Welcome the Child – Children’s Sabbath

Matthew 18:1-5; 19:13-15 Kimby Young

Hebrews 13:1-2 October 22, 2017

This weekend is designated Children’s Sabbath when people of all different worshipping traditions think about the needs of children and ways we can support children. My early ministry was children’s ministry – so obviously, this is a Sunday I value and observe. You, too, good people of First Presbyterian Church of Gardner, have a long history of supporting children and youth. You have grown good faithful kids over the years – some of you are those kids all grown up. Further you support outreach, mission and service projects for children and youth. Currently Operation Christmas Child, Care Portal supporting foster care, Joy Closet clothing local families, and so many other of your mission ministries – focus on supporting children worldwide and making life better for the next generation. Third, you obviously love the children you have among you with Sunday school classes and traveling day camp, with EPIC and PYF, with mission trips and fundraisers, with confirmation and scholarship programs, and other ways of nurturing children and youth within this community. You love the children and youth among us, and you crave welcoming more children to church here. In fact your session is trying to imagine ways of attracting more children and youth, and of caring even more profoundly for children in the world. So when, as in this scripture passage, Jesus says, “Welcome the child! Let the children come.” – you are all in. You value children and youth. A day like today rings true and important for you, as well as for me. How can we welcome the child to Jesus? This is a “preaching to the choir” kind of a sermon. What more is there to say than – “Let the children come.” And let us do our part to welcome the children to Christ.

So rather than having a really, really short sermon, I thought I would just offer you a list of practical suggestions to support children and youth in our congregation, community and world. I’m going to throw out a lot of ideas and I don’t want you to feel like you have to do everything. Just pick one thing – or maybe two things that you can do to support children and youth.

Number one – pray. Promise to pray every day for children. This can be the same prayer every day or 300 different prayers in a year. You can pray for individual children and youth by name – I can give you a list. Or you can pray for specific needs of children and youth – and there is a wide range of needs. For education, sports, health, family relationships, awareness of God’s love, development of their talents, prevention of worry and anxiety, and good ways to spend free time. Then for children and youth at risk the list is even longer - health care, foster care, hunger, child abuse prevention, gang violence, drug involvement, and fear. Prayers for someone who will love them and protect them and make the world a better place for them. There are some kids – too many kids who live on the edge with no one to help them grow. It is up to us to reach them, teach them, care for them and provide for them. As a church we have barely scraped the surface of all that we can do.

So that leads to the second way we can support children and youth – volunteer – here in the church or in the community. The list of needs is endless. If you feel a call, come talk to me or to the mission pillar or discipleship pillar and we will try to give you some ideas to meet your gifts. An easy one is help with our ongoing children and youth programs here – we need substitute teachers for Sunday school, we always need help with day camp, we could use some back up in the nursery when Sydney is tied up. If you would like to work with children at risk our mission pillar does a few things that might interest you: We need a coordinator for the Care Portal – someone to receive emails and help match needs with resources. For those of you who don’t know – this is an internet based, e-mail based network that links Foster Care and Social Workers to churches and volunteers. The needs come across in an email and if we can respond we do. As I said, right now we need a coordinator to receive the emails and respond if we are able. We give a lot of resources through the Joy Closet – you may not be aware. But if we get a request for clothing or sheets or some furniture or toys – often we already have the material goods and we just need someone to make the match and deliver the offerings. Joy Closet reaches and helps a lot of children in the area and provides basic needs – volunteer to sort or staff the Joy closet any time. Another great ministry we already do here at the church is Operation Christmas Child. We collect items through the year, package them in November and send them off all over the world to children in need. Pam Wilson has been coordinating the effort for years and we are looking for a new coordinator for 2018. If that interests you, let me know. You can train under Pam this season and be fully prepared for next year. We have had suggestions to start other community outreach programs for children in our area or to plug into existing programs like tutoring or after school programs. If that interests you, we need several people to help organize it and coordinate. Of course there are dozens, maybe even hundreds of good community programs we could plug into – in Gardner and in the wider Kansas City area. Some of it is hands on action, some of it is advocacy for better services for children and youth. I even hear there is a desperate need for foster parents in our area – if that is a high calling which you could meet. Our Presbytery offers some cooperative work for children in our area. Let me know if you want to know more about any of this. Volunteer for any of the things I have talked about - if that is something you can do. If you are not able – go back to my first suggestion - pray about it. Prayer counts. Prayer matters. Pray for the kids and for the programs. Pray for the children and their parents. Pray for the world and the leaders of the world to care for our children and youth.

So number one – pray. Number two – volunteer. Number three – give – financially – if you are able – through the church or through a reputable agency you know about. Give to programs that support children and youth. It’s simple and practical – and it counts toward making the world a better place for children. I know all of this is overwhelming – the needs of children in our world – but you don’t have to do everything. Just do one thing to help children in our world – children down the pew or children around the world. And again, if you feel a call but you aren’t quite sure what to do, come talk with me and God will inspire us in the right direction.

My final suggestion is really a less practical, less concrete idea. I take you back to the scripture for today. Jesus says, “Let the children come to me.” Jesus also says, “Unless you become like little children you will never enter heaven” – or you will never live in the presence of God. We must be like children as we come to God – innocent, trusting, vulnerable, open, loving, - like a child - “all in” in the relationship with God. Children completely belong to God and they know it. We are called to be the same – to give ourselves to God with all of our hearts. To trust God and to put our lives in God’s hands at all times. We are called to be open, pure, vulnerable, loving. Are we? As we grow up, we assume more responsibility. Jesus calls us to give some of that responsibility back to God. Trust God rather than your own abilities. Become like a child in faith. Come to Jesus as a child comes – open arms, heart full, joy filled, trusting, free. It’s hard to let go of our “adultness” and to come as a child to Jesus. But that is our call. Come to Jesus. Let all the children of God, come to Jesus. So in a very real sense, advocating for children is advocating for everyone. Supporting children means supporting all God’s children everywhere. How is it that we can bring all children to Jesus? How is it that we can introduce all of God’s children to God? How is it that we can see every single person as a child of God – a beloved child of God? If we can do that, then that opens up an entire world of possibilities for mission and ministry, outreach and service. Treat everyone as God’s beloved child. Welcome everyone – the stranger, the outcast, the unwanted and unwashed. Love them as you love God’s beloved child. And in so doing, you will entertain angels. In so doing you will stand in the presence of God, holy and blessed, gifted and beloved. Knowing that you too are God’s beloved child, child of promise, child of grace. This is the gift of God for you.