

## Little Ones Who Believe

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on September 25, 1994, the 26th Sunday in Ordinary Time. Scripture Lessons: Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22; Psalm 124; James 5:13-20; Mark 9:38-50.

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

~~A minister shared with me a story from the time he was a first year student at Columbia Presbyterian Seminary in Decatur, Georgia.~~ <sup>Sanctuary at CPS</sup> A professor invited him and several ~~other~~ students to his home one evening for desert and a time of informal fellowship. After desert he asked each of them to share their testimony. "What brought you to trust in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior?"

Each of the students began to share, in turn, thrilling testimonies of how they had come to trust Jesus Christ. One had been converted from a life that was certainly headed towards alcoholism. Another had been an atheist. Another shared how he had gone from one promiscuous sexual relationship to another before coming to Christ. <sup>One of them</sup> My friend felt embarrassed because he had no dramatic conversion story to share.

When his turn came, he simply confessed, "I've never known a day in all my life that I didn't trust in Jesus as my Lord and Savior. That doesn't mean that I haven't been a great sinner. But no matter how great my sins, there's never been a night in my life when I could not lay down my head trusting that God forgave my sins through Jesus. My parents told me about how much Jesus loves me. 'Little ones to him belong' we sang. Each night they prayed for me and with me. They brought me to Sunday School and Church and we worshiped together. They taught me to trust in Christ alone for my salvation. So from the time I was little I've

trusted Christ as my Lord and Savior.”

When he finished speaking he noticed that tears were streaming down the face of his seminary professor. He said, “I wish that all of us could have a testimony like that.”

I’m grateful that God converts grown men or women to Christ. I’m so grateful when one of you shares how you were converted to Christ as an adult. But I’m sure - I’m absolutely sure - that God’s will for us is that we come to know Christ as our Lord and Savior as little children.

I’m often asked, especially when I baptize children, “Don’t you believe that children of Christians must make a conscious decision for Jesus Christ?” Yes, absolutely! I hope and pray that a conscious decision for Jesus Christ is made by them every morning of their lives. I hope and pray that these little ones will never know a day when they did not believe in Jesus. There may - and will be - times of unusual, joyful experiences. There will also be times of rebellion. But nothing could be better if our little ones believed in Jesus from their earliest days.

Jesus spoke of “little ones who believe”. He may have been referring to men and women who were immature in their faith, like the one casting out demons in the name of Jesus who wasn’t a member of the family of faith. But I also believe that Jesus is speaking as well, literally, of children. ~~Jesus implies that we can use our hands, and eyes, and feet in such a way as to cause us to sin against one of these little ones who believe in him and to cause them to go astray.~~ “Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him

if a great millstone were hung round his neck and he were thrown into the sea. And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire.”

There've been times when my hands have caused me to sin with respect to disciplining my children. There've been times when these hands which once bathed my children when they were little, which wiped away their tears when they cried, which gently caressed them at bed time - these hands which have baptized ~~them~~ them and broken the bread and poured the cup of Holy Communion - these hands have been transformed into ~~a~~ instruments of terror. I feel ashamed of how I have, at times, used my hands as a weapon. I'm not talking about slapping a toddler's hands as he or she is about to stick a fork into an electrical outlet. I'm not talking about using hands to restrain and protect a child, sometimes forcibly. I'm talking about using hands to hit a child in such a way that he or she is demeaned, belittled, and made to feel worthless - if not actually bruised and bloodied.

Recently I read where 60-80% of these little ones who believe in Jesus will depart from the faith at some point in their life. Many will return as they grow older, but, unfortunately, many will not. What many of our youth are rejecting is not the true faith but a caricature of it. They're looking for a faith that's exerting a positive influence on their parents - one that conveys joy, honesty and peace in the family. If there's any factor that stands out with kids who have forsaken the faith, it's the fact that they hate being in a home where there's tension between their Mom and Dad, whether it's in the form of a yelling match or a cold war. *worse using hands to punish & physical assault on another.*

How we place our hands upon these little ones will affect how readily they place themselves in the hands of Jesus Christ. And how we look at them with our eyes, either in love and respect, or else in rage and disdain, will certainly affect how they look into the eyes of Christ.

According to the Children's Defense Fund, 1,649 children are abused every day. <sup>violent hands are laid upon men.</sup> In 1992, 2.9 million incidents of child abuse were reported, and 1,261 children died as a result. Every day 10 children die from gunfire and thirty more are wounded. <sup>Hands pulling triggers.</sup> One in three girls is the victim of sexual molestation outside the familiar surroundings, before the age of 16.

And Jesus is angry. <sup>is angry</sup> The compassionate Christ - ~~The~~ Christ who ate and drank with sinners - the One who died for all our sins - sternly warns us that nothing is so likely to cause a person to end up in hell than to lead astray one of these little ones who believe in Jesus. "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung round his neck and he were thrown into the sea. And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire."

In Jesus we see how our hands, eyes and feet can be used as instruments of God's grace. With his hands <sup>Jesus</sup> he overturned the tables of the money changers in the temple, but he never used his hands to hurt or terrorize anyone, let alone a child. With his hands, Jesus touched lepers, healed the sick, and blessed little children. His eyes looked upon men, women and children in love and even when he looked at

anger, he never looked with contempt. The feet of Jesus took him to the bedside of sick people like the little daughter of Jairus whom he took by the hand and raised from the dead.

The hands and feet of Jesus were nailed to the cross for our salvation, and from the cross his eyes looked down upon those who had crucified him and he said, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." Jesus was crucified, dead and buried. He descended into hell. He took upon himself the penalty for our sins so that none of us need ever, or should ever, have to enter into hell with hands, feet and eyes which have caused us to sin. And on Easter Sunday Jesus arose from the dead, stood before his disciples, graciously looked upon them, and lifted up his nail scarred hands to bless his disciples.

*And today*  
We, the church, are the body of Christ. We are the hands and eyes and feet of Christ in this world. God be ~~gracious and~~ *whenever* merciful to us ~~if~~ *we ever* use our hands, eyes and feet in such a way as to cause one of these little ones who believe in Christ to sin. Our hands and eyes and feet are to be a visible demonstration of the hands and eyes and feet of Christ in the world. *with our feet we can walk in the CROP*  
*to help hands, feet, eyes and ears*  
We're to look at the world through the eyes of Christ. And we pray,

Take my hands, and let them move  
At the impulse of Thy love.  
Take my feet, and let them be  
Swift and beautiful for Thee.

Let us pray: Ever living God, in your mercy you promised to be not only our God, but also the God of our children. We thank you for receiving our children by baptism. Keep all the little one who believe in you always in your love. Guide them as they grow in faith. Protect them in all the dangers and temptations of life. Bring them to confess Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior and be his faithful disciples to their life's end. May there never be a day in their lives in which they have not known your love for them in Jesus Christ. May they never remember the day that they did not believe and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.