

Why Children?

Matthew 18:1–6

At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them and said, “Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.” (Mt 18:1–6)

The Missouri Synod’s constitution has always included a paragraph devoted to “conditions of membership.” As we might expect, that section has always required commitment to the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions. The Synod’s history is quite consistent in that respect, but other provisions have come and gone—for example, “exclusive use of the German language in the our synod’s conventions.”

However, in view of this morning’s Scripture reading, it is noteworthy that our synod’s first constitution made it a condition of membership that a congregation provide “a Christian education for the children of the congregation.” A Christian education for the children!

Right from the beginning, ~~therefore~~, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod committed itself to ~~the~~ children. The Synod, congregations, the Church—Christianity itself—were not just for grown-ups but for their offspring as well. This, then, was the start of a church-wide commitment that today has resulted in hundreds of elementary schools, dozens of community Lutheran high school, and thousands of Sunday Schools.

Obviously, a lot was going on when early Lutheran leaders decided to establish and maintain Lutheran education in America: sociology as well as theology, ethnicity in addition to piety. Such things certainly entered into their motivation. But it is also true that any church worthy of the name, indeed, any Christian at all, knows that our Lord loves children—especially -- and on more than one occasion during his ministry, he marked out a special place for them in his kingdom.

On the one hand, there is that tender and touching scene in Jesus' ministry that is read at nearly every Baptism:

“Let the children to come to me” [he told his disciples]; “do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God.” . . . And he took them in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands on them.
(Mk 10:14, 16)

But on the other hand, there is this morning's text, the counterpart of that first one, with that ghastly promise of retribution against anyone who offends “one of these little ones who believe in me.” “It would be better

for him,” threatened our Lord, “to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea” (v 6).

That’s how much our Lord cares for the little ones!

But now, you have to ask yourself why? What is so special about children in the eyes of Jesus?

From our perspective, the answer is obvious: God made them cute! And not only our own children, but also the children of others. They are so dear to look at, to smile at, to coo at. They’re just plain cute! But this is First Article stuff—an example of divine providence, a blessing and encouragement, especially to parents, for the cuteness of their children is proportional to the demands they make on their parents. Caring for the young is hard work, and there’s no direct compensation—but at least God made them “cute.”

Well, that’s US -- as parents, as grandparents, even just as neighbors, admiring little ones, but it doesn’t really explain Jesus, does it? Why does he single out children as models for his kingdom? What is so special about them? What can they do for the kingdom? What can they do for Jesus?

That’s just the point, isn’t it? Nothing at all. Children have no capacity for entering the kingdom of God and not much for serving in it. In that familiar Baptism text, unnamed individuals were bringing the children, even infants, to Jesus; the kids ^{were not} were’t coming on their own. And in this morning’s reading, our Lord took the initiative, called a child and set him

into the midst of the disciples. “At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, ‘Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?’ And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them and said, ‘Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven’” (verses 1–3). Did the children even know what was going on in these situations? Probably not.

Which, again, is just the point, isn’t it? For when it comes to the Kingdom and a right relationship with God, there is no room for human initiative, human effort, self-seeking, self-promotion, self-justification — none at all! In fact, all of that gets in the way. It forms obstacles to grace, and misses the point entirely of how God wants to save us, God’s way of saving us—by doing it all for us himself in Jesus!

You work in an office? You’re a big boy, a big girl. Don’t expect the boss to do your spreadsheets for you, to direct deposit a paycheck into your account while you lounge around on the beach. Don’t expect the union to negotiate twelve months of vacation for all workers. You want it? whatever it is—you’ve got to earn it. That’s the grown-up way!

But it’s not the way of Jesus.

Notice, too, that our Lord does not appeal to the “innocence” of children; that is not at all what he has in mind. For as every parent recognizes almost from the first instance of life—every child, every infant, even our own dear ^{child} ~~one~~, is entirely preoccupied with self. Not with God,

not with their neighbor, and certainly not with parents. In this respect, they are just like grown-ups. Helpless they may be, but certainly not selfless. So they need saving as much as anyone.

So there they are: helpless, humble, lowly. In other words, perfect candidates for grace—which God is eager to bring to them. It's for them—yes, for you, for everyone, but certainly also for them—that God himself became helpless, humble, lowly. The one who needs no one's help became not only a little child (probably a cute one!), but also a suffering, dying grown-up. The Teacher of all, including tender youth, ^{the lambs in the flock} became the Servant of all. Humbled himself even to death on the cross to secure God's grace for these little ones.

And it's especially to these little ones that he delivers that grace by water and the Word: forgiveness, life, and salvation. That's the Gospel, of course, and it is all yours, no strings attached—but not only yours, also your children's!

But the times, they are a-changin', and even Sunday Schools are experiencing great challenges. Community youth programs and sports leagues no longer honor Sunday with hands off. They force parents to make a choice, and so often children are influential in selecting whichever is the most fun, rather than what is most valuable. So it's not clear what our Lord has in store for Christian education in the years ahead. ~~No,~~ not clear at all.

Sunday schools require ~~the~~ dedicated teachers, and leaders responsible for guiding, problem solving, and setting the table for learning. Sunday Schools require parents who reinforce what is taught on Sunday mornings with godly behavior, the study of God's Word and teaching children how to pray in homes. Together, we are partners in bringing up ^{the little lambs} children in the love of God and in living lives pleasing to Him.

I do know one thing for sure about the future that we can always depend on in ^{this} ~~our~~ congregation, and that is God's love in Jesus. Remember, that love is not just for you and not just for me, but also and especially for the children. Amen.