

Little Levers of Kindness

*a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on September 19, 2021
based on Mark 9:33-37*

The front page of the Oregonian Friday morning had this headline, “She Doesn’t Have Her People.” It was about an 8 year old only child, Lily Burko of Moses Lake. She and her whole family contracted Covid-19 a month ago after a visit to the Grant County Fair. Lily recovered. Her grandmother who had been vaccinated had a breakthrough infection but recovered. Her 30-something mother and father who were not anti-vaccine but who both had conditions that made them fearful of a reaction to a vaccine, both succumbed quickly to the virus.

Now, little Lily is living with her aunt and uncle in San Diego. It’s all like a horrible dream. And because we, you and I, have big hearts when it comes to children, when we hear of such a tragedy it’s easy to imagine the child is our own. Lily and other Covid orphans like her are on the front page of several papers and many people’s hearts this month.

Last Sunday I said that what made Jesus *Jesus* was the fact that he was 2000 years ahead of his time due to his supreme regard for women and children, something people in his day didn’t understand. Today’s text is Exhibit A for that.

Views of childhood in the first century were, interestingly, informed by childhood mortality rates. Infant mortality was about 30% of live births. And 60% of children died by the age of 16. We know that some parents didn’t choose to name their children until they were 5, just in case. Sadly, the same thing still happens among some of the poorest around the globe.

The medieval theologian, Thomas Aquinas, speaking for his 12th century culture, taught that in a raging fire a husband was obliged to first save his father, then his mother, then his wife, and finally, his children, should he have any.

So, before the advent of the modern, people tended to ignore anyone below their kneecaps. But Jesus saw them, and this makes him unique among the great spiritual exemplars of the world.

Jesus saw them trying to keep up with caravans of people on pilgrimage. He saw them being dragged along by dutiful parents. He saw them cooed to by mothers.

That all being true, adults were taught to give *other adults* their best attention, so children got what was left-over. They were fillers, not the main event.

So, Jesus’ behavior with kids was highly unusual for a man in the ancient world, especially for a bachelor. Yeah, I know the age-old idea that maybe Jesus was married keeps coming up. It won’t go away any more than questions about Obama’s birthplace and religion, but it’s not too hard to deflect.

Mark's gospel is dated to 70 A.D. and in it we hear all about Jesus's family – his mother, his sisters, his brothers – his home in Capernaum. If he had a wife, we would have heard about it, like we heard about Peter having a mother-in-law in this same gospel.

So, as far as we know, Jesus had no children of his own, but he was not shy about picking babies up, carrying them in his arms. Maybe it was because he was the oldest of Mary's many children.

He knew how to hold their wobbly little heads in his large palm – how to pass them carefully back to their mothers without dropping them. They were not thought of as full-fledged citizens of Palestine – nor of their own families, but Jesus said they were members in full standing in *God's* kingdom – yes, in fact, they were FIRST in that kingdom.

When his disciples scolded people for bringing their children to the synagogues to hear him, Jesus was indignant. "Bring them up front," he said. "The noise they make is the sound of life." He lifted them up to his lap. In fact, it's no trouble for us to imagine him lifting one up to his shoulders for a ride.

Of course, today we are much more tuned into children than 1st century Palestinians were. Far from ignoring them, we Americans tend to idealize them. We dress them in the best that *Bullabuloo*, and *Majamas* have to offer. Grandparents usually sum it up most honestly, saying, "I would drive any distance to see my grandson for a long weekend, but by Tuesday I'm usually ready to head home to my own bed. "

Yep, fresh-faced and loving, kids will wear you out. They can be noisy, and overly clingy, and self-centered, and sometimes even cruel. Like all people, kids are complicated.

Here's what Florence King said about her first day of kindergarten. Take note that she was very precocious, and also an only-child:

"I wasn't used to children and they were getting on my nerves. Worse, it appeared that I was a child, too. I hadn't known that before; I thought I was just short."

Erma Bombeck once said: "For years my husband and I have advocated separate vacations. But the kids keep finding us."

I know of a book on the subject of child-rearing that there was a lot of buzz about when it first came out. It's called *NurtureShock*. It amounts to ten chapters exploring fairly recent findings in child development all based on scientific studies that have mostly been left out of the headlines because the results are not what most parents expect to hear. Here is a smattering of what it says:

Praising our kids may have a detrimental effect on a child if it isn't done sparingly and with great specificity. Baby Einstein videos that hyper-achieving parents show their two-year-olds may stunt a child's development. Children who go to integrated schools are often more racist than kids who go to schools that are single race. Just sending them to a school with a rainbow of races does NOT mean they will come to appreciate racial difference. Depending on the student, the setting, and how it's dealt with at home, the outcome may be totally the opposite.

Well, what one generation decides is sage advice, the next may jettison.

In this morning's text, Jesus is on the way to the cross. The disciples are arguing. They are arguing about who among them was the greatest. How incredibly ironic. Jesus is, in fact, on the way to cosmic humiliation and the disciples' chief concern is who ought to be voted "disciple of the year."

And what does Jesus do? He sets a child in their midst and puts his arms around her and says: "The person who warmly receives a child like this welcomes me – "Wake up folks, I'm only going to be here a little longer -- and the person who warmly receives a child welcomes me."

Now, this is NOT as in the other gospels. In *Matthew* and *Luke* Jesus says, "You must *become* like a little child. Here it's about kindness. Here he says, genuine Christian living means welcoming the child; warmly receiving the little ones in our midst.

In fact, Jesus doesn't even denigrate the desire to be first; he just turns what the world believes being first is all about, on its head.

"You want to compete?" he asks. "Compete in the way you love children. Be first extending healthcare to the tiny. That's what superstardom ought to be about. This is what kindness is with a capital K. "

Opening yourself up to a child may be better for your soul than finishing a project, or getting a raise this year, or reading a chapter of the Bible.

Know this: there will be no payback. Yeah, the child you help may shout your name the next time she sees you and run and hug your knees, but you won't be able to list her name on a job application, and she won't lend you a thousand dollars.

She is not good for anything like that. She has no status, no pull, no income – but, hey, those things alone make her great in God's estimation. She is just what you need to work on your own greatness in the eyes of God. Your greatness depends entirely on what you do for little ones when no one else is looking.

A few years ago a friend of mine who was an interim minister tried to interest me in applying to be permanent pastor of the church he was then serving. It had 1300 members and not a one of them was under 55. It was in a gated community.

He said, "Look, you'd have no night meetings, no worries about staffing a Sunday school or youth program because we have none, and they'd double your take-home pay." I told him I didn't even need to sleep on it. I couldn't imagine a church without children. What's the point?

Again, what made Jesus *Jesus* was that he saw children. He *saw* children. He valued them supremely, and I think he knew a secret about them few have learned.

The sociologist, Alice Miller, knows that secret. Trends about childrearing come and go, but I believe that some of her wisdom on the subject of children will never go out of style.

Here is the secret: In her book with the sarcastic title, *For Your Own Good*, she defines children as "messengers from a world we once deeply knew, but which we have long since forgotten, who can reveal to us more about the true secrets of life, *and also our own lives*, than our parents were ever able to."

She argues that parenting is a gift; it is designed to be the key to unlock an understanding of the first years of our lives in a way nothing else quite can; and it is also designed to help us develop the resources we need to best appreciate the rest of the years of our lives, as well.

Those who think kids just get in the way of adults having a good time just don't get it. I'm thinking right now of something the author, Bruce Reyes-Chow said. How at the age of five, his angry step-father forced him out of the car he and his mother were riding in along the freeway. Imagine that. No, you can't, but Bruce can and will for the rest of his life.

The lesson for Bruce? That your mother, choosing to divorce your father, can be an act of kindness.

Let's not be sentimental, Bruce is saying: kindness can have many faces, especially when it comes to the treatment of children.

Again, it is nearly impossible for a normal person to imagine a parent leaving a child alongside the freeway even for 10 seconds. One reason for this is not only that we adults seem to be pre-programmed to love kids. They seem to be pre-programmed to love us too – and unconditionally.

Charles Dickens, speaking of children in general, once said, "I love these little people, and it is not a slight thing when they who are so fresh from God love us."

Is it any wonder that Jesus honored children (and by association, parenting) above anything? But it is so hard. So many kids end up in Foster Care and, you know, 80% of the people in prison today came from Foster homes. They are up against so much. They get kicked out of cars along freeways every day.

A powerful piece in the NYTimes this week highlighted why this may be true. It was written by an alum of the Foster Care system. His name, Sixto Cancel. He wrote the following:

When I was 15, an usher at my church offered to become my foster parent. Hers was one of the best foster homes I lived in. But she wanted a son. It was more than I was able to give.

I had been in foster care since I was 11 months old because of my mother's drug addiction and poverty. Adopted at age 9 by a racist and abusive woman, I was locked out of the house at age 13. For two years, I couch surfed with friends, then entered foster care again. I was told I was loved, that I was a part of a family, yet I would always find myself moved to a new placement, with all my stuff in a trash bag.

In the three months I lived with the church usher, I couldn't unblock the years of numbness I had developed to survive. It is difficult to hug back or reply, "I love you, too," when all you have ever known is betrayal from parental figures. Her doors soon closed to me.

I found out on a school trip. My social worker called to tell me that all my stuff had been packed and left at the Department of Children and Families.

Okay, I don't want to end this sermon with that image on the top of your heart, thought maybe I should. Let me tell you the story of another under-loved young person.

Lynda Barry grew up on the wrong side of the tracks next to the city dump. Her parents communicated to her that she was really an impediment to them, and to each other, as well. Her sense of the value of family was very undeveloped . . . until she got to know the Taylors, the new neighbors on her street.

Mrs. Taylor was different from any other adult Lynda had ever known. She paid attention to children. She made eye contact with them. She seemed to enjoy having Lynda play with her kids, and sometimes go to church with them.

We invented a game called "church" in Mrs. Taylor's front room, Linda writes, We dragged out her huge Bible and took turns playing the preacher, the lead singer, and the lady whose wig was on crooked by the end of the song. And the greatest part was Mrs. Taylor leaning out of the kitchen to tell us that our sins had been washed off us and they were lying all over the floor so wouldn't one of us please vacuum.

I loved going to her house so much that one day I sneaked over at dawn. I stood on her porch knocking and knocking and knocking, weighing how much of a bother I was becoming against how badly I needed to see her. Finally the door opened.

Mr. Taylor [a huge man, wearing a] bathrobe, looked down at me and said, "Now girl, what are you doing here?"

'Who is it John?' Mrs. Taylor stepped out from behind him with her robe on and for the first time ever I saw her hair down. The whole picture of it made me unable to speak.

Mr. Taylor was getting up for work and Mrs. Taylor was making him breakfast. When I told her my mom said I could eat with them she laughed and pushed open the screen door.

I'll never forget that morning, sitting at their table eating eggs and toast, watching them talk to each other and smile. How Mr. Taylor made a joke and Mrs. Taylor laughed. How she put her hand on his shoulder as she poured coffee and how he leaned his face down to kiss it. And that was all I needed to see. I only needed to see it once to be able to believe for the rest of my life that happiness between two people can exist.

And I remember Sammy [their little boy] walking in and crawling up into his father's lap, leaning his head into his dad's green coveralls, like it was the most ordinary thing in the world.

Even if it wasn't happening in my house, I knew that just being near it counted for something. When I got back home, my mother told me she was ready to wring my neck. She couldn't figure out why in the world I kept going over there to bother those people.

Back when I pastored a church in Ashland a retired woman I knew who had some money, but not a lot, and who wanted to do something small to help girls who needed a leg up, endowed a small scholarship meant to help one girl a year who wouldn't have the means to go to community college. She got a little board made up of her friends to review applications and choose the first girl. They decided on a young woman who had very good grades and had come up the hard way. Her dad had been in prison her whole life and her mom was away from home more days than she was with them due to a drug habit. This girl was raising her little brother. How in the world had she stayed in school and done as well as she had? Her answer was this. "My little brother and I always knew that when it was 5:00pm and we were alone, there were always two or three porches on our block where we could show up and the people there would feed us dinner and help us with our homework.

Kindness. Kindness. Kindness.

"The person who warmly receives a child . . . welcomes me, and the person who warmly receives me,' said Jesus, "welcomes God."

Amen