just a blessing on their child. Again, he was known as a healer, and this was a time when the infant mortality rate was very high.

We are not told why, but the disciples were not happy with what was happening, and told the people to stop, but Jesus replies, “Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them, for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.” So, what is it about little children that leads Jesus to see them that way? It is often suggested that it has something to do with their innocence- especially the little infants. That may have something to do with it, but there is another way to see it - and that is their vulnerability. Not only are they susceptible to infant mortality, but they are totally dependent upon the love and care of others.

Remember what Jesus said in the fourth chapter of Luke. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free.” He doesn’t mention children in that statement, but it is clear that the kingdom of God is especially open to the vulnerable members of society.

Back to today’s reading, Jesus continues, “Truly I tell you, who ever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” We may be adults, but we are also children of God, and, again, it’s not so much about our innocence, but the recognition that we are all vulnerable in one way or another and are in need of God’s presence in our lives - and that we have the willingness to place our trust in the hands of divine love and care - just as an infant has a need to trust those that care for them.

Of course, as adults, we also recognize that we have certain responsibilities within the kingdom of God, to follow in Jesus’ footsteps, extending care for the more vulnerable among us. In a sense, we become what Henri Nouwen called “wounded healers”. Out our own vulnerability, and whatever pains we have experienced in our own lives, we reach out and touch the lives of those in need. When we think about the vulnerable, those who suffer and are in need, children are very high on the list. So many today are victims of the ravages of war and/or caught in the seeming hopelessness of poverty.

We are familiar with the images of small children emaciated by malnutrition and starvation in third world countries, but it is not a tragedy found only in faraway places. Among the more developed and richest countries in the world the United States has the highest rate of child poverty. One in five children in our own country live below the poverty line, with a sizable percentage of those children living in the Deep South. Such poverty, of course, leads to hunger and health problems for the most vulnerable. Malnutrition and poor diets lead to many harmful effects on the health and development of young children, including , childhood obesity and diabetes, increased hospitalizations, developmental risk and behavior problems, such as aggression, anxiety, depression, and attention deficit disorder. (see: 'Invisible Americans: The Tragic Cost of Child Poverty ' , Jeff Madrick). In the long run this leads to broader social problems. We can do better!

I referred to the seemingly hopelessness of poverty and place an emphasis on the word "seemingly". With collaborative efforts the problem of poverty can be overcome. For example, in the last twenty years, in sub-Saharan Africa, largely through the efforts of the UN, UNICEF, and various NGOs, the number of children dying before the age of five has been reduced by 50%. As the saying goes, ' where there is a will , there is a way' , and I would add to that, especially when our will is grounded in the love and mercies of God.

Throughout the Bible, and particularly in the writings of Luke , the portrayal of a merciful God is central, and we hear echoes of that when Jesus says, " Let the little children come to me", which, in turn, becomes a calling for the Body of Christ, the Church. There is no more basic human right than the availability of healthy, life-giving food for all!

At this time, we have no children in our church, but this congregation, through charitable efforts, has shown its concern for the little ones, and I hope we can continue to move forward in that regard in the new year ahead. Amen.

Let us pray: Gracious and merciful Lord, we thank you for this day you have given us, and for the blessed gift of a new year. As we look forward to the year ahead strengthen our commitment to follow in the ways of your Son, Jesus. May your mercies be revealed through us as we strive to live as you would have us do, bearing witness to your love, especially as we look towards those who suffer in this world, whether it be the result of poverty and hunger, the scourge of violence and war, as well as the hatefulness, the bigotry and intolerance that are so often at the core of such suffering. May the new year be a blessing for all as we open our eyes to the presence of your kingdom in the midst of us, in and through the power of your Holy Spirit. We also ask that you bless us individually and as a congregation as you lovingly mold us into the people and church you would have us be. Give us a vision for our future and grant us the faith, love, and hope to see it as a reality. And, as always, we lift up before you those in our own community who are in special need of your presence, your peace, and your loving care...Amen.