

“Jesus and the Children”

Mark 1:1-11; Isaiah 50:4-9a; Mark 14:43-15:47

VII of IX in the Sermon Series “Jesus”

Jeffrey Window panel “Suffer the Children”

The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens
Senior Minister

March 24, 2024

From the Pulpit

The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
444 East Broad Street, Columbus, OH 43215

Phone: 614.228.1741 Fax: 614.461.1741

Email: home@first-church.org

Website: <http://www.first-church.org>

“Jesus and the Children”

Mark 1:1-11; Isaiah 50:4-9a; Mark 14:43-15:47

A Palm/Passion Meditation delivered by the Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister, The First Congregational United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, March 24, 2024, Palm/Passion Sunday 2024, dedicated to Amy Wagner on her 60th Birthday, to all the newborns, children and teens of First Church, to my seven grandchildren (and two on the way!), to all the children of the world, to the blessed memory of Barbara Sterrett who passed to eternal life on Saturday, March 23rd at 97 years old and always to the glory of God!

+++++

*Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock, and our salvation.
Amen.*

+++++

They were there. They were everywhere in the crowd. They were at the gate when Jesus entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. They were leading the masses who dropped their palms on the ground before him. They were there in the outer areas of the temple when he turned over the tables. They were at the Passover Seder because they were an essential part of the celebration of liberation from slavery and the hope of the future nation – and they would have been present with their fathers and mothers when the Passover bread was broken, and the cup shared. They were there when he carried the cross through the narrow streets of Jerusalem and told the women of Jerusalem to not weep for him but for themselves and their children. They were with their

mothers at the crucifixion as well – although I hope and pray their mothers shielded their eyes as they would during a solar eclipse. But, they were there. The children were always there.

They were present for another reason, too. They wanted to be near him. They had been touched throughout Jesus' ministry by his kindness and love. They had been healed by him, taught by him, blessed by him and I am sure they played games and brought their artwork to him as a way of thanking him for being their rabbi. They loved him, too. They believed him, too. They followed him, too.

Earlier in the scripture, when the disciples had formed a wall of protection around Jesus by the Sea of Galilee, he got indignant and proclaimed, "let the children come to me and do not stop them because the Kingdom of God belongs to them. And I tell you, unless you become LIKE A CHILD, you will never enter the Kingdom of God!" Without a doubt the children were central to Jesus' life and ministry. In fact, children have carried the heart and soul of faith and faithfulness throughout time – and in all faith traditions.

THEY were the reason for HIS season. Jesus truly loved the little children – as the song says, "all the children of the world."

In the third episode of Season One of the four season series, "The Chosen," we meet the children in an episode entitled, "Jesus Loves the Little Children." We encounter Jesus as he cares for the children. It is apocryphal in nature, but it reflects the spirit of Jesus in relation to people – especially little people – as he is funny, fun-loving, engaging, ever-present, joyful and an engaging storyteller and teacher. In the episode, he is camping alone outside Capernaum when a little girl discovers him. She is cautious and he gently engages her. Soon she is bringing her friends and before you know it, the children of the village are gathered around as he shows them how to make fires, how to carve and whittle (after all he is a carpenter's son and quite a craftsman with wood). By the time he has spent time with the children, they have learned skills – like carving, cooking, storytelling and more. When he

packs up and leaves, Jesus leaves behind dolls and handmade toys for each of them which reflect what each of them love in this world. He has built relationships with them and reflects that in the gifts that he gives them.

I love this depiction of Jesus because it reflects what I believe to be true about this oldest son of Joseph and Mary's five children. He is really great with children. His compassion and connection reaches to all ages – for all time.

As we walk into this holy week, there is a reason to put children at the heart of Jesus' story and our story. We are close to the end of this season of repentance and redemption, and we remember that at the core of Jesus' message was a call to each one of us to become like a little child.

He doesn't call us to eat dust or to mercilessly beat ourselves by naming all our failures and shortcomings, and hope God changes our hearts. He calls us to radically change our outlook, to fundamentally reorient our lives so that we no longer trust the security we have built up for ourselves or lean into the persona we have carefully created over time. Rather he wants us to have the courage to become as receptive as little children, with all their openness to life. He wants us to take down the barriers and throw away the armor which we try so hard to lug around.

That is what repentance really means. It means there is more to you than you ever dreamt or knew. It means becoming bored with the quarter of what you are and taking risks with the three-quarters of you that is yet to become. It means taking a risk to surrender to the whole of who you can be and thus to find a more abundant life. He wants you and me to be fully alive.

As we head into this Holy Week, we want to connect to him at the core of his message – to become like little children and enter the kingdom of God that awaits us. I make it sound easy – to become like a child again. Maybe that is because I am spoiled. I have seven grandchildren to remind me how to do this. I am a lucky man. The other night, I got a text from Adam, my grandson Axel's dad. Axel is just about three – and he NEEDED to talk with

me right away. He had been chattering about me to his parents for hours. He needed to see me. So we Facetimed just before he went to bed. I came on the screen, and he cried out, “Paw Paw!” (loosely translated Grandpa). Then he dropped the phone, so I was now looking at the ceiling while his mom and dad were laughing hysterically. He ran to the front door thinking that he had conjured me up and I would be there to take him out to play. He cried out to the empty landing, “Paw Paw, where are you?” I said, “I’m right here in the phone.” He came back, looked at me and sighed and then he said, “Ok for now Paw Paw. But, next time come get me! I love you!” “I love you too sweetheart!”

See how easy it is. If Axel can conjure up his grandfather through his creative imagination, you can enter into the Kingdom of God through your creative imagination of becoming like a child and growing closer to Jesus. I have faith in you! You can do it.

Pay close attention to Jesus this week as he moves through his Passion and Resurrection. See him on a donkey as “Hosannas!” are cried and Palms are raised and laid down. See him in the temple praying and tossing tables. See him resting in Bethany and returning to Jerusalem. See him at the Passover Seder breaking bread, pouring wine, and declaring his sacrifice and love for all. See him falsely accused, whipped and beaten, bearing the cross, and then being crucified at the hands of the Roman Empire – all for the salvation of the world. See him dead and buried. Then see him rising from the dead in resurrection joy and becoming our inspiration and hope for all the generations.

See him. Hear him. Feel him. Break bread with him. Drink the cup with him. Listen to him. Touch his cross. Walk by his side. Pray to him. Pray with him. Give yourself to him as his disciple.

Become like a little child this week and enter the kingdom of Heaven.

Copyright 2023, First Congregational Church