

Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
June 1 & 2, 2013
Dan Anderson
Valuable: Kids
Mark 10:13-16

(Slide show begins.)

1. Children are a gift from God.
2. The fruit of the womb a reward.
3. Grandchildren are the pride and joy of old age.
4. Children take great pride in their parents.
5. Children are a gift from God.
6. The fruit of the womb a reward.
7. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior, so are the children of one's youth.
8. Happy is the man who has his quiver full of them [Psalm 127:5].
9. Most of the time . . .
10. Most of the time . . .
11. Most of the time . . .
12. (Family Circus, picture, no words.)

(Slide show ends.)

Kasserian ingera? I have read that among the tribal clans of Africa, the ethnic tribal groups, few warriors are more fearsome or more cunning than the Maasai warriors of Kenya and Tanzania. So perhaps it is surprising to learn that the traditional greeting among these fierce Maasai warriors is *Kasserian ingera?* which in Swahili means, "Are the children well?" or "How are the children doing?"

In recent weeks we have been looking at the different parts of *our* tribe, our community at Christ Presbyterian Church, to see how all of the parts fit together. What is the value of each component? We considered women and we considered singles and last week, we looked at our elders. But what about children? How do the children fit in and do we care? Some of us grew up in a culture that said, "Children should be seen and not heard." The great American novelist, Mark Twain, once said, "When children turn thirteen, put them in a barrel and feed them through a knothole. When they get to be sixteen, plug the hole."

What about the children? Is Mark Twain right? How do the children fit into the community of CPC? What value do we place on our children? Well, we value children enough to hire a large staff to work with our kids. This photograph is already out of date because Anne McCracken has retired and Jill Campbell is the new ministry assistant for Kids' Ministries and Michelle Dunbar has left the team and we are looking for a

replacement. But, say, nine salaried staff members working with our kids at maybe \$100,000 per person. That would be almost a million dollars of investment. It is possible that my calculations are slightly off here, but you get the idea.

When you count up salaries, curriculum materials, supplies, custodial expenses, heating, electricity, the number begins to add up. Financially we invest heavily in our children, perhaps as much as a half-million, three-quarters of a million dollars in our kids, something like that. Plus, there's building space. Have any of you ever tried to have a meeting for an adult group in this building on a Wednesday night? It's not possible because children are in every space in the building. The whole building is teeming with children learning about Jesus!

And volunteers? We have almost 120 volunteers working with our children. At an average of three-plus hours per week, that translates to 360 volunteer hours per week or the equivalent of nine full-time positions! All in all, we have a little over 1,000 children on our rolls at CPC! Why would we dedicate so much money, time, energy, and space to children? Why do we invest so heavily in the lives of little people? Let me share with you a few reasons for valuing and investing in children.

1. The first reason is this: Children, like grownups, are **created in the image of God**. Contrary to what some cultures seem to imply through their practices, we do not believe children are commodities to be used or owned, nor do we believe children are designed to be a workforce for their parents. Children are people, albeit little people, but whole people, created in the image of God. When David, the shepherd boy, reflected on his own formation, he wrote in Psalm 139,

14 I praise God because I am fearfully and wonderfully made

We value children because they are wonderfully made, created by God, in the image of God.

2. We also value and invest in children because **faith is more likely to take root and stick for those who learn about Jesus while they are children**. In 2009, the Barna Research Group reported that 64 percent of American adults who are followers of Jesus began that journey of faith before their 18th birthday. They drew this conclusion: "If people do not embrace Jesus as their Savior before they reach their teenage years, the chance of their doing so at all is slim."* And so we invest in our children.

The Barna Group also noted that 61 percent of adults who attend church services faithfully, that's you, 61 percent of you were regular attendees when you were children while only 22 percent of those who were not churchgoers as children attend churches today. They concluded, "If you connect with children today, effectively teaching them Biblical principles and foundations from the start, then you will see the fruit of that effort blossom for decades to come."* This matches the teaching of Solomon who wrote in Proverbs 22,

6 Start children off on the way they should go, and even when they are old they will not turn from it.

In writing about brain development in children, the University of Denver's Institute for Early Learning noted, "Floor time with a child, including talking, singing, reading, playing and exploring . . . are the best ways to stimulate brain development." If we are going to invest, it seems to make sense to invest where there is likely to be a return. So, we get down on the floor with our kids, and we sing and we read and we explore with our children as we introduce them to the wonder of a God who loves them.

A third reason we value and invest in children is because **Jesus valued children**. This brings us to the Scripture lesson for today from the Gospel of Mark, chapter 10. It's on page 1,506 of your pew Bible and on the screen.

13 People were bringing little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them, but the disciples rebuked them. **14** When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. **15** Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." **16** And he took the children in his arms, placed his hands on them and blessed them.

With the buzz about the teaching and miracles of Jesus, parents and grandparents wanted Jesus to touch their children in a protective way. They hoped for His blessing on the lives and futures of their children. It is possible that Jesus was in a home in this instance, and parents were bringing their children to Jesus to have Him pray with them before they went off to bed. Whatever the circumstance, we read that the disciples rebuked the parents for bringing their kids. Perhaps they thought that children should be seen and not heard—that children are really a nuisance. Besides, children don't really count in all cultures, do they? And busy Jesus has more important things to do with the adults than to attend to whiny children, so the disciples shooed the children away. Only one time in all of the New Testament writings do we read that Jesus became indignant. This is that time. When Jesus saw what the disciples were doing, He was indignant and said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them for the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these." Jesus was not too busy for children. He had time for them. He valued children and wrapped the children in arms of love. He blessed them and then said to the adults, "You would do well to become like children. Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it."

Was that ever a surprise to the adults! Jesus turned the tables and said to the adults, "Children do not need to grow up and act like you grownups. You grownups would do well to discover the fountain of youth and become like little children. You grownups can, in fact, learn from these children." What is it that children teach us? What is it that Jesus wants us to learn from children? Let me offer three suggestions.

1. We can learn from children how to receive a gift. Children know how to receive a gift. They take it and enjoy it with great delight and wonder if there are more gifts coming! Children do not ask, “Hmmm, I wonder what the motive is behind this gift? What does the giver want from me?” Adults, on the other hand, are more likely to think there must be a catch, that there must be something we must do in order to earn God’s gift. With a big enough offering can’t I buy my way into God’s Kingdom? Can’t I enter through merit and doing good? Jesus said, “Adults, receive my gift like a child.”

Twenty-eight years ago my wife and I moved back to Minnesota. One of the church members in our new congregation gave us keys to his boat on Lake Minnetonka. He said we could use it any time we wanted. Did I mention this was a 34-foot, three-deck cruiser with two big Chrysler engines and sleeping quarters and a galley? Or that he gave us his credit card and told us where we could go to get gas when the boat needed it? Or that he said we could stop at the Lafayette Club and have lunch using his member number? My wife and I nicknamed this boat *Therapy* because it was so good. Did I do anything to deserve that wonderful gift? Not a thing! I hardly knew the man when he gave me the keys to his boat! Did I need to pay him back? I couldn’t have paid him back if I had wanted to. There was no way I could. This was a gift. And with some trepidation, listen, the only boat I had ever taken out before that was a little rowboat with a 7-horsepower motor on the back, so with some trepidation but with a great deal of pleasure, we received that gift.

Jesus offers the gift of membership to His Kingdom. He offers the gift of belonging to His community, to His family, the place where God reigns, and the gift comes with complete forgiveness. It comes with partnership, friendship, joy, meaning, and the gift of eternal life. Jesus says to us, “Receive My gift like a child.” Children know how to receive a gift.

2. We can also learn from children not to be afraid to ask for help. Children are not afraid to be dependent.

- Mommy, will you help me tie my shoes?
- Daddy, I’m hungry. Can you get me something to eat?
- Mommy, can you give me a ride to soccer practice?
- Dad, will you help me with this homework? (Go ask your mother ☺.)

And children are dependent in ways they do not even recognize. What do they know of mortgages or gas or electric bills or buying health insurance or the cost of groceries? They don’t understand all of that. They simply depend on their parents to take care of them. As children grow older they begin to say, “I can do it by myself.” By the time we become adults, we are pretty much self-sufficient, I-can-do-it-by-myself kinds of folks.

Our American culture admires independence. New Englanders, my region of origin, are fiercely independent. We are reluctant to ask for help. We, especially men, are hesitant to go to the doctor’s office when we don’t feel well. When our cars make funny noises, we hope the noise will go away or we add another quart of oil. When our marriages are

in trouble, we sometimes act as if ignoring the problem will make things better. When we face challenges and hard decisions, we are more likely to try to figure things out ourselves than to seek advice. And when it comes to God, we don't want any handouts. We tend to act under the belief that there are no free lunches and if we are going to find a way into God's family, doing good is what really matters. But Jesus says to us, "Receive my gift like a little child. You cannot earn My forgiveness and blessing on your own. Depend on Me. I will do for you what you cannot do for yourselves." The Apostle Paul put it this way in Ephesians 2,

8 For it is by grace through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— **9** not by works, so that no one can boast.

We are saved by faith in God, who treats us much better than we deserve. This is God's gift to us and not anything we have done on our own. It isn't something we have earned, so there is nothing we can brag about. To receive God's gift like a little child, come in dependence.

3. Finally, we learn from children how to trust. If a loving parent says to a child, "Jump into my arms," the child will most likely jump because the child has learned to trust the loving parent explicitly. To trust in someone is to rely upon or depend on or to place confidence in them. It is to believe. It means to trust another person's honesty and integrity.

Many of us have been conditioned by the Lucy van Pelts of life. "Charlie Brown," she says, "I have a great idea. I'll hold the football like this and you come running up and kick it." "Ha!" Charlie Brown says. "I wouldn't try that for a million dollars! You won't hold it. You'll pull it away and I'll kill myself." "Waah! You don't trust me! You think I'm no good! You have no faith in me!" "Don't cry, Lucy. I apologize. I'm sorry. Please don't cry. You hold the ball and I'll come running up and kick it." Then Lucy says, "Never listen to a woman's tears, Charlie Brown."

Children are not jaded by the disappointments of life and the realities of human sinfulness. They hear "Jesus loves me" and they believe. Twelve-year-old Greta Long, who is singing with her sisters in the 9:30 service, was interviewed for the current issue of *CPC Life*. This is part of what she had to say, "Children, especially very young ones, may not know a ton about the Bible and may not know a ton of Scripture, but in their minds, there is no doubt that there is only one God and He came to save them. I think everyone can learn from that."

This does not mean that we check our brains at the door when we come to faith. I don't think so. When Thomas, one of Jesus' early followers, struggled with Jesus' death and the idea of His resurrection, Jesus provided him with evidence, enough evidence for him to trust, and Thomas exclaimed, "*My Lord and my God!*"

29 Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." [John 20:29]

At some point, following Jesus means to trust, to step across the river of questioning and believe that He has given us enough evidence to accept what He said and did as true. At some point, following Jesus means to leap into His arms. Mark, who was one who walked with Jesus, told the story of a man who had a sick son who came to Jesus asking for help. The distraught father implored,

22 . . . if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us." **23** " 'If you can'?" said Jesus. "Everything is possible for one who believes." **24** Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" [Mark 9:22-24]

Lord, we do believe. We want to believe. Help us with our unbelief. Jesus loved and valued little children and He says to us, "Learn from the children. Become like children:

- Take and receive My gift.
- Depend on Me to direct your lives.
- Trust Me. I will be true to My word.

What's the bottom line of this meditation and this Scripture? Very simply this: If you have not done so already, today you are invited to receive God's gift like a little child. "Let the little children" and let the adults "come to me, and do not hinder them, for the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these." Let's pray together.

Like the dad with the child who was sick, we want to believe. We want to believe like little children. Sometimes we struggle with the realities of life. Lord, help us in our unbelief to trust You, to receive Your gift, to walk with You. In Christ's name, Amen.

* from *Transforming Children Into Spiritual Champions* by George Barna, George Barna Research Group

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