

# ENCOUNTERS WITH JESUS IN MATTHEW: THE DISCIPLES AND CHILDREN

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Matthew 19:13-15

This morning we conclude our sermon series on encounters Jesus has with others in the Gospel of Matthew. During this series, we have watched Jesus call his first disciples, heal the leper, respond to the eager volunteer, answer the request and marvel at the faith of the centurion, dismiss the request from Mother Zebedee, and offer harsh words to the religious leaders. We have by no means, of course, exhausted the encounters Jesus has with others, but we have nearly run out of time for now, as Ash Wednesday is this week, and the season of Lent begins next Sunday. Today, though, before we leave this series of sermons, we consider one more Jesus' encounter.

The disciples up to this point have traveled with Jesus from place to place. They were eyewitnesses when he healed all kinds of diseases and raised people from the dead. They had front row seats when he preached his sermon on the mount. They were there, on the shore of the lake, when he taught in parables while seated in the boat. They watched as crowds, who were clamoring for Jesus, were not turned away, even when he was tired and in need of rest. They, these twelve men, were his closest students, watching him work and learning from his ways.

In today's text, they watch as family members bring young children to Jesus so that he can lay his hands on them, bless them, and pray for them. What a beautiful image to think of in your mind, or even to look at in one of the stained glass windows in the chapel. And after all the things Jesus has done, like calming storms and driving out demons, one would think this is a fairly simple request.

The disciples, though, don't see it the same way. "Go!" they say to the children. "Get away from here! Be on your way! Jesus has more important things to do than to pray for you." You can imagine the trauma inflicted on these children and the shocked look on their faces; on these little ones who were simply being presented to Jesus for a blessing.

The word rebuke in our text can also be translated as to scold or to reprimand. This is the same word used in Greek when Jesus stills the storm, when he drives out demons, and when he reprimands Peter and says, "Get behind me, Satan! You do not have in mind the concerns of God." What the disciples are doing is no casual "move along now, kids." No, the disciples are irritated and vehemently try to shove the children away from Jesus.

What lies at the heart of such behavior? Is it simply a lack of patience, similar to when they've tried to turn people away before? Think of the feeding of the five thousand, when it was late and they were in a desolate place with no food to be found. They say to Jesus, "Just send the crowds away to find food elsewhere." And when a Canaanite woman cries out for mercy for her demon-possessed daughter, and Jesus does not respond immediately, the cry rings out from the disciples, "Send her away, Jesus, for she keeps crying out after us." If you listen carefully to those situations, you hear those cries of desperation, but there is no desperation in the story of Jesus and the children.

Instead, the disciples are likely letting two schools of thought influence their thinking: first, that these young children are not worthy of Jesus' time. They are simply not that important at that age. That's what much of society thought of children at the time. They were, in some sense, marginalized just like those who were lame, leprous, widowed, or poor. In addition, the disciples believe these children are interrupting what they consider to be more important matters; more important ways to be proclaiming the kingdom of God. Jesus could be, as we mentioned earlier, raising the dead, healing the sick, or preaching the good news of the kingdom. To stop and take time to pray and bless children? The disciples might say, "That is not a good use of Jesus' time!"

While marginalized children may look different today than in Jesus' day, it doesn't mean that they still don't exist. Many children, for example, both around the world and in this community, are living in poverty and are at risk. Think of the kids that LaGrave members mentor at Congress School through the Kids Hope program. Think of kids who are being lured to the child sex traffic industry. Think of kids who are facing or have faced various forms of abuse from the adults in their lives.

When I was teaching, I watched this happen to one of my students. Ryan's parents never married, so he began life living with just his mom and his sisters. Substance abuse was evident in the home, and he eventually moved to a less-than-ideal foster family. His dad seemed to finally get his act together, even taking required parenting classes, and he took custody of the three kids. But once mom got out of jail, things began to unravel once again. Ryan was supposed to go back to the same foster family he had before, but they decided they didn't want him and would only take his sisters. I can still remember the first day of school when he arrived with minimal school supplies and he didn't even know which classroom he would be in.

We heard about similar struggles just last month during the Primers senior's gathering here at church, when we heard a presentation from leaders at Wedgwood Christian Services, an organization, as some of you are aware, that seeks to help heal the hurt and trauma that children, teens, and families are going through in their lives. These are children who long for a fresh start, children who long for a safe place to live, children who long for people who will care for them well. In fact, last year Wedgwood received prayer requests from several teens who were receiving treatment and care in their residential program. Many kids submitted nearly the same prayer request: "Please pray that God gives me a family and that they love me."

In our story today, the person who loves and cares deeply is Jesus. In the midst of the disciple's strong rebuke, Jesus becomes angry at them and says, "Let the little children come. Do not send them away for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these." And with that, he lovingly takes the children in his arms.

Pastor Kristy, in her children's sermon a few weeks back, told the children how she used to do headstands when she was a kid. She told them this to illustrate that in the kingdom of God, when we follow the teachings of Jesus, things are not always the way we think they should be. Often, God turns things upside down, and this story is a classic example.

What a radical shift from the disciples' response. What a radical shift from the culture. What a radical shift even from the religious beliefs of the time. This leads us to ask the question: what does Jesus do to accomplish this radical shift? Let's zoom in a little closer on the story.

First of all, he sees (he notices the children, pays attention to what's going on, sees the need), he loves (he welcomes the children, has compassion on them), he touches (he takes them in his arms, laying his hands on them), and he prays for them. Except for touching, which is something we need to be careful about these days, there is nothing to prevent us from seeing, loving, and praying for people who are in need. And if it's not appropriate to physically touch someone, we can "touch" them by mailing a card, sending a text, or writing an e-mail, all ways to show God's love.

We see a love for children here at LaGrave when we watch our children bound down the aisle in eager anticipation of the children's message. In fact, if you are watching online now or have ever watched the live stream, you may have noticed that the camera purposely shows us the kids in the aisle as they come and go because we so enjoy watching their enthusiasm. We also appreciate the boys from Scouts and Youth Outdoors who were willing to help lead us in worship a few weeks back, we give thanks for the children who played handbells at last Sunday's evening service, and we are delighted at the way God is working through the 22 kindergarteners, first, and second graders who praised God in song at the 11 o'clock service last week. We even applauded afterwards!

These activities show that we are following the ways of Jesus, ways that show that children are valuable, yet God is nudging us to do more. The pastors hear many of you tell how you lament children and grandchildren who are not attending church or who have wandered away from the faith. We lament that as well. That's one of the reasons LaGrave is involved in the Growing Young program, as we seek to form meaningful relationships between adults and our young people so that they will keep the Christian faith and also feel welcomed and valued in the church. It's also why we are always seeking more baptism prayer partners (such as Marlene) who will commit to faithfully praying for our children and their families. Indeed, God desires us to see the value of children.

But God also wants us to see the value of all who are helpless, hurting, or marginalized, no matter their age. From Jesus' actions, we see a picture of how we must overcome the irritation like that experienced by those first disciples and instead devote ourselves to the spiritual and physical care of such people. Perhaps that includes families who have or who are going through a divorce. Maybe that includes people who are barely making ends meet or who have no place to call home. It could be someone who struggles with mental illness or who battles an addiction to drugs or alcohol. Perhaps it's a homebound member who would so love to be sitting here in this sanctuary with you today but who is physically no longer able. There is certainly no end to the list of marginalized people who God is calling us to see, love, touch, and pray for.

I'm grateful for two families that did that for Ryan, first a quality foster family who took him in and began the healing process, healing from all the trauma he had experienced. They went above and beyond what the courts required and instead followed what God was calling them to do. And then, praise God, a wonderful family who saw him, loved him, and then touched him as they adopted him as part of their family.

As we thought this morning about disciples who didn't follow the ways of Jesus, it might be easy to be a bit harsh on them, calling them "forgetful followers" or perhaps "slow learners." But if we're honest, we're not really that different from them because we, too, forget what Jesus teaches at times, and we fail to follow his ways, the ways of the one who laid down his life for us and asks us to lay down our life for others (1 John 3:16).

As we go from this place today, may God give us, by his grace and through his Spirit, the ability to remember what he teaches, and then to put that into practice, the work of seeing, loving, praying for, and reaching out to children...and people of all ages. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

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