

All the Children

Rev. Dr. Scott Ramsey

Psalm 8; Mark 10:13-16

Lewinsville Presbyterian Church

World Communion Sunday – October 3, 2021

World Communion Sunday is a tradition that was begun at Shadyside Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh in 1933, as the pastors and Session there sought to promote Christian unity and to call our attention to the ways that Christian congregations and denominations are organically connected to each other *through Jesus Christ*. As Ephesians 4 teaches, we affirm “one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.” The one holy catholic and apostolic church finds its unity – not in our strongly and correctly held opinions, nor in the color of our skin, nor in our preferences for a particular style of worship – our unity is in Jesus.

Now if you’re paying attention, that should give you enormous comfort, and it should make you sit up straight with a bit of uneasiness. It should give you comfort because it means that the future of the church does not actually depend on us, and is completely secure. Shirley Guthrie, my beloved theology professor in seminary, was once asked whether, given all of the statistics of church decline, whether he had any hope in the Presbyterian church. He very quickly responded, “Absolutely not. No one should have any hope in the church, whether the Presbyterian church, or the Episcopal church, or the non-denominational church, or any other organization. We do not hope in the church. We hope in Jesus Christ. Period. And because Jesus Christ was raised from the dead, we’ve got all the hope we could possibly ask for.” This gives us the deepest comfort.

But it should make you uneasy, because if our unity is in Jesus, then that means that we need to be taking our marching orders from him, and it does not take much awareness to realize that we do not always do that.

In our wonderful little text from Mark 10, that Michelle read for us, Jesus denounces his disciples who are acting as bouncers, trying to determine who can get to Jesus. When I think of how often the church down through history has tried to control who is allowed to get to Jesus, it makes me tremble. “People were bringing little children to Jesus so that he might touch them with blessing, and the disciples spoke sternly to them.” Children, they must have thought, will just be a distraction. Jesus has more important people to talk to. In fact, immediately after our text in verse 17, a rich man comes up to ask Jesus a question. Nobody stops him. African-American womanist scholar Bridgett Green observes that “The Greco-Roman world treated children as inferior, powerless dependents with little to no rights. In general, the culture viewed

them as a liability, burden, and commodity until they can contribute to the family.”¹ The disciples were just doing what most adults of their time would have done, fencing the children out and shushing them.

But Jesus wouldn't have any of it. He was “indignant,” the text says. “Let the little children come to me; do not stop them.” You can't always tell what tone of voice Jesus uses in a particular passage. But you can tell here. He was angry at his followers who tried to keep little ones away from him.

If the church is going to follow Jesus, the church must be a community where the needs of children are at the center of our attention. Recently, a group of us were talking about our utilizing the Bethany Room for childcare, while the building is undergoing renovation. We were talking about what we'll do if little ones in the Bethany Room start to cry or make enough noise that they can be heard in the sanctuary. We came to realize that what we will do is to rejoice. We will say ‘thanks be to God for this little one.’ We will not roll our eyes, we will not throw shade at anyone, we will not groan and wonder how long until the building is complete so that we can get the children out of earshot. “Let the children come to me.” The little ones, the last and the least, whom our society tends to overlook and ignore are at the center of God's kingdom. This is especially the case for children who are in some kind of need, whether through poverty or homelessness or warfare or oppression. In Fairfax County, *before the pandemic*, there were over 23,000 children who lived with food insecurity, according to county statistics.² Those numbers have surely gone up during the pandemic. World Communion Sunday is a time to commit ourselves to advocating for public policies that will increase access to healthy food for all children.

As we focus on the needs of children, we will also experience Jesus' invitation to attend to the frightened little child that lives inside of each one of us. As we go through our own childhoods, we picked up fears and wounds along the way that still drive us. We picked up these wounds, not necessarily because the adults around us were mean and malicious, but because they were human and limited, too, doing the best they could with the wounds they had accumulated in their own childhoods. If we are impatient and hostile towards children in our world, that is a sure sign that there is a neglected and scared little child inside of us, whose fears are driving our own hostility in the moment. In our passage from Mark, it is not hard to imagine that the disciples, who were speaking so sternly to the poor who were bringing their children to Jesus for a blessing, had very likely been shamed and shushed themselves as children. After all, we act out as adults what we learned and experienced as children.

¹ Bridgett Green, “Nobody's Free Until Everybody's Free,” in *Womanist Interpretations of the Bible: Expanding the Discourse* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016) 301.

² <https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/food-council/food-access>

When Jesus says, Let the little children come to me, he is saying, let *all the children* come to me. No exceptions. Let the children in your community who don't have enough to eat. Let the children in your families who just want your attention. Let the child who is inside of you, scared and lonely. World Communion Sunday is a day when we remember that Jesus Christ, the head of the church, has time and space for all of the children. To God be all the glory. Amen.