

Series: Witness of the Windows  
Today: Bless the Children  
Text: Mark 10:13-16

A Sermon preached by the Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.  
Sunday, September 25, 2011  
First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA

### BACKGROUND ON THE WINDOW

This morning we continue our series on the scriptures which inspired Louis Comfort Tiffany as he crafted the opalescent stained glass which surrounds us every time we come into this Sanctuary. Each Sunday I have reminded you that we are not worshipping the building nor are we worshipping the windows; even though they would be impossible for us to replace. The focus of our worship is the God who inspired a vision for the windows through the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments.

Today we turn to window #2 which is known as *Jesus with the Children*. The window was installed in 1919 as a memorial to the three children of Mr. and Mrs. Charles Baker, all of whom died in childhood. Suzanne Baker and Daniel Baker both died in early childhood of unknown causes. Miriam Baker died at age 11 from a freak lightning strike while she was attending church camp. Appropriately, the window portrays Jesus blessing children—two girls and a boy. At the top of the window is a crown with palm leaves suggesting a triumphal entry of the King; a King who is the ruler of heaven and earth; yet a king who took the time to spend with children and to bless them.

The scripture which is the foundation for this window is Mark 10:13-16, but it is also found in Matthew 19:13-15 and Luke 18:15-18. These three Gospels are known as the synoptic gospels, and when we find an event that appears in all three of these synoptic gospels, we can be pretty sure that it was an historical event. Listen to the story from the Gospel of Mark.

<sup>13</sup> *People were bringing little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them, but the disciples rebuked them.* <sup>14</sup> *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. <sup>15</sup> Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it. ” <sup>16</sup> And he took the children in his arms, placed his hands on them and blessed them.*

### **BLESS THE CHILDREN**

As I was preparing my message this morning, I thought of Harry Collins. Harry was a faithful member of this church who died seven years ago. He was such a faithful member that we really didn't know how many people it would take to replace him until he was gone. He tended the Memorial Garden, arranged the flowers for the sanctuary every Sunday morning, wrote and directed plays, washed the dishes after congregational suppers. He was just one of those people churches cannot do without. However, his greatest love was for the children of our church.

I shall never forget the first Sunday I met Harry. It was April 14, 1996, and I had just given my first Word to the Children in this church. It was the day I was to be introduced as the candidate to become your pastor. The Pastor Nominating Committee had asked me if I was willing to speak with the children in worship. That was not a problem for me. I had been doing the Word to the Children for 25 years in three different churches. However, I forgot to ask them what happened with the children after I was through with the message.

So there we were, the children of this church and me. I asked them what happened next, and one of them said, *“We go with Mr. Harry.”* And I responded, *“Who is Mr. Harry?”* (I had images of a man with a lot of hair, or a character dressed in some outfit). In answer to my question, all of them pointed to down the center aisle where there appeared a slight man with a huge smile and his arms outstretched. The children jumped up and ran to Harry Collins who greeted them by touching each one on the head in a safe, non-sexual way, and he took them off to activities which had been planned for them.

Harry Collins worked for RCA. He wasn't a trained teacher, but he loved children, and the children knew it. He would read to them, tell them stories, act out Bible verses with them, but mostly

he just showed interest in their lives and let them know that he loved them. He was a follower of Jesus who demonstrates in our text for this morning that he, too, loved children.

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem for the final week of his life. He was going to die, and he knew it. And in the midst of that pressure, the parents of children wanted this distinguished rabbi, whom they had heard so much about, to bless their children, and they were so insistent that they were mobbing him.

So when his disciples told the children to get away from the Master, they were not being boorish or ungracious. They were trying to protect Jesus from anything that would demand more of him, and any of us who have children know that no matter how much we love them, they can be demanding at times.

I am reminded of the two young children that were talking with each other about parent problems. One of them complained to the other, saying: “First they teach you to talk, then they teach you to walk, and as soon as you learn how, they tell you to ‘Sit down and shut up!’”

Children didn’t know that these were the final days of Jesus. They didn’t know that he would soon be killed. They were simply responding to something in Jesus which told them that here was someone like Mr. Harry who loved them and wanted to make them feel special in the kingdom of God. Scripture says that he took them in his arms, laid his hands on them, and he blessed them. When it comes to church, Jesus didn’t talk about children like we do. He didn’t say, “*Children are the future of the church.*” He told them that if we wanted to receive the kingdom of God, we had better learn to be more like children and not try to make them more like us.

Here is what he said, “*Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.*”<sup>15</sup> *Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.*” Will you think with me for a few more minutes about what that might mean? What does it mean to become more childlike in our faith?

As I was preparing this message, I came up with a list of over a dozen qualities of a childlike faith; things like obedience, playfulness, enthusiasm, and many more. There are so many directions we could go from here, but for the sake of time, I want to suggest just two possibilities for us this morning of what a more childlike faith might mean: 1) Wonder; and 2) Trust.

### **SENSE OF WONDER**

Most children have a marvelous sense of imagination and wonder. They can make a fort out of two chairs and a sheet. When you tell them the story of creation, it makes sense to them that a power greater than themselves brings order out of things. It's not that they don't have questions, but they are willing to accept that all their questions may not have a rational answer, and at that point they are willing to accept the fact that there is a God who is created the universe; who brought order out of chaos, and who gives meaning and purpose to those who seek to do God's will.

This summer I took our 3 year old granddaughter to the tide pools near the 9<sup>th</sup> Street Jetty in Avalon. She had all kinds of questions about shells, the hermit crabs, the barnacles, and I struggled to answer them the best I could from my memory of an introductory biology course I took as a freshman in college. However, when she asked me where all of it came from, my limited science background had no answer, so I told her, "*I don't know.*" She responded very quickly, "*I do.*" So I asked her, "*Well tell me, Nya, where does it all come from?*" She answered, "*God. God made it. And God made it all just for us; just for today.*"

Hers was an answer of deep faith and trust surrounded by a sense of wonder. The psalmist came to the same conclusion in Psalm 8: *When I consider the heavens, the moon and the stars, what is man that thou art mindful of him and the son of man that thou should visit him.*" A childlike faith is one which is able to capture the wonder of things.

In his book *The Wisdom of Tenderness*, Brennan Manning tells the story of a man who took his two-week vacation to Ireland to celebrate his favorite uncle's 80th birthday. On the morning of the great day, the man and his uncle got up before dawn, dressed in silence, and went for a walk along the shores of Lake Killarney. Just as the sun rose, his uncle turned and stared straight at the rising orb. Ed stood beside him for 20 minutes with not a single word exchanged. Then the elderly uncle began to skip along the shoreline, a radiant smile on his face. After catching up with him, Ed commented, "Uncle Seamus, you look very happy. Do you want to tell my why?"

"Yes, lad," the old man said, tears washing down his face. "You see, the Father is fond of me. Ah, me Father is so very fond of me."

## **TRUST**

Trust is the second beauty of a childlike faith. Developmental Psychologist Erik Erickson says that the key question to the development of faith in a child is whether or not they have learned to trust that those who love them will be there for them when they need them. Every time you tire of hearing a child cry for its mother or father, remind yourself they are just building their trust in a God in whom they can trust.

All of us remember the first time when we lost track of our parents and felt abandoned. We can easily remember how frightening that was. Erickson says that if children learn to trust that his/her parents are there for them, they can easily grasp the concept that God is there for them and it will carry them through the difficult.

In Dennis Rainey's book *Stepping Up (Family Life, 2010, pp. 17-18)* he tells the story about the short life of his granddaughter Molly. Born with a brain aneurism, Molly lived only seven days. As difficult as those seven days were, Molly's parents and grandparents held firmly to their trust in God,

confident that they will see Molly again in the age to come. Rainey concludes the chapter of Molly's story with this memory:

*A number of years ago, [my wife] Barbara and I were vacationing in southwest England and stumbled upon the little town of Saint Buryan, a crossroad in the country with a pub, a decaying church, and a graveyard. We stopped and read a few of the gravestones. One that was barely legible commemorated a family that lived in the 1600s. Buried beneath the stone were the mother, who gave birth to a son and died just ten days later at the age of twenty-four; her son, who lived thirteen months; and the father, who died a few days later at age twenty-five. The faded words on that weathered limestone grave marker moved us so deeply that today they are etched on Molly's headstone:*

*We cannot, Lord, Thy purpose see*

*But all is well that's done by Thee.*

#### **A PRAYER FOR THE CHILDREN**

*“Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.”<sup>15</sup> Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.”*

We've asked Rila Hackett and Mary Edith Leichliter to come and close us in a prayer. The prayer is printed in your bulletin. It is for the children of the world today who remind us that Jesus loved them not for what they would become, but for who they are.

#### **A Prayer for the Children**

by Ina J. Hughes

*(first read at the Children Now's 10th Anniversary Celebration—October 1, 1998)*

We pray for the children who put chocolate fingers everywhere, who like to be tickled, who stomp in puddles and ruin their new pants, who sneak Popsicles before supper, who erase holes in math workbooks, who can never find their shoes.

And we pray for those who stare at photographers from behind barbed wire, who've never squeaked across the floor in new sneakers, who never had crayons to count, who are born in places we wouldn't be caught dead, who never go to the circus, who live in an X-rated world.

We pray for children who bring us sticky kisses and fistfuls of dandelions, who sleep with the dog and bury goldfish, who give hugs in a hurry and forget their lunch money, who cover themselves with Band-Aids and sing off-key, who squeeze toothpaste all over the sink, who slurp their soup.

And we pray for those who never get dessert, who watch their parents watch them die, who have no safe blanket to drag behind, who can't find any bread to steal, who don't have any rooms to clean up, whose pictures aren't on anybody's dresser, whose monsters are real.

We pray for children who spend all their allowance before Tuesday, who throw tantrums in the grocery store and pick at their food, who like ghost stories, who shove dirty clothes under the bed, who never rinse out the tub, who get visits from the tooth fairy, who don't like to be kissed in front of the school, who squirm in church or temple or mosque and scream in the phone, whose tears we sometimes laugh at and whose smiles can make us cry.

And we pray for those whose nightmares come in the daytime, who will eat anything, who aren't spoiled by anybody, who go to bed hungry and cry themselves to sleep, who live and move, but have no address.

We pray for children who want to be carried, and for those who must. For those we never give up on, and for those who never get a chance. For those we smother with our love, and for those who will grab the hand of anybody kind enough to offer it.