

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Fourth Sunday after Epiphany, January 29, 2012

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 628, 302, 627, 631, 659.

Lessons: Psalm 144, Ephesians 6:1-4, Luke 18:15-17.

Sermon Text: Mark 10:13-16

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

On two separate occasions, Jesus taught His disciples lessons about children. A number of times the disciples argued about who was or would be greatest among them. They asked Jesus if they could sit as rulers on thrones with him. Other times they wanted to imitate the rich and powerful. On occasion they had visions of an earthly kingdom in which they could be rulers. But on one such occasion Jesus used a lesson with little children to teach them about greatness.

One time, Jesus' disciples did not want people to bother Him with children. Sometimes children don't seem to be important to some people, and on the occasion in our sermon text, Jesus' disciples didn't think little children were important enough to disturb Jesus. But Jesus lets us know that children are very important to Him and can teach us something very important about believing, about faith.

In this lesson, Jesus especially encourages parents – and anyone responsible for children – to seek their spiritual welfare. Today we see how

JESUS BLESSES CHILDREN

- 1. Jesus blesses little children when his disciples thought they were a nuisance.**
- 2. He invites little children to come to him.**
- 3. Jesus speaks of child-like faith.**

“People were bringing little children to Jesus to have him touch them, but the disciples rebuked them.” It is as if they thought that Jesus was too busy or too important to be bothered in this way.

People brought little children to Jesus for him to bless them. Luke says that they brought infants to Jesus for his blessing, so there must have been a wide age range of children who were brought to Jesus.

According to Jewish custom, parents often brought children to the rabbis and priests to be blessed. People bringing babies and little children to Jesus perhaps expected his touch to convey a blessing.

The laying on of hands was an old custom in Israel. It was a means of conferring the blessing that had been asked. We read, for example, in Genesis 48:14 *“But Israel [that’s Jacob] reached out his right hand and put it on Ephraim’s head, though he was the younger, and crossing his arms, he put his left hand on Manasseh’s head, even though Manasseh was the firstborn.”* In bringing an offering to the Lord the giver *“is to lay his hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it will be accepted on his behalf to make atonement for him.”* Leviticus 1:4 Even in the New Testament we read of Stephen and the six others called to serve as helpers, *“whom they set before the apostles: and when they had prayed, they laid their hands on them.”* Acts 6:6 King James Version

In fact, the very touch of Jesus had brought healing to a leper on one occasion recorded by Luke (Luke 5:13). But for the children being brought to Jesus, the disciples perhaps thought this all a waste of Jesus’ time and perhaps quite useless.

The disciples rebuked the people – probably parents – and tried to turn them away. Perhaps the disciples thought that these very small children and infants wouldn't be able to understand a blessing from Jesus. Or perhaps they didn't want to wear Jesus out after his long day of preaching.

But Jesus rebuked his disciples for trying to send the little children away when they assumed he would regard them as a nuisance or an interruption. By preventing people from bringing their children to Jesus, the disciples showed that they considered children too immature to profit from the Lord's attention and were not yet in need of the Savior. But Jesus took the side of the people who brought their children to him. This is also what God teaches us in the Scriptures, as you heard in our New Testament epistle lesson, here in the words from the King James Version of the Bible: ***"ye fathers, provoke not your children to wrath: but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord."*** Ephesians 6:4 Our text says ***"When Jesus saw this, he was indignant."*** Jesus became angry, indignant with his disciples when He saw them doing that.

Only once before did Mark tell us that Jesus became indignant. That time it was against the Pharisees. Here it was against his own disciples and rightly so. They should have known by this time that Jesus' blessings are intended for everyone regardless of age. Jesus had brought Jairus' 12 year old daughter back to life. He had cured the Syrophoenician woman's daughter of demon possession. And just a few days before in Capernaum he had set a child in their midst to teach them about child-like faith. Didn't they remember even that? We wonder how could they have been so slow to learn the lesson that everyone is important to Jesus, including, as the children's song goes "Jesus loves the little children".

How sad that some still today deny the opportunity for children to come or be brought to Jesus. This can be done in many ways, but one that is especially damaging for children is to deny baptism to little children, as though baptism were not a gift of God but rather something that a person could choose when he or she is old enough to make a decision for himself or herself. When Jesus commanded baptism in Matthew 28, he made it clear that we are to teach all nations, to make disciples of all nations ***"Baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."*** Matthew 28:19 We must emphasize that little children are included in ***"all nations"***. In addition, every parent knows that children are not sinless and thus need God's grace. From this we know also that infants and little children can and should be baptized, receiving from baptism the blessings of faith and forgiveness.

Baptism is an opportunity to receive the gift of God's grace, God's undeserved goodness and mercy. Infant baptism is an excellent example of pure grace. There is nothing that the baby brings to baptism except the status of "sinner." God's grace works forgiveness and makes one fit for the kingdom of God. It is baptism that "works forgiveness of sins, delivers from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe." And baptism itself works faith.

Jesus' indignation, his anger is turned to a positive command for his immediate disciples – and for us, too. ***"He said to [his disciples], "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it."***

Jesus plainly invites children to come to him. He told his followers to let the little children come to Him and not to hinder them.

Why? Well, let's review three reasons: Little children are included in the "all nations" whom we are to teach and baptize. Little children are sinful. And because infants also can and do believe, their faith, which is simply accepting Jesus at his Word, is an example of what all believers' faith should be like. Jesus speaks of child-like faith. One characteristic of children is that they trust you; they believe you unless that trust is broken.

It is wrong to prevent in any way children from receiving spiritual blessings from the Lord. They are, of course, also sinners. We read in Romans 3:23: ***"for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,"*** and in Ephesians 2:3: ***"All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath."*** All mankind are sinners, too, as we read in Psalm 51:5 ***"Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me."*** New International Version ***"Behold, I was shapen in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me."*** Psalm 51:5, King James Version

Jesus is not saying that little children are automatically in the kingdom of God, but he is saying that they, too, can belong to it. When the Holy Spirit works faith by the Word of God – and by baptism – they become part of the kingdom of God's grace. They, too, can receive God's grace, his undeserved goodness and mercy. If the kingdom of God even can belong to little children, anyone who prevents their access to this

Kingdom has separated them from something which God had prepared and planned for them, and thus this is an enormous sin. Jesus speaks bluntly in Matthew 18: ***"But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea."*** Matthew 18:6 This is the idea of "causing offense" in the scriptural sense, of causing one to sin, as we read in the King James Version of the same passage: ***"But whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea."***

For in God's eyes, their humble faith in Him makes them great. Anyone who wishes to enter God's kingdom is told to receive it ***"like a little child."*** Like the sinful tax collector pleading for mercy, the person who desires to enter the kingdom must come in childlike weakness and receive what God has to give.

Jesus speaks very seriously to his disciples – and to anyone who was listening. Without a faith like that of a little child, no person can have the Gospel rule his or her heart.

As further evidence of their importance, Jesus gathered children up in His arms, and personally gave them a blessing. Nothing in this text implies their need for any kind of physical healing so we must assume that Jesus gave them spiritual blessings. For indeed, as infants they can believe and can receive spiritual blessings.

The only way we can enter the kingdom is by simple faith and trust in what Christ has done for us. Belonging to the kingdom of heaven, the kingdom of God, is not something we earn or merit by our own good deeds or good life. These are fruits of being in the kingdom, fruits of faith. We can not merit or earn the kingdom of God any more than a little child or a baby can. The kingdom of God, just like faith, is a gift of God's grace.

Sometimes we may think that children are disruptive to our worship services. That surely happens, for they, too are sinful and the devil wants to do everything he can to prevent us from hearing God's Word and worshipping God.

We haven't, in our churches, taken great pains to set up play-rooms for children to play in while their parents attend worship services. I have personally seen some very nice play-rooms – one even overlooking the sanctuary of a church with sound-proof windows. We prefer that families sit with their children so they can learn, too. This implies that there should be something in the worship service for little children. But there is always a natural curiosity and children often love music and singing. Parents especially are to teach their children by example and by discipline if necessary that worship services are a time for worship and not for play. If children are brought up to think that church is a time and place to play, that will certainly hinder their learning from youth on that worship time is a time to pay attention to what God says. To do otherwise is really hindering them from receiving and growing in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Parents are to bring up their children in the training and instruction of the Lord, and see to it that the Word of God becomes the most important part of their attendance at worship services. As a parent and grandparent, I know how difficult and frustrating this can be. But the spiritual benefits for the children are worth it, for it leads to eternal life in heaven!

"Anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it. And he took the children in his arms, put his hands on them and blessed them." The message of God's grace, that Jesus died for my sins as well as the sins of all men – including little children – is offered to you again today.

Just as Jesus blessed the children, may we never hinder them from receiving God's blessings. Lord, we ask that we always treat children in such a way as to lead them to Jesus. Give us a child-like faith, that we, too, may become and remain part of Jesus' kingdom. Amen.