

The Greatest

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

August 25, 2024 – Sunday Morning Worship

Text: Matthew 18:1-5 & 19:13-15

The first day of school is coming! For some it is coming this week and for others, next week. Whenever that first day of school arrives, life shifts for all of us, even those of us without children in school. Why is that? Well, at least in part, these back to school days are a powerful reminder of our own “back to school days” when we were young. We know what it is to be excited and what it is to wish summer was just a few days longer. We drive past the kids waiting to get on the school bus and memories wash over us, of long ago bus rides or walks to school. Whether the memories swirling around us are of our own first days of school or our children’s, they are bittersweet as often as not. Some of us remember vividly the gut wrenching feeling of our kindergartner heading off to school on that very first day. Or that day we were left behind as our youngest headed out the door to the rest of their lives – to college, or work or the military. Our babies were babies no more. And even if the first day of school doesn’t hold such emotional immediacy for many of us, we can’t escape the reminders of the new school year since we’ve also been bombarded for weeks with the over-abundance of school supplies – like those we have been collecting over the summer and dedicated this morning – in local stores. The Halloween candy already on sale is also an annoying and unwelcome reminder that fall and all the changes it brings is quickly coming upon us. Thus, even if we are more than ready for cooler, dryer weather, the end of summer still holds a tinge of melancholy for us all.

So, I’m curious. What kind of kid were you as the first day of school ticked ever closer when you were that age? Did you dread

seeing that day circled on the kitchen calendar, knowing the sweet days of summer were ending? Did you grieve over the return of too early mornings and too much homework? Or, were you the so excited, you couldn't wait for the day to come kind! I was one of those kids, no doubt an irritant to all the other kids whose feelings about school were lukewarm at best. This still holds true today. Some kids – and their teachers – are happy and excited to return to school and others are, well, resigned to it. Whatever the situation, it almost goes without saying that especially at this time of year, schools and the kids who fill them are on our minds. Hence my choice of Scripture texts for today.

The verses from Matthew 19, specifically Jesus' response to the disciples who had been "speaking sternly" to the parents who had brought their children to Jesus for a blessing, has always been a foundational one for my vocation in ministry. I had it framed in my office at the first church where I served as a Minister of Family Life and Education. I saw this verse – "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs"—as the cornerstone of my work and ministry, my call to action as it were. I worked hard to build a Christian Education and youth program that was strong and vital. With 150 children enrolled in Nursery through 8th grade, my program was literally the envy of churches of all types. I had a staff of 30 volunteer teachers and aides and we routinely met for staff trainings and meetings to plan for Sunday mornings in this highly sophisticated and well attended program. I worked hard to keep it the best it could be. I was determined that everything we did would do nothing but be encouraging for "letting the little children come" to Jesus and come they did. We also offered a weeklong Vacation Bible School each summer with an average attendance of more than 40 kids, quite a feat since we were competing with one of the best Boys & Girls Clubs day

camps in the area. We also had a strong and thriving youth ministry program with three youth groups averaging 20 kids each plus a confirmation program which averaged 25 kids each year. It truly was a dream program. I was proud of it. I loved those kids. I gave my all to those kids, and their parents. I made sure the doors were always wide open to those kids and their parents. I know UCC Westerly also had a thriving Sunday School and youth program during the same time frame. But the reality today is far different, both for that church with the dream program and for this church and so many others. In fact I would argue the majority of other churches have seen their numbers in children's and youth programming plummet leaving us all to wonder what the heck happened.

A logical question for sure but I confess to wondering if this is even the right question. I don't think it is. The right question for us to focus on in this moment is not "what happened" but instead "what does Jesus need us to do now, in the world as it is today in 2024." I think we can all agree that the world of the 1980's and 90's and even the early 00's is long gone. Family life is completely different. People generally are completely different. Cell phones, social media, the digital world in general changed everything about the way we live our lives. The other reality is that how we work as adults is totally different as well, especially since Covid. Some parents work remotely. Others make their livings through the gig economy meaning they work all the time as different "gigs" pop up. And kids have changed too. For most kids, the first day of school is marked not with new text books but with a personal laptop the children are issued on the first day of school. Textbooks? A rarity. Cell phones? Too present in student lives if you ask most teachers. In short, dear ones, the world today is so very different than it was even 10 years ago. The church, then, must be different too and, let's face it, change for the church is

not easy. I always think of it as akin to trying to turn an aircraft carrier. The church, dear ones, does not change anything easily. But change we must. That is our invitation and our call to action from Jesus. But, now what?

Let's return again to what Jesus said when he was talking about children. In these two texts from Matthew, one in Chapter 18 and the other in Chapter 19, Jesus makes two very clear points. First, in both texts Jesus is clear that children are not empty vessels waiting to be filled up with bible memory verses and craft projects of dubious quality and purpose. In other words, as Jesus greeted these children, what we think of as Sunday School was nowhere on his mind. In fact, he argues precisely the opposite approach. Children, Jesus says, are the ones who are already part of the kingdom of heaven so they should be teaching the adults. In other words, Jesus is saying that kids just get it. They get God as Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer because they have been born with a sense of the divine imprinted on their souls. Contrary to traditional thinking, Jesus reminds us here that children are not blank slates waiting to be filled up with adult notions of who God is and why God matters. Children are already filled to the brim with the divine. God sees to that and makes it visible in their humility, in their vulnerability, in their willingness to love unconditionally and to be loved and nurtured as well. Children are the ones to show us what it means to know and love God, not the other way around.

Second, Jesus understood that children can only come to God, to claim fully their birthright in the kingdom of heaven, if their parents or guardians take the time and make the effort to bring them someplace where they can be blessed and nurtured in the faith. After all, they are children. They can only go where the adults in their lives take them. The adults have all the control here. In the verses from

Matthew 19, we find it is parents who are bringing their children to Jesus for a blessing. They are seeking him out. These adults know that Jesus has something unique to offer their children and whatever it takes, they are going to make sure their children receive the kind of blessing, the kind of nurturing that only Jesus offers. Noteworthy here is that, as happens too many other times in the Gospels, the disciples just don't get it. They don't see the children, and their parents, as anything but a nuisance. They want to protect Jesus from what they see as needless interruptions to his already too demanding reality as crowds follow him everywhere. But Jesus realizes what they are doing, and he tells them they've got it wrong. They are *not* to stop the little children from coming to him. Why? Because, once again, these children and their simple, humble faith reveal the path to the kingdom of heaven for everyone else. These little ones remind everyone – even the disciples, even Jesus himself – that the entire foundation of faith is simple and straightforward, like a child who approaches every situation as they encounter it. No preconceived notions or ideas. No biases or judgments. No worries about being right or wrong. Just faith and trust that God is love, always and everywhere. All the other stuff we think we need to have a relationship with God – knowledge of Scripture, knowledge of the right way to pray, knowledge of the rules of the church or the expectations of the adults in church – none of that matters. Children remind us of that. Jesus reminds us in these two texts that we would do well to pay attention to their example.

One of the most interesting aspects of the Matthew 18 text about children and faith is how it begins. The disciples don't come to Jesus with questions about why there aren't more children in the crowds following them. They don't ask him anything about children. Instead, they ask him an all too typically human question: "Who is the greatest

in the kingdom of heaven?” Say what now? They’ve been traveling with him for months, watching him heal hopeless cases, listening to him teach and preach about God in ways they’ve never heard before and their question to him in this moment is “who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” I am guessing Jesus was not thrilled with this question. He was probably hopeful that after all this time with him they would have a better question than “who is the greatest?” But, ever patient, Jesus doesn’t roll his eyes or slap his forehead in exasperation. Instead he calls a little child over to him and says to the disciples, “unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

“Unless you change and become like children you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” Wow. That would have made no sense to the disciples at all. Why would they want to be like little children? Children had no value in their world which, truth be told, is not that different from today. But it is true that in Jesus’ time, children were simply mouths to feed and clothe and house. They weren’t seen as any kind of asset until they were grown and able to contribute something substantial to the family unit. Sons would help with the family business (think of Jesus working in Joseph’s carpenter shop) or work tending the sheep or cultivating the small patch of land the family had. Daughters could help with cooking, sure, but their real value would be in the dowry they would command as soon as they could be married off.

So, it is no surprise the disciples reacted as they did to Jesus comments about children and the kingdom of heaven in these two texts from Matthew’s Gospel. Why would anyone want to become like a little child again? That doesn’t make sense! This is when I imagine Jesus looking at them, with the little child on his lap, and sighing deeply. Let’s face it, Jesus needed endless patience to deal with the

disciples who had a tendency to be a little dense. So Jesus sighed, and then he explained that the little child was a living example of the capacity for any human to have faith. Children, he explained, were humble with no thoughts or worries about who would be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. The child was just happy to be sitting on Jesus' lap, resting in the embrace of this man they sensed was extraordinary in some way. Humble. Trusting. Open to whatever God brings into the moment. Not worrying at all about who is best, who is first, who is the greatest. Just content to be with Jesus in that moment. That's the example he used for the disciples, and it still speaks to us today.

Dear ones, that's what I invite you to take with you as you bring these two texts with you into the week ahead. I invite you to dare to be as a little child as you come to Jesus, humble and gentle with no worry about being the best or the greatest or the smartest or anything other than yourself in the moment. I encourage you to come to God as a little child, with an open and trusting heart, ready to embark on whatever comes your way as the day, the week – your life unfolds. I pray you will welcome the Holy Spirit into your words and your actions in the days ahead that you may bring a little piece of the kingdom of heaven with you in all that you do, so that it becomes visible in you – if only for a second – to the people around you. Most of all I want you to remember that being the greatest or the smartest or the richest or the anything-est never matters to God. God is never about superlatives when it comes to the people God loves, the people God welcomes into the kingdom of heaven here on earth and in the life of the realm to come. God is only ever concerned with one thing – the child of God that is you. God created you to be exactly who you are. Not perfect. Not even close. Just you – because to God you are perfect. Always. Amen.

