

## HE TOOK A LITTLE CHILD INTO HIS ARMS

Proverbs 31:10-31, Psalm 1; Mark 9:30-37

A sermon preached by the Reverend Theodore S. Atkinson  
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**IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.**

I love when children disturb the worship service, when they cry, when they crawl under the pews, when they play their pocket electronic games during my sermon. I love it. I know their parents don't like it. They imagine angry stares from fellow worshipers. They're tempted to stop bringing their children to church. They're tempted to stay away themselves. And when that happens I want to stop and say, "It's all right. We welcome children."

When we came to Oxford Presbyterian Church our three boys were 5, 6 and 8. They were always perfect little gentlemen. They looked forward to church and Sunday School like it was Christmas. Believe that and you'll believe anything. The fact is, when our boys were small never was I so certain of the existence of a personal devil than on Sunday morning. I vividly remember one morning when the devil got into me. Kay and I had gotten the boys strapped in the back seat of the car. All three were arguing, complaining, fighting with one another and I got angry. I lashed out -- I reached back and slapped all three with one swoop of my hand. (Let me stop to say I was wrong to do that. I don't believe corporal punishment is effective unless a small child is about to stick a fork into an electric socket and you need to knock the fork out of their hand. And never is it appropriate to slap a child on the face.) However, I slapped all three boys. Then Andrew said, "Dad, my lip is bleeding." Guilt and shame overwhelmed me. I may have been preaching that morning on, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me."

I say that in the way of introducing an incident in the life of Jesus. We're near the end of the earthly ministry of Jesus. The disciples were arguing, like kids, about who was the greatest. Jesus may have felt like smacking them. Instead, he took a child and put it among the disciples and taking it in his arms, he said to them, "If you want to be great, welcome children."

Consider the place of children in the ancient world. Children had little value. Today we're shocked when we read about an baby abandoned in a garbage can. But in the ancient world abandoned children were common place. Infants were usually abandoned because parents were too poor to feed them. When we read

ancient Church writings we discover that Christians rescued abandon children from garbage dumps and welcomed. One Christian in the second century wrote, "Christians marry like all other people and they beget children; *but they do not cast away their offspring.*" Christ introduced into the ancient world a new respect for children. "Welcome children!" he said.

In the ancient world, a father would pick up his child immediately after it was born. That meant he acknowledged it as his own and pledged to raise it. If he refused to take the child in his arms, the child was abandoned to the garbage dump. This Roman custom of taking the newborn infant in ones arms probably underlies our Gospel lesson. When Jesus took a little child in his arms – he was saying, "I love this child as my own. If you want to be great, welcome children."

Today I'll take a child in my arms and hold him up. When I do that on behalf of the congregation I'm saying, we adopt that child into our faith family. This is our child. He's a member of our church family. We welcome the child. At least we say we do. Infant baptism declares that Christian faith is more than a personal relationship with Jesus, it's membership in a family. We can no more survive as Christians outside the church family than a child can survive all by themselves.

We Presbyterians stress that God loves and accepts us by *grace before* faith in the same way a parent welcomes a child before a child can respond. God doesn't wait until we're old enough to believe. Children don't say "mama" or "dada" for months yet we still claim them as our own. We welcome them before they confess us. Before they know who we are, we know and love them. As a Christian family, we baptize children of believers and welcome them into our church family long before they confess Christ as their Savior.

If what Jesus says is true, if we really want to be great we'll welcome children. You table parents, you teachers at Wednesday's word and Sunday School— you're the greatest. And if you really want to be great -- help out with our junior and senior high youth groups. Consider chaperoning an overnight lock in. Help us grow a thriving youth ministry. Help us welcome children.

Earlier I shared with you a moment in my life as a father I'm not proud of. Now I'll share one of my greatest moments. We were living in Kenmore, New York. I was pastor of Knox Presbyterian Church. I had

tickets to take our boys to the Barnum and Bailey Circus. They were so excited. Several days before the circus a very active member of our congregation died. His widow asked me to do the funeral on the Saturday of the Circus. After some hesitation and soul searching I said I couldn't. Why? "I promised I'd take my boys to the circus." I feared the aftermath of my decision. I could hear the phones ringing throughout the congregation, "The minister refused to do a funeral so he could go to the circus." My fears had no basis. The gracious widow responded, "Take those boys to the circus. You made a promise. Keep it?" And she suggested an alternative time for the funeral that allowed me to have the funeral and still go to the circus. I think that was one of my greatest moments.

Jesus gives us a new vision of greatness and what's really important. Years ago we had a family picnic in a State park. Our boys were there with their cousins. When dinner time came Philip and his cousin, Grant, were missing. Philip was only about 10 and Grant, 6. We called. No answer. An hour passed and no Philip and Grant. We'd been starving but all of a sudden food wasn't important. We organized search parties. All of us had other things to do. Chores at home. Work to do at the office. Deadlines to meet. None of that mattered. The only thing that mattered was finding Philip and Grant. Eventually we found them having a great time playing in the woods – they never knew they were lost.

So many children are lost to the family of God and they don't know it. What if we had a similar concern for children baptized into the church? What if each year on the anniversary of a child's baptism, the session would send a card reminding parents and child that we really care about where they are. What if we put the names of children in the worship bulletin on the anniversary of their baptism to remind us that we welcomed that child to share with us in Christ's ministry? What if we sent out search parties for lost kids? What if parents of baptized children knew their church family will bug them with love because we're so concerned about where our kids are? If we'd do that – we'd be the greatest congregation.

Mighty God, by your love we are given children through the miracle of birth. May we greet each new son and daughter with joy, and surround them all with faith, so they may know who you are and want to be your disciples. sNever let us neglect children, but help us enjoy them, showing them the welcome you have shown us all; through Jesus Christ the Lord. Amen.