

THE LITTLE PEOPLE OF THE BIBLE: A LITTLE BOY WHO GAVE ALL HE HAD

John 6:1-14

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IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Imagine our Gospel lesson as the opening scene of a movie. In the opening frame, a wide-angle camera shows a crowd of people walking up the gentle slopes of a mountain as the sun slowly sets. Look closely! Notice how some of the people are rubbing their tummies and we can hear whispers: "Boy, it's great to be here but I'm getting hungry." A second frame focuses only on Jesus and his disciples. Jesus says, "Where are we going to get bread for all these people?" Philip shrugs his shoulders and answers, "We can't afford to feed these people!" Andrew rubs his chin and looks with puzzlement at a little boy. "There's a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?" The word he uses for "boy" refers to a little boy about 6 or 7 years old. The third camera shot moves in closer and focuses on the little boy. He's holding five flat pieces of barley pita bread under one arm and two large sardines hanging from a home made fishing pole. His knees are scraped, his fingernails are dirty, and he's wearing a baseball cap backwards.

Keep that opening sequence of events in your mind while I raise three preliminary questions.

First, what's he doing there? Why was a little boy there with all those adults? Had his parents brought him? We know from other stories that parents sometimes brought their children to Jesus. But the little boy's parents aren't mentioned. Maybe they dropped him off and went someplace else. Or maybe he'd become separated from them in the crowd? Another preliminary question. *How did Andrew notice him in such a large crowd?* A little 6 or 7 year old boy isn't very tall and he's in a sea of 5000 towering adults. As long as children remain quiet and don't move around adults don't notice them in a crowd or in a church service. But maybe the little boy caught

Andrew's attention because he was crying. Maybe he'd been running around bumping into people, causing a disturbance.

And that leads to a third preliminary question. *What place do children have in worship?*

The Gospels give us the feeling that Jesus and his disciples were at odds as to how to answer that question. We've all seen a popular painting of Jesus with his arms around children. Their parents had brought them to Jesus. The disciples initially sent them away, maybe because some of them were crying. They shared an attitude quite common at the time, "Why bother with children? Let them grow up first and decide for themselves if they want to see Jesus." But Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me and forbid them not for of such is the kingdom of God. And he took them in his arms and blessed them." Another time Jesus said if anyone abuses one of these little children it would be better for that person to have a millstone placed around their neck and thrown into the sea. Jesus welcomed and blessed children. His attitude towards children was not at all common in those days or today. In fact he said we must become like little children to enter the kingdom of heaven.

Having raised these preliminary questions...

Think about your early memories of going to church? Maybe you can't remember. Maybe you didn't go to church when you were little? Many adults today have never been to church. They have no idea what happens in this sanctuary. And, frankly, many of them fear entering because they won't know when to stand up or sit down. They don't know the responses. It's really difficult to get adults who've never been to church to attend; almost as difficult as getting adults who *did* attend as little children.

But some of us do remember how your parents took you to church. Like some of you, my mother brought me from the time I was an infant. She brought me every Sunday regardless of how I behaved the previous week. Believe it or not, I sometimes misbehaved. I sometimes fussed and cried. When I got too loud my mom would take me out of the sanctuary until I calmed down. But

she always brought me back, week after week, so I discovered that fussing wasn't going to make her stop bringing me. I never did learn how to be quiet in church so I became a preacher.

I *also* discovered that God must be very important to my mom for her to come week after week in all kinds of weather. When I was a little older, my dad started attending church. I was deeply impressed that a big, strong, opinionated man like my dad ~~found God~~ wanted to see Jesus in worship. I couldn't read the words to hymns but we sang some so frequently that I learned favorites by heart. I rarely paid attention to sermons as I drew pictures on the back of the worship bulletin. But I was learning by osmosis. I was learning a vocabulary: *forgiveness, justification, sin, and salvation* that helped me later understand my experiences of guilt, loneliness, and longing for what I discovered was God in Christ. Through Bible stories, hymns and sermons I was learning that *God so loved the world that he gave his only son that I should not perish but have everlasting life.*

Somehow God worked in my life in slow and hidden ways, shaping and molding me until I began to be grateful for the salvation God gives us through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. *Has done the same for many of you ... Not that we're better ... but less ...*

Now come back and focus on the little boy with five loaves and two fish. All four gospels *Matthew, Mark, Luke* tell the story of the feeding of the five thousand but only John mentions the little boy. Many commentators, including John Calvin, don't mention the little boy. The other gospel writers felt the little boy could be dispensed with. He's one of the little people of the bible, easy for everybody, even apostles to overlook.

What happened to him? We never hear of him again but there's no doubt in my mind that the little boy never forgot Jesus. He never forgot that Jesus treated him like he had something really important to share with everybody. He never forgot the feel of the cool grass as he sat there entranced at what was happening – the bread, his bread, just never stopped running out. I believe that children who come face to face with Jesus in the midst of the worshipping community will never forget when they grow up. They may grow up, leave the church, leave the faith and go off

into a far country but they'll never forget Jesus. His grace, love, and unconditional acceptance will haunt them until they become ^{so grateful they willing to die} ~~thankful for~~ the salvation God has given us through Christ.

Children have more to contribute to ^{all of} life than we can imagine. Christ can work miracles with their meager resources. Robert Coles, a child psychiatrist, tells a story of his visit to a fifth grade classroom in Lawrence, Massachusetts. They were all poor kids, boys and girls – White, Black, Hispanic – all from working class families. He asked them to answer the question, “Who are you?” They could write something or draw a picture. One little girl wrote, “Who am I? I’m the one who’s writing this! I’m the one at home who can make grand pop laugh. He’s old and he doesn’t laugh much. I don’t tickle him. I just tell him jokes. My mom said that without me grand pop would be sad.” The little girl didn’t have much in the way of money, but what she had worked miracles in the life of an old man who didn’t have much to laugh about anymore.

Walter Wangerin, a Lutheran minister, poet and novelist, writes, “Early in my childhood I suffered a spiritual crisis. I can’t remember *how* early this was, but I was young enough to crawl beneath the church pew, small enough to be haled back up by my mother one-handed, yet old enough to wish to see Jesus. I wanted to see Jesus with my own eyes.” I believe all children long to see Jesus. All people, regardless of their age, and no matter what they’ve done or failed to do, have a longing that will never be satisfied until they offer their bread to Jesus and watch him take it, give thanks, and distribute it to hungry men and women until they are filled.

God and Father of all, you have willed that the last shall be first, and you have made a little child the measure of your kingdom. Give us that wisdom which is from above, so we may understand that, in your sight, the one who serves is the greatest of all. We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.