

Let the Little Children Come to Me

Matt 19:13-15

I asked that a few different passages of scripture be read for today, but what I've been thinking most about is the one from Matthew's gospel. It is short, so I'll read it again:

Then people brought little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and pray for them. But the disciples rebuked them.

Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these." When he had placed his hands on them, he went on from there.

Jesus is a pretty neat guy. One of the really neat things about Jesus is the way he can take some of the things we think we know very well, turn it on top of its head, and then teach us something new that we never would have thought of otherwise. As an example, remember when Jesus and his disciples were walking through a field on the sabbath, and his disciples picked some of the grains and ate them as they walked. Doing this outraged the Pharisees. It was the Sabbath, the day that God's people are commanded to cease their labour in the fields. No good Pharisee would think to defy the Law by picking grains on a Sabbath! The Pharisees,

being experts in the Law and zealous about following it as closely as they were able, took themselves to know pretty much all there is about Sabbath regulations. If you had asked them, they likely could have recited all 39 categories of activity that were prohibited on the Sabbath. Now think about what Jesus does. His response to them is that “Man was not made for the Sabbath, but the Sabbath for man!” Jesus flips the Sabbath Law right onto its head. The Sabbath is a great gift given by God to his people out of love, not a burden imposed upon us to keep us from flourishing (or eating). Yes, we are commanded to rest one day out of seven, but that is only because it is *good* for us to take rest. Without that break we become so caught up in our work, activities, and general business that we lose perspective of what we are doing with our lives and why, we miss out on many of the simple pleasures of life, and we don’t actually increase our productivity in any meaningful way anyways. The Sabbath is a great blessing given to us; it is not a means of enslaving us. In flipping around the whole underlying approach that the Pharisees took to Sabbath regulations, Jesus is undermining much of what they would have just assumed without really questioning it. If Jesus is right about Sabbath regulations, what of the rest of the Law? Could it be that all of God’s commands are actually given for us, to our benefit, rather than us being created for the purpose of serving the Law???

Another example: this one brought to my attention through one of Pastor Michelle’s recent sermons. When Jesus’ final day on Earth was approaching and he was preparing his disciples for what he knew was about to happen, it seems the most obvious thing in the world that it would be *bad* for the disciples to lose their friend and Master to a horrifying death on the cross. It would be bad for them to have to continue in life without Jesus physically walking beside them each every day. We usually share that assumption; who among you has never thought that it

would be better for you if you could have Jesus physically present with you the way the disciples did during the years of his ministry on earth? And yet, Jesus flat out tell his disciples that,

“7 But very truly I tell you, it is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.”

According to Jesus, it was better for his disciples that he was going away, because having the Holy Spirit sent to them would turn out to be even better than continuing the life they had already been experiencing side by side with Jesus. Likewise for us. Our ability, right now today, to live a life empowered by the indwelling Holy Spirit, is *better for us* than it would be to live with the physical companionship of Jesus himself. The presence and glory of God used to dwell in a tabernacle, a tent that the Israelites carried around with them. In Jesus, the presence of glory of God came and dwelt among mankind, clothed in the human flesh. Now, the presence and glory of God dwells *inside* each and every Christian through the indwelling Holy Spirit, and Jesus’ claim is that this final state is even better than having Jesus with us in the flesh. This is not at all what we would have expected; it flips our expectations on their head, and yet once you accept it you begin to see truths about the power of the Holy Spirit that you may not have even considered otherwise.

Jesus is a master of turning the tables on us, and he does it again here in the passage we are considering today.

Normally, we assume that our role as parents, and as adults in a church family, is to provide instruction and guidance to our children. Our job is to raise them up in the instruction of the Lord, to teach them the ways of God, to hold their hands and point them in the direction they ought to go.

¶ Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it. Prov.22:6

Now consider what Jesus says when a group of children are brought before him for a blessing. Rebuking his disciples for trying to shoo the kids away, Jesus claims that “the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.” Do you see how Jesus is turning the tables again? Of course it is our job as adults to train our children, and yet, if Jesus is right that the very Kingdom we are striving for belongs to those like the children, then surely we can learn a lot from them as well! As much as we train our children to prepare them for life as adults in this world, THEY can train US for the heavenly life. Consider the irony of the rich young ruler who approaches Jesus immediately after this passage. He has spent his whole life striving for the kingdom, he claims, keeping the law ever since his youth. He has toiled and laboured for years, if not decades, for the very thing that already belongs to those such as the little children he likely pushed his way past in order to speak with Jesus. Jesus gives him not one, but two crucial pieces of advice. He explicitly tells him to give up his riches and come to follow Jesus, but his implicit advice to the entire crowd is pay more attention to the children that typically get shooed away or ignored. If the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as they, then perhaps we should pay attention to what they have and we lack!

I am at a point in my life where I have been blessed with a full quiver of 4 children, and I can attest to you there is much truth in Jesus' words. Not only do I have a full quiver, I have kids at all stages of life: Makiah and Theo are now teenagers, Cora is my four-year-old toddler, and Opal recently turned one. Today I'd like to share a bit of what I am learning from them

OPAL

First, Opal is now transitioning out of the infant stage, but she is still the baby of the family. She speaks only with a few hand signals and some very loud screams when she is upset. But even Opal has things to share about what it means to live in the kingdom of God. The other day I was changing her - we have a change station set up on top of her dresser, and her sister was making funny faces at her. Opal rolled towards her and if I hadn't been there she would have just rolled right off the dresser and landed on her face. It struck me how completely dependent Opal is. Left to herself she wouldn't be able to eat or drink, she would likely injure herself several times within minutes, and she may not even survive for more than an hour or so.

Every minute of every day, Opal needs someone else to care for her and provide for her needs. Furthermore, she is not even aware of this radical dependence! She has no idea how big a mess she would be in if she did not have someone else paying attention to her needs and her safety. If she's able to think about it at all, she probably assumed that if she rolled off the change table she'd just float gently to the floor the way she does when someone is carrying her.

No one has ever gotten a thank-you out of Opal for seeing to all her needs; she is entirely oblivious to it.

Opal's situation is not so very different from ours. What I learn from Opal is how radically dependent I am, and how just as radically oblivious I am to that fact. Just as Opal has a mother and a father and a few older siblings constantly looking out for her behind the scenes, you and I have a Heavenly Father who is attentive to needs that we don't even know we have. God is looking out for us, and we are so much more dependent on his love and his activity on our behalf than we will ever realize. This goes for every single one of us.

This is part of what it means for God to be the Creator. We tend to think of God's act of creation as a single event far in our past. God, we think, at one point said out loud "let there be light". After this there was light, and God's act of creating light was over and done with. Similarly, we often think of God fashioning the entire universe at one point in time long ago, winding up the clock, so to speak, and then ceasing his creative activity and leaving the world to do its own thing. Many of the classical theologians thought differently about creation, and I am convinced that there were right. Creation is not a single event with a beginning and end at some identifiable points far in our past; rather, creation is an on-going activity. God is actively creating at every moment; it is only because he continues to hold the creation in existence that anything has being at all. Were God to cease his creative activity, everything other than God would collapse into non-existence. God is the ultimate Being, the supreme Reality, and everything distinct from him derives its very being, moment to moment from the loving creative activity of God. We are dependent on Him for our very existence

If you are a Christian I am not sharing anything new with you; you'll likely acknowledge quite readily that you are dependent on your Lord in all manner of ways. I've always acknowledged that as well. However, when I observe Opal's helplessness and when I am attentive to her needs as much as I am, I begin to feel my own helplessness in my very bones. I don't just agree to it in my head, I feel my complete need for and dependence on God my Saviour.

One more thing. Sometimes ... pretty regularly ... ok, several times a day ... Opal soils herself. When she does, she just sits there in it and lets it get worse and worse. She is completely and utterly unable to get herself out of that awful situation. Being soiled is miserable for her and miserable for everyone around her too. It spoils whatever other good things are going on in her life. Sometimes she even screams at other people as though it were their fault! The longer she wallows in that condition, the worse things get, and the only way that she is ever able to get out of that condition is when someone who cares for her picks her up, cleans her off, and makes her well.

Sometimes ... pretty regularly ... sometimes several times a day ... I soil myself. NOT in the same way that Opal does! I make a bad choice of some sort, or I let my temper get the better of me, or I give in to temptation, and the result is a soiling of my heart and my soul. That condition is bad for me but also bad for those around me. It festers as time goes on. The very nature of sin is to corrupt and to keep corrupting. You see this when you choose to tell a small lie about some matter, and then find yourself telling more and more lies in order to cover up the fact that you lied the first time. Sin feeds off itself. Sometimes, I even try to put the blame on others; often, I am just not very pleasant to be around. The longer I wallow in sin, the worse things become. Finally, I am entirely unable to free myself from that awful condition. Try as I might,

there is no erasing sin, for example through trying to make up for it with good deeds. I can be honest 10,000 times but it doesn't erase the fact that I lied that one time, and that the lie has effects beyond just that moment. The only way that I come out of my sins is if Someone picks me up, cleans me off, and puts me in my right condition. I am completely dependent upon my Saviour, and I have learned this in a new way from my year-old daughter.

CORA

Cora is now four years old, and from her I have learned, or perhaps AM LEARNING, Joy. Cora is not happy all the time; Theo in particular knows just how to push her buttons to get her upset, but she does have a deep joy in her heart that I envy. Cora can be delighted to the Nth degree by some of the simplest and most mundane things in life. Take some soap and blow some bubbles into the air some time, and just watch her eyes light up with glee. "It's just a boring old soap bubble," I think in my old man heart, and yet to Cora it is fascinating and fun and delightful. She drinks in pure joy from this world, and I would cut off my right arm if I could experience life that way. When Cora goes to her 8th swimming lesson, she is just as full of excitement and joy as when she goes to the first. The other day when I got home from work she ran up to me bubbling over with joy, "Daddy, Daddy, I jumped off the diving board; TWO TIMES!!!" It was like the best thing that had ever happened to anyone before. The next day I got a phone call from her when I was at work. She had just woken up and told her mom that she needed to talk to me. I picked up the phone and she says, "Daddy, Daddy, I jumped off the diving board - TWO TIMES!!!"

I want to be more like her. Cora sees wonderful and delightful things each and every day that I just seem to be blind to. Perhaps her heart is receptive to joy where my heart is calloused over and jaded; too hard to let that joy in. I am learning. The other day I was jogging with Cora and Opal in the stroller and she spied a mud puddle in front of us. Guess what she wanted me to do? Never in a hundred years would I have thought to run right through the middle of a mud puddle if hadn't been for Cora, but that is just what we did. And guess what I learned? It is FUN to run through a puddle! Yes, my shoes got soaked, but they dried out the very next day. Why do I take myself so seriously when the world around me overflows with opportunities for simple joy??? Children can teach us this, they can pull us out of our imposed self-importance and they can share with us the world as they see it, if you have ears and are willing to listen. The kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these... Perhaps part of what Jesus had in mind is that the kingdom of heaven is not just the way things will be at some point in the distant future, or a world far removed from us in place and time that we will somehow be transported to after our death on earth. The kingdom of heaven exists right here and now, parallel to our earthly lives, as a sort of alternate reality. Jesus came to tear the veil between the two, to allow heaven to seep in to our earthly existence, so that God's will might be done here and now on earth, as it is done here and now in heaven. In their ability to find delight in a mud puddle, perhaps children participate in the heavenly life in a way that stuffy adults are simply blind to. Let the little children come to you; try to see what they see, and perhaps you'll peek behind that veil into the life of heaven.

One more thing; I have come to believe, and it has taken me *decades* to get to this point, that in her unadulterated, overflowing joy, Cora is *Godlike*. God, I think, is the most joyful being in

existence; no one else is as full of delight, pleasure, and happiness as our Lord. His joy is like a deep cup that is so full it flows over the top and spills all over the rest of creation.

I have not always thought this. For most of my life I have pictured God with his arms crossed and a frown on his face. For most of my life, if you were to ask me to give adjectives to describe God, I probably wouldn't have given you this answer out loud, but it certainly resided in my heart: disappointment. God, more than anything else, is disappointed. Disappointed in mankind generally, but in me specifically, for all of my constant failures. Were it not for us and our sins, perhaps God would be joyful, but we mar the face of creation so deeply that the pleasure God would otherwise have in it is spoiled. Maybe one day, when the problem of sin is fully and finally settled, maybe then God will be happy again, but for now his brow is furrowed.

NOT SO. I no longer think this is the case, and it has been a hard thing to come out from under that picture of a disappointed God.

Pastor Michelle has been instrumental in this.

She has been teaching us recently that the cross is predominantly about the glory of God and not *predominantly* about you or I. My sin, as disappointing as it might be, is the tiniest thing in great glorious Creation of God. God has so much to be joyful of that no amount of human sin can put even the shadow of a frown on his face. This does not mean that sin is insignificant, it does not mean that we don't have a real problem that must be dealt with and it certainly does not mean that we have license to sin more freely. We should never forget that the problem of sin is big enough that it put Jesus Christ on the cross. Along with this, however, we must also never forget that through his death and resurrection Christ *triumphed* over sin, and he did so in

such spectacular fashion that the final result is even more joyful. God is so much bigger than our sins that they are not worth comparing to the great glory of his unfettered Joy.

C.S. Lewis saw this. In his book *The Great Divorce* he imagines some folks from hell taking a visit on a flying tour bus up to heaven. Initially hell is described as a vast realm with no end. The denizens of hell cannot stand one another, you see, so they continuously move further and further away, until the drab, grey, shabby buildings of hell stretch out for millions upon millions of miles. As the tour bus rises from hell the narrator says,

“A cliff loomed up ahead. It sank vertically beneath us so far that I could not see the bottom, and it was dark and smooth. We were mounting all the time. At last the top of the cliff became visible like a thin line of emerald green stretched tight as a fiddlestring. Presently we glided over that top: we were flying above a level, grassy country through which there ran a wide river.”

Later in the story, however, after the narrator has spent some time in the heavenly realm, the place that the tour bus came up from is pointed out to him:

“My teacher gave a curious smile. ‘Look,’ he said, and with the word he went down on his hands and knees. I did the same (how it hurt my knees!) and presently saw that he had plucked a blade of grass. Using its thin end as a pointer, he made me see, after I had looked very closely, a crack in the soil so small that I could not have identified it without this aid. “I cannot be certain,” he said, “that this is the crack ye came up through. But through a crack no bigger than that ye certainly came.” “But - but,” I gasped with a feeling of bewilderment not unlike terror. “I saw an infinite abyss. And cliffs towering up and up. And then *this* country on top of

the cliffs.” “Aye. But the voyage was not mere locomotion. That bus, and all you inside it, were increasing in size.” “Do you mean then that Hell - all that infinite empty town - is down in some little crack like this?” “Yes. All Hell is smaller than one pebble of your earthly world: but it is smaller than one atom of *this* world, the Real World. Look at yon butterfly. If it swallowed all Hell, Hell would not be big enough to do it any harm or to have any taste.”

I do not wish to downplay the real tragedy of fallen humanity or the absolute horror of the things we are capable of doing to one another. I do want to suggest, however, that there is a much, much bigger context that those realities exist within. When you picture your Father God, I would encourage you to picture him with a great big smile on his face, perhaps laughing out loud the way Cora did when we ran through that puddle.

THEO AND MAKIAH

In addition to my infant and my toddler, I am blessed at this stage of life to also have two wonderful teenagers, Theo and Makiah. They are each unique individuals and don't deserve to be lumped together, but in the interest of getting us all out of here on time, I am going to discuss what I am learning from my teenagers together rather than separately. I imagine I'll hear about that later...

Almost certainly, when Jesus invited the little children to come to him for a blessing, and told his followers that the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as them, there were not any teenagers in the crowd of children. Two reasons for this; first, back in 1st century Judea teenagers would likely be raising their own families or at least working alongside the adults; second because being teenagers, they would have refused to associate with little kids and turned their noses up at having some stranger place his hands on their heads and saying a blessing.

Still, I am going to extrapolate a little and suggest that teenagers also have much to teach us about the kingdom of heaven. I learn at least as much about the kingdom from Theo and Makiah as I do from Opal and Cora.

Teenagers are difficult. Everyone knows this but unless you are living with teenagers right now you've probably either forgotten much of it or don't REALLY know what parents are talking about when they complain about their teenagers. What makes teenagers difficult is how strongly they resist attempts at controlling, steering, guiding, and sometimes even *suggesting* a path through life. Teenagers, by their very nature, butt up against rules and expectations. This can be infuriating and in some families - not my own, not yet! - in some families the conflict can just tear apart relationships and basic functioning. I am going to suggest, however, that in that very contrariness there is a kernel of something *glorious*. I am very much aware of the contrast this makes with the Dependence I am learning from Opal, but what I am learning from my teenagers is the great value, and the place in the Kingdom of God, of *independence*, autonomy, self-direction, and freedom of will.

I need to be careful here because my own teenagers are listening, and all they are likely to take away is a big thumbs up to acts of defiance. I am NOT saying that it is good to defy your parents. What I am saying is that the capacity, the ability, to think for oneself and set one's own direction in life is itself a tremendously good thing.

We can see this in a couple of ways. A teenager's refusal to take direction from parents can, I must admit, lead to the discovery and appreciation of good things that the parent is just plain ignorant of. I learned this lesson recently with Makiah and Theo's involvement in the Yukon Theater for Young People and their production of the musical *Newsies* up at the Arts Centre last weekend. Understand that I have no use in my own life for signing and dancing, and there are few things that grate on my sensibilities more than Broadway showtunes. The last time I danced was 19 years ago on my wedding day. I sing to God in church (and I don't do it well), but I don't sing for any other reason in my life. Given a choice between spending hours upon hours learning, practicing and performing a musical play or spending that time fishing, biking, or doing just about anything else, I certainly would have guided my teenagers in the other direction. They wouldn't and didn't accept that guidance, and instead got involved in *Newsies*. And guess what? Good for them. They poured a ton of energy into that play and in the end, they nailed it. The show was excellent; even I in my tone-deafness and profound ignorance of the performing arts was able to appreciate how many overlapping good things a production like that brings together. There is a whole wide world of goods out there, and I recognize that I am in touch with only a few; my teenagers have found goods that I am ignorant of, and they wouldn't have done so if they had remained under my guidance.

There is something tremendously good about a free human soul pursuing the Good on its own initiative. We can see how good a thing this is by contrasting two situations. In the first, suppose that Theo takes out the garbage for no reason other than that his parents have instituted a set of household rules including reward for obedience and punishment for disobedience. He cares not one whit about the need to get the garbage out of the house but he does care about getting his allowance at the end of the week and about not having the internet cut off if he doesn't do his chores. He takes out the garbage because he is compelled to do so by the power and the will of his parents, and for no other reason. That isn't a bad thing; obeying your parents gets a big thumbs up, and taking the garbage out in this situation is a job well done. Contrast it, however, with this (imaginary) scenario: Garbage duty has been struck from Theo's list of chores and there are no longer any rewards from his parents for taking it out, or any negative consequences for him if he leaves it in the house. However, Theo comes to understand that with Opal soiling herself in the house and diapers ending up in the garbage, it advantages everyone in the household to have the garbage taken outside. The scales fall off his eyes, so to speak, and he comes to understand the inherent good of taking the garbage out. All on his own initiative, he voluntarily empties the bin and goes about his day, not even looking for extra recognition. We can see that this second scenario is *better* than the first; there is something glorious about free creatures independently pursuing the Good instead of being compelled or controlled in that direction by a higher power. We can come to know this through reflection alone, but living with teenagers helps you to feel it in your bones.

There is much to be said about this, but let me just scratch the surface a little more. We know that God created the world, and we know that God is powerful enough to have created any sort of world he wanted. If God's purpose in creating was just to have other creatures acting in

concert with God's own will, he could certainly have done so by making creatures all of whose thoughts and actions are under God's immediate control. Evidently we do not live in such a world, and so evidently God's purpose in creating was somewhat more complex. To go back to my example, perhaps God didn't just want the garbage taken out. Perhaps what he really wanted was creatures capable of understanding and valuing God's own ends and desires, and then pursuing those independently of his control. Creating creatures independent of God's control is inherently risky; it means that those creatures might end up going in the wrong direction. It is risky in the same way that living with teenagers is risky. Teenagers must have freedom to pursue their own ends (if that freedom is not given it will be taken), but that just means that they are enabled to make choices that scare the pants off of their parents. However, including teenager-like creatures in God's creation also allows for the possibility of much greater goods than could be obtained without them. It allows for a possible future where God's creatures worship his glory because they independently see and understand and *love* his glory, and not just because they really have no other choice in the matter.

I can see the Calvinists among us squirming uncomfortably in the pews so maybe I will leave it at that. From my teenagers I have learned more of the deep value of autonomy, independence, and free will. In no way does this independence and autonomy negate the radical *dependence* I spoke of in relation to my infant. One of the great mysteries of the Christian faith is that our dependence and our independence co-exist in mind-boggling ways.

CONCLUSION

I've been sharing some of what I've been learning as a parent of my own children, but I am aware that not all of you are parents, and some of you that are parents have grown children who aren't living with you anymore. If you don't live with children at this time in your life you might be tempted to think that my message doesn't really apply much to you. Without children of your own, you might think, you don't have the opportunity to learn about the kingdom of heaven from children. Resist that temptation! Recognize that when Jesus suggested that we can learn of the kingdom from little children, he was talking to his disciples about *other people's* children. And here, at RBC, we have a great treasure in our children's program that invites participation from each and every one of you. If you don't have children of your own living with you, consider helping in the nursery or teaching a Sunday school class next season. Let our little children come to you, to learn from you but also for you to learn from them! Grace-Ann has been inviting you to participate in a discipling program over this summer. This would give you a chance to build a relationship with one of our teenagers, and to test my claim that teenagers have a view into the kingdom of God that perhaps you have forgotten. Periodically we circulate a basket with slips of paper containing the names of the children in our church family, and we ask you to take one of those slips. The purpose is for you to find another child in our church to make a connection with. You've been assuming that this is for the benefit of the children, so that they can recognize adults in their church family other than their parents, and so that they can perhaps learn something from you about what it means to live as a Christian. It DOES have that purpose, but that isn't the only one! Allow Jesus to turn the tables on you and realize that you have much to learn from those children as well. They see God in a way that you cannot,

and if you have ears to listen to them, they can share what they see with you. Let the little children come to you, for to such as them belongs the kingdom of heaven.

BENEDICTION

Be reminded this week of your utter dependence on the Lord Jesus for all that your spirit needs. This week, may the wonder and beauty of creation renew Joy and bring laughter to your hearts. Be thankful this week for the great and terrible gift of freedom that God has given you. May you use it wisely in pursuit of his Goodness.