

*A sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, October 21, 2012, dedicated to all the children of the world, to Mark Williams in his ministry with our children and to G. Dene Barnard on his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday in thanksgiving for all the love and blessings he has brought to First Church for 40 years, and always to the glory of God!*

## **“Bring the Children to Jesus”**

### **Hebrews 5:1-10; Mark 10:1-16**

*Today, I will not be focusing on marriage and divorce in Mark 10:1-12. On October 4, 2009, I delivered a sermon on marriage (gay and straight) based on Mark 10:1-12. I also preached on divorce November 19, 2006. I recommend you check these out if you are interested – [www.first-church.org](http://www.first-church.org). Each of these needs additional focus. But today, I will focus on the children in Mark 10:13-16. Please join me in prayer.*

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May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Some years ago, I came across a story about a little boy talking with his newborn baby brother. It seems the big brother - age 4 - loved having “conversations” with his baby brother – age 3 months – at all hours of the day and night. As thoughts came to his mind, he would go into the baby’s room to talk about them. He would share with him what he did at pre-school, what he and his friends were doing and what was on his mind about their parents. He would bring good books to read to his brother, as well. Mostly the baby watched and listened. Sometimes he “cooed and chattered.” What big brother didn’t know was that mom and dad

could hear everything because of the baby monitor by the crib. They loved listening in.

Late one night, mom and dad were awakened by the baby's bedroom door opening and closing. Big brother's little footsteps could be heard as he made his way across the room to the crib. He attempted to wake the little one. *"Baby, wake up. Wake up. I have to talk to you. Wake up. You have to talk to me. You know how each us comes down from heaven – how we are brought by the angels? God sends us to our families? Well, I need you to talk to you about God. I am beginning to forget what God looks like. Baby, help me remember."* With that, the bay began to chatter and coo. Only the two of them could understand what was shared that night. And God smiled.

I believe this story. As we are heaven sent, I also believe we are created by God and delivered as newborns to bring hope and light to this world. In every child that is born, under no matter what circumstances and no matter what parents, the potentiality of the whole human race is born again, and with that child's birth – whether we know it or not - each of us takes on a new responsibility to see that child has a chance to live into the fullness of her life.

I believe Edmond McDonald has it correct when he writes:

*When God wants an important thing done in this world or a wrong righted, God goes about it in a singular way. God doesn't release thunderbolts or stir up earthquakes. God simply has a tiny baby born, perhaps of a very humble mother. And God puts the idea or purpose into the mother's heart. And she puts it in the baby's mind, and then – God waits. The great events of this world are not battles and elections and earthquakes and thunderbolts. The great events are babies, for each child comes with a message that God is not yet discouraged with humanity, but is still expecting good will to become incarnate in each human life. (Presbyterian Outlook, found in Guide My Feet, Marion Wright Edelman, Beacon Press, Boston, 1995, p.7).*

God believed this so much that God came down to earth with “skin on.” That is exactly what the incarnation means. In Jesus Christ, God comes to us with skin on. And a God who is born from heaven with “skin on” has a particular place in his heart for children, for the vulnerable, for all creation. Such a God remembers what heaven is like and comes to bring heaven to earth.

This brings us to our Gospel text for today.

Jesus is out teaching about scandals in the land (chapter 9) and marriage and divorce (chapter 10). In between all of these teachings and the disciples were busy in chapters 9 and 10 angling for the position as MVD – Most Valuable Disciples.

Throughout these exchanges, Jesus is set on healing with his hands and heart of love. He is out in the midst of the Judean countryside and families of all ages and people of all sizes are there, too. People don’t have tickets to see Jesus. They didn’t leave the kids home with a babysitter. Grandma and Grandpa (if they were still living) are looking for enlightenment and healing just like everyone else.

You can believe the children were all around. They were everywhere. No one took them out of church. There was no “children’s church.” They were right by Jesus’ feet, right by his hands. They may not have taken in all that he was saying, but they were taking in his presence. They were absorbed by his aura.

Don’t forget children are drawn to the “Light of the World!” They have a sixth sense about someone’s aura, someone’s goodness and kindness. Children are drawn to the light of God!

Then the disciples do what bouncers do. They do what protectors do. They block people from swarming all over Jesus. They even block the little people. In this particular instance, people are **bringing** the little children to Jesus. The disciples speak sternly to the kids. In fairness to the disciples, they were doing what they thought was right. Without a functional job description,

they were making it up as they went along. This time – they were wrong.

When Jesus sees what the disciples have done - he becomes irate and he lets them know it! He says, *“Don’t push these children away. Don’t ever get between me and them. These children are at the very center of life in the kingdom. . . . Mark my words, unless you accept God’s kingdom in the simplicity of a child, you will never get in.”* Mark 10:15- (Eugene Peterson, *The Message*)

Jesus is ticked off. With the exception of his reaction to abuses by marketers in the temple of Jerusalem, we don’t see Jesus’ “hot anger” in the Gospels. Here he expresses himself with utmost clarity. What is about the children that brings out the fire in Jesus? Why is he so insistent that children come to him and that the God’s kingdom belongs to them?

I believe (like the baby in the crib), Jesus still remembers what heaven is like. Children see that in him. But, Jesus also sees that in children. You see, in Jesus’ times children were “non-persons.” They were not seen as cute. There were no romantic notions of these little people. But Jesus saw them as full human beings and he wanted his disciples to see them the same way. In our times, homeless people are often the persons we do not see – they are turned away as “non-persons.” We have treated Native Americans in a similar way down through the ages. Ralph Ellison wrote *The Invisible Man* through the eyes of his experience as an African-American male. He named his reality as one in which people saw him and a non-person – even non-existent.

Treating others as non-persons is not unfamiliar to us. But, Jesus didn’t want his disciples to forget they were “children” of God – each of them important to God – none of them “non-persons.” We are all called to enter God’s kingdom with the spirit and mindset of children.

Unfortunately, we haven’t come far enough in our relationship to children. We keep them away from Jesus and the full and unconditional love of God in many ways in our times, too.

The Children's Defense Fund, under the leadership of Marion Wright Edelman, established this day as Children's Sabbath more than 25 years ago. Thanks be to God for Dr. Edelman "Bringing the Children" to all of us so that we had to more clearly wrap our arms around them. Here are some recent statistics Children's Defense Fund has gathered about children in America. These statistics are ones that happen every day in America.

**Every Day in America:**

**2 Mothers die in childbirth.**

**3 Children are killed by abuse or neglect.**

**5 Children or teens commit suicide.**

**8 Children or teens are killed by firearms.**

**32 Children or teens die from accidents.**

**80 Babies die before their first birthdays.**

**186 Children are arrested for violent offenses.**

**368 Children are arrested for drug offenses.**

**949 Babies are born at low birth weight.**

**1,204 babies are born to teen mothers.**

**1,240 public school students are corporally punished.\***

**2,058 children are confirmed as abused or neglected.**

**2,163 babies are born without health insurance.**

**2,573 babies are born into poverty.**

***\*Based on calculations per school day (180 days of seven hours each).***

In a news conference in which I spoke in the early spring at the Statehouse, I was addressing the rise in deaths related to gun violence (remember the shootings in Chardon, Ohio, earlier this year?) and I joined others in calling for new laws in Ohio around handguns. Here is yet another staggering statistic from the Children's Defense Fund that I discovered at that time: The number of preschoolers killed by guns in 2008 (88) and in 2009 (85) was nearly double the number of law enforcement officers killed in the line of duty in 2008 (41) and 2009 (48). Based on this statistic alone, I believe we don't need to arm more people and allow for more freedoms to carry individual weapons of mass destruction.

We are faced in our times with stark political, economic and moral choices – all of which somehow affect children - not the least of which is a huge federal deficit. When it comes to the federal budget, it's critically important to remember that children did not cause this deficit. Those who did should be asked to pay to close it – that burden should not be left with the children.

Rather, we should increase programs and support for children. Children under age 5 are the poorest age group in America, and one in four infants, toddlers and preschoolers are poor during the years of greatest brain development. If you believe that we are called to make just and sensible choices like helping babies during their early childhood development years rather than helping grant tax cuts to billionaires who do not need one additional material thing, then speak up. As long as there are millions of children in America who are poor, hungry, uneducated and without health coverage, we must stand up and speak up on their behalf. If we do not stand for up for our nation's children, we will not be able to stand for anything else (drawn from CDF materials).

Jesus said the children should come to him. He said that no one should stop them from coming to him. Let us be the ones who clear the way for the children to get to God. In fact, let us become like the children, and in so doing we will “remember who God is,” and in time, enter the kingdom of God. Amen.

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