

To Such As These
Caldwell Presbyterian Church
August 24, 2014
Rev. John Cleghorn
Text: Matthew 19:13-15

The phone call came during my second cup of coffee last Saturday morning.

The caller had seen news coverage of our community's exploration of whether Charlotte might be a welcoming community to some of the unaccompanied children streaming into our country from violence-torn Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador.

They are currently being warehoused in Air Force bases and other government installations. As you may know, we have offered our Price Building as a *potential* site for a kinder, gentler refuge for these children while their legal status is determined by the courts. The caller had tracked me down to discourage that idea. He identified himself as a Christian.

"These kids don't belong here. They need to be sent back home. We are a nation of laws," he said, using that familiar talking point of immigration hard-liners.

"What would Jesus do?" I asked the man.

"Jesus obeyed the law," the man responded. "He said render unto Caesar what is Caesar's."

"Jesus didn't always obey the laws of man, but he did obey God's law," I responded. "And besides, this effort is all about obeying the law. These children have applied for legal help in America because their lives are in danger at home. The courts will decide that. This is about showing caring and compassion to them while their cases are decided by the courts."

There was a long pause.

"Oh, well, I hadn't thought about it that way," the man said. "But in the meantime, the children will just disappear and then they are illegal aliens, like all the others."

"How do we know that?" I asked. "And now aren't you just making an assumption that avoids the main question?"

“Well, I will say our Sunday school class has wrestled with this issue and what to do,” he said, with a slightly different tone of voice.

“That’s great,” I responded. “Maybe your Sunday school class and ours could get together and talk about it.”

“I’d like that,” he replied. “We need more civil dialogue.”

We spoke graciously to each other for a few more minutes. Then just before he said goodbye, the man asked. “Your name is Cleghorn. Are you from Canada?”

Not knowing exactly what his point was, I said, “No, sir. I’m a southerner, born and bred.”

“Well then,” he said, with a friendly tone. “It’s been nice talking to you.”

When it comes to understanding what God would have us do, I guess God’s people have always had their disagreements and varying opinions. One day Jesus and his disciples were sitting around, talking. Jesus overheard the disciples arguing over who was the “greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” I imagine it was a debate not unlike the kind my caller friend and I were having.

Jesus realized it was yet another teaching moment for his sometimes dull-minded disciples. So he offered lessons about caring equally for everyone, using the parable of the lost sheep. He warned the disciples against doing anything that might cause another to sin. He taught lessons about forgiveness and fielded a particularly tricky question about marriage and divorce.

Then some people started bringing children to the great teacher, that he might lay hands on them and pray. The disciples told them to stop. Jesus spoke sharply to his disciples, saying “to such as these children belongs the kingdom of heaven.”

Jesus was making a point and it is a point that speaks to us just as clearly as it did to the disciples that day. It is simply this: we can debate and discuss issues of faith and religion all day long. But, Jesus said, keep the main thing the main thing. Care for the little children around you. If you do, *then* you can be sure you are pleasing God. Then you can know that you are tending the Kingdom.

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In 2007, this congregation – at least those who were here then – held a number of town hall discussions to frame the resurrected Caldwell’s mission focus. Immediately, children and education arose as a high priority.

Not long after that, we got to work. Our connection to the Common Hope organization in Guatemala provides us ways to fund the education of youth and to help families so that youth there can stay in school. Our three trips there so far have introduced us to those families and allowed us to help in many other ways.

We also knew we needed to serve families and children close to home. We identified Merry Oaks Elementary School, off Central Avenue, as one of our system’s poorest and most diverse elementary schools. And we got to work there, too. Merry Oaks has become one of our deepest, longest and highest impact ministries. Almost 20 of you have sustained your involvement there over the last 6 years. And still more of you have purchased supplies for the kids and their classrooms.

Merry Oaks is also one of our most measurable ministries, where measurement is important. Reading levels and achievement among the children you touch have soared and Caldwell has become Merry Oaks’ largest volunteer partner. Thanks be to God.

We also received the call and the chance to work with the Charlotte Bilingual Preschool, housing classes and walking with those Latino families as they navigated life in Charlotte. And, most recently, we have extended some of those relationships to our “New Worshipping Community,” La Casita De Amor, led by Rev. Landrau and touching both children and their parents.

There is yet another bold possibility God seems to have sent our way is whether we might offer the Price Building – or a portion of it – as a temporary facility to extend kindness and compassion for the unaccompanied minors I mentioned a few moments ago.

There are many unknowns as of now, at least, in whether and how that might work out. But I’m thankful for all those who are helping find the answers and all those who said you would like to help.

God has been plentiful in providing opportunities to serve and you have been generous with your time and love. The same God in Christ continues to call us, continues to say, “Let the children come to me,” and “Feed my sheep.”

In our “3D” dialogues, you expressed a two-fold desire to reach more children with the hands of Christ and to develop and deepen relationships across lines of race and class. After seeking ways to respond to that call, the session has endorsed one new ministry in particular.

Twenty-one years ago, elder Kim Bohannon, a career P.E. teacher in a poor corner of Connecticut, acted out of her faith. She saw the needs of at-risk kids all around her and started an organization now known as Buddy-Mentor. Buddy-Mentor went on to help guide hundreds of children through school and many to college and beyond. For those who were accepted into college, the Buddy-Mentor organization offers a generous scholarship.

After Kimbo moved to Charlotte, she did her best to remain still and listen for God’s call on her life here. She led the 3D committee that examined options for opening an after-school program for at-risk youth at Caldwell. Yet we found there are not really any good options for partners who would work beyond the buildings and grounds of Charlotte-Mecklenburg schools.

So, today, we officially launch Buddy-Mentor South. The board of the non-profit has approved this southern invasion, of sorts. Kimbo will tell us more about how we can get involved but let me stress that this is a complimentary ministry to the amazing work of our Merry Oaks team. The opportunities to serve Merry Oaks come during the week, when the children are in school. Buddy-Mentor will enable those who may work or have other commitments during school hours to mentor a child on Sundays, once a month. We also think we can be in relationship with the students’ families, perhaps sharing meals on a regular basis. But that is for planning later. Kimbo will tell us all more in a moment.

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For now, let’s get back to Jesus and his disciples and their debate about who was the greatest. There are a number of things going on in this story worth noting as we seek to be the body of Christ in our time.

When Jesus answers their question about who is greatest by drawing their attention to children, he says to them: “Stop thinking about God’s immeasurable grace, love and adoption in terms of human calculations.” The Gospel of Mark’s version of this story emphasizes that we must receive the notion of the kingdom of heaven as a little child would. Jesus calls us to accept and adopt it, without trying to use our limited human

understanding to dissect and parse its meaning, without trying to locate its boundaries on a map or its dimensions in space, without attempting to estimate its scope and scale.

Jesus is saying, “Just take the kingdom of Heaven as a promise.”

Jesus is also making a point to his male disciples that God’s word is for all. By making way for the children to come to him, Jesus also made room for women to be among them. It would have been the women who would bring the children, because the women cared for the children. So Jesus’ rebuke to the disciples for trying to limit access to him stands as a strong statement about the inclusiveness of God’s invitation in Christ. It is an invitation that transcends the barriers that society then – and now – tries to erect in an effort to keep the Good News the property of one segment of the population or another.

No, Jesus said that day, the Good News, my healing touch, is for women, children and men. For us in our time, we must bear witness to God’s love in the same wide-open way, extending a radical welcome of our own.

Finally, Jesus is saying to his disciples that they are not the ones to decide access to or status in the kingdom of heaven. That job is for our Triune God. In the societal construct of Jesus’ time, children would have been considered non-persons, to be seen but not heard, much less granted status of any kind of importance.

This story asks: who are the non-persons of our day, those who are voiceless and powerless yet those to whom Jesus says, “Let them come to me?” Are they members of the LGBTQ community? Are they the homeless? Are they the poor? Are they the immigrants? Are they the 23,000 children who have stepped over a line on a map in the southwest, only because their lives at home are nothing but desperation and danger?

For children in Jesus’ day, wasn’t Christ simply saying: “It’s not up to you, you dim disciples, to decide who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? It is up to God to decide and it is up to us to be obedient to God’s grace, just as a child would be expected to be obedient to adults in Jesus’ day.”

Yes, God decides who gets into the kingdom, an idea that would be mighty disturbing to the protestors who came again to visit us last week.

So, in closing, this story about Jesus and the children, which appears in three of the four gospels, leaves us with an important two-fold charge:

First, let us abstain from judgment or any attempt to rank the citizens of the Kingdom of God, conceding and deferring instead, to our God, who is the only one who decides the limits of divine grace.

Second, when we get too caught up with ourselves, our lives, our needs and wants, our opinions and convictions, let us remember there is always a child who needs us, or at least a part of us, and that a good use of some of our time is to help that child make it in this fearful and foreboding world.

Thanks be to God. Amen.