

Blessing the Children: Reflection for Child Dedication
Co-Pastor Susanne Guenther Loewen
NPMC – Sept. 12, 2021

Scripture: Mark 10:13-16

Hymns: See the Children Here Before Us (VT 509); Child of Blessing, Child of Promise (VT 508/HWB 620)

Mark 10:13-16, NRSV: People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, “Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

We are grateful today to be celebrating the gift of children with two families. This past year and a half, our congregation has felt somewhat empty as children and young families have been unable to come in person as frequently because of the pandemic. I know I’ve missed those little whispers (or sometimes, let’s be honest, loud talking or crying!) from the back pews, and a circle of those lovely little faces gathering at the front for children’s time. It hasn’t been the same to lead children’s time just for the live-stream camera, though I am glad we have kept that reminder of the children as part of our worship services. We have missed the children of our faith community, who are an important part of who we are. What a gift, then, to have the opportunity today to bless some of them, and to be blessed by their presence here among us.

Child dedication in the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition is based on Jesus’ blessing of the children, which we heard from Mark’s Gospel this morning. In the first-century context of Jesus and his disciples, children were of very low status – along with women and slaves and lepers and other marginalized people. So it’s no wonder that Jesus’ disciples respond the way they do when parents approach Jesus with their little children – they turn them away, assuming that of course Jesus is much too important for these children, that of course he has much more valuable things on which to spend his

time. But Jesus stops them, and Mark's Gospel tells us that Jesus is "indignant" that they are turning these children away. And Jesus welcomes the children and blesses them.

But as I turned to this well-known passage again this week, something stood out to me. Jesus doesn't only bless the children and call us to do the same. The message isn't just to include these poor children. No, it's actually much more radical than that. Jesus actually calls us to learn from the children, to be like them, in order to enter the upside-down kingdom or kin-dom of God. Jesus says, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." But how does one become like a little child? What does that mean?

Teacher, principal, board chair and former Deacon Brent Guenther shared a really endearing story from the first few days of this school year. When asked about how his summer had been, one of his students had shared that his family had seen a "reincarnation of Jesus" – a seagull standing on the water! It's these kind of quirky and funny observations that melt our hearts when it comes to children. Maybe it's that honesty and lack of pretense that Jesus is calling us to cultivate in ourselves. But against what we might assume, being like children is not about being quiet and obedient. As the late Rachel Held Evans writes, "Those who say having a childlike faith means not asking questions haven't met too many children. Anyone who has kids or loves kids or has spent more than five minutes with kids knows that kids ask a lot of questions. Rarely are they satisfied with short answers, and rarely do they spend much time absorbing your response before moving on to the next 'why?' or 'how come?'"¹ So maybe an insatiable curiosity is integral to a child-like faith. Theologian David Csinos goes so far as to call children "little theologians," because they do have an image of

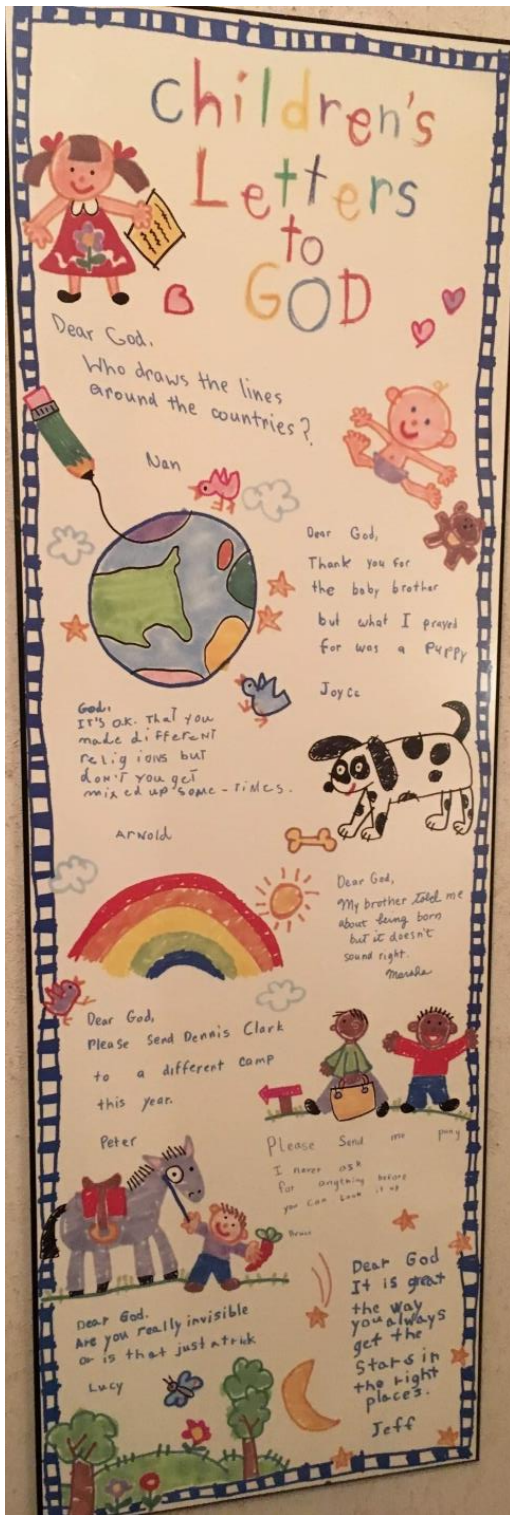
¹ Rachel Held Evans, *Evolving in Monkeytown: How a Girl Who Had all the Answers Learned to Ask the Questions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 225.

God and theological questions and spiritual insights from an early age.² That's what we

need to remember as a faith community and as families as we raise children in the faith tradition – that they are not empty vessels to fill with our beliefs, but bring their own spiritual wisdom to the table.

As we continue to bless these children of our faith community through celebrating their births through showers and meals, through providing children's programs to build community among them, through continuing to wear masks until they can be vaccinated, through blessing their backpacks as they return to school, and through child dedication today, let's remember that they are also a blessing to us. Let's remember to keep our minds and hearts open to learning from them, like a certain twelve-year old whose parents lost track of him and found him teaching the leaders in the Temple! (Luke 2). Thanks be to God for these little lives, and these little theologians among us.

AMEN



² David Csinos, *Little Theologians: Children, Culture, and the Making of Theological Meaning* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2021). For an interview about the book, see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V6_b2FP0UkU&ab_channel=TraciSmith