

Sermon September 30, 2018
Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29, Psalm 19:7-14, James 5:13-20, Mark 9:38-50

Take a Child in your Arms

There are times when it would be so much easier to understand what Jesus is saying if we could be actually there. Don't you think? We would get so much more of the context. If we were there, we would not only *get* what Jesus was saying, but also all the things He didn't *need* to say because it was completely obvious. We'd get all the stuff that even the disciples can get, because it is right in front of them. But alas. We are not there, and can't be actually. Not literally anyway.

But we *can* be there in at least one very important way. We can be *there* through certain *human* experiences which are universal. We place a high value on diversity these days – a great thing in my view – so sometimes it can seem like there's less and less we can legitimately claim is 'universal'. But in my view, Jesus actually chooses certain actions and situations because of the 'human condition' types of experiences they create, because of their universality. We *get* them because they are hardwired, they are part of what makes us human. They were the same for the disciples as they are for us and so they are a doorway. We can step

through them, into the Kingdom, the realm of universal meaning that Jesus creates, in which all humanity can come together.

So I invite you to step through that doorway with me now. Allow yourself what must surely be among the simplest and most universal of human experiences. Take a child in your arms, spiritually I mean. We can't do it literally of course. But allow yourself to experience it in spirit. Take a child in your arms. We've all done this. It is so good, so right, so whole. Notice how it feels in your arms, how it feels in your breath, in your heart. Notice what happens for you spiritually. It is beautiful. With a beloved child in our arms there is the certainty of *love*. The *certainty* of love. We love children. I'm convinced that we *all* do. It is universal. To take them in our arms is to give our whole self over to self-giving love. I name that *divine* love. It was the same for the disciples as it is for us. It will be the same in another two thousand years. It is probably the same, not just for humans, but for all living creatures. It may be *the one* truly universal spiritual experience. We do it in communities too, like here at St. Helen's. We did this in that beautiful children's communion service we had last week.

We take children, our children, any children, all children into our arms. We hold in them in the arms of us, not just because of the window above the high altar that bids us from scriptures to do so. But we do that especially because we want to be in a certain spiritual condition. Holding children in our arms is a doorway to the experience of divine love and that is our purpose.

It is also our stewardship theme for these next four weeks. The Kingdom love we can only experience in connection with children is our Promise of Tomorrow. Jesus gave us this great insight into ourselves that 'Unless we change and become like little children we can never enter the Kingdom of heaven.' We might call it a motherhood thing. But it is interesting that Jesus is saying it here to men as well.

It is good that we have taken a child in our arms today because now we can hope to understand what Jesus is saying. We have got the *context*. To say it another way, we cannot hope to understand what Jesus is saying in Mark 9:38-50 unless we see that He is holding a child in his arms while He says it. We especially need to hold a child in our arms to understand verse 42 and following:

42 'If any of you put a stumbling-block before one of these little ones who believe in me, [*little ones' like the child I am holding in my arms*] it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea.

He picked up the child the child in verse 36, which was in last week's Gospel reading. He is still holding her this week. It is the same conversation, the same passage, the same universal experience of holding a child. It just took us a week to get there. We have to know the context though or wouldn't get that piece.

He picked up the child verse last week in verse 36 in order to say verse 37:

³⁷'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.'

Do you want to know God? Welcome a child. Welcome a child? Welcome me. Want to proclaim and share *me*? My divine love? Hold a child in your arms. We *know* that when we hold a child in our arms. Don't we? I do. It's beautiful.

But He goes on in verse 42 to say what happens if we *don't* hold a child in our arms, if we don't welcome Him. There is a key word here, a *theme* word for the whole Gospel. It is there almost every week in some form or other, but we explored it more explicitly a few weeks ago. The word is *stumbling block*. Remember that? Three weeks ago I explained it this way:

Stumbling block is one possible translation of a Greek word *skandalon* or *skandalizo*, a noun and verb. It also exists in a perfectly good English word: *scandalized*. The translators *could* just give us that word in the text in the authorized version. But they don't. In each of the forty odd times *scandal* or *scandalized* appears in the Greek, they give us a bunch of different translations. *Offended* is a common one. *Causes us to sin* is another. *Stumbling block* also appears a number of times. That is an interesting one. That begins to bring us closer to the meaning. The Greek *scandalized* (*eskandalisthEsan*), means *ensnared*. Literally *caught in a trap*. A number of scholars believe that the word comes originally from middle eastern bird hunting. It is the name of a specific part of the trap: the *trigger* that causes the trap to shut.

Jesus knows something that He believes is universally true for human beings. We have two modes spiritually. We are either moving toward God in Kingdom love, holding a child in our arms. Or we are *scandalized*, triggered, moving toward crucifixion. Jesus' simple message? Choose God. Choose love. Learn that love from the love you have for your children.

If you don't, "you put a stumbling-block before one of these little ones who believe in me, [and] it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea."

In other words, we need to pay special attention to how we are around children. Be in the place of Kingdom love. Do anything to avoid being *scandalized or triggered* around them. This is challenging, to be always setting this loving example for children. But we need to see also that, as Jesus knows, this is part of how children bring out the best in us.

How important is this to Jesus? I give you verse 43 and following:

⁴³If your hand causes you to *stumble*, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire, ⁴⁵And if your foot *causes you to stumble*, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell. ⁴⁷And if your eye *causes you to stumble*, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, ⁴⁸where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.

Cut off your hand, remove your foot, pluck out your own eyes rather than put a *scandal*, a *stumbling block* before a child. Why? Because our spiritual condition is catching. If we are triggered/offended/caused to sin/trapped/or scandalized someone else will be too, then others will catch it from them, and so on. Children are especially vulnerable because they learn so much from our example. If they learn from us to be frequently offended they will pass that on throughout their lives. The result is a conflagration, a 'worm that never dies,' a 'fire that is never quenched.'

We remember this ourselves from our own childhoods. There were some adults who seemed always angry. Their presence affected us like a sickness. That was okay as long

as we had adults around us who held us in their arms and entered with us into the place of Kingdom love. That healed it all. These loving adults were our saving grace. They shared with us the love of Christ whether they said so or not. We *caught* that love from them and ever since have passed it on.

But if we did not have that. If our adults were stressed or struggling or under attack or had been through a World War or a Great Depression or had never been held or had never *themselves* known Kingdom love, we might gradually have come to believe that anger was adult, that offendedness was okay, that indignation was righteous, that being triggered was a good way to motivate ourselves. Without meaning to, through sheer habit, we may have unwittingly made our home in that *other* place. That *other mode*, the mode of a slightly less than holy spirit may have become our default. No matter. Kingdom love can heal it all. Take a child in your arms. Jesus' advice is to start with the child you were when you were little. We can all take *that* child into our own loving arms.