

Wesley United Methodist Church      Rev. Beverly E Stenmark  
October 7, 2018  
Title: On the Mend: Healing Trust  
Scripture: Hebrews 1:1-4  
Mark 10:13-16

Several years ago, while visiting my family, I took my young granddaughter to church with me on a Sunday close to Christmas. As the Advent candles were lit in their circular pattern, she yelled out, "Look, Nana, It's a hoppy birfday." Most of the people around us in the sanctuary chuckled at the joy and observation of a young child. One man, however, turned around and gave me a burning glare. I don't know whether he thought my grandchild was a nuisance, or I was a bad grandparent for not having taught her to be quiet, or that I was negligent in her religious upbringing so that she didn't understand what an Advent wreath was. I don't know what his motivation was, but I will remember that glare.

If I had been a young parent trying out worship and wondering if my child would be welcomed, that one glare would have been enough to make me not come back. It probably wouldn't have mattered that the vast majority of those present, were amused by her and welcomed her spontaneity and innocence.

In today's gospel reading, people were bringing little children to Jesus so that he might touch them and bless them. His disciples, intent on keeping things orderly, and not disturbing Jesus, spoke sternly to the parents or grandparents. 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."

A few years ago, I was in a different sanctuary. The mostly older congregation had been worried that they might need to close their doors

and bring to an end their long history of being a witness in their community. Something had happened in that congregation and suddenly there were three or four families with young children. On that morning, when it was time to light the candles, a boy and girl, both about 8 or 9 came down the aisle carrying the light. With them were another three or four children ranging in age from 2 to about 5 or 6.

Something in my old traditional ways, felt uneasy as the children jostled for space at the front and the candles were lit. I was thinking to myself that at the very least the two-year-old didn't belong up there. Maybe I wasn't so very different than the man who had glared at me when my granddaughter shouting out her exuberant observation.

I knew the woman sitting next to me. She was in her 80's. She was very prim and proper and definitely old church. Her husband and son were both pastors and I knew she liked order and predictability. As she leaned closer to me, I was sure I knew what she was going to say. Imagine my surprise, when she whispered, "Isn't it exciting to see the little ones up there! We are so thrilled to have them, and they love coming up front every week." Like the disciples in today's scripture, I had been properly chastised. Immediately, I understood what she was saying and with her I rejoiced.

Children have a sense of wonder and joy about them. They have an innocence and an expectation that adults are going to be interested in what they have to say. They believe that telling you about their new toy, or what they are wearing, or who is coming to visit, or whatever is on their mind is the most important thing in the world. They can't imagine that we wouldn't be as interested as they are.

Jesus says that if we do not receive the kingdom of God like a little child, we will never enter it. They come with a trust that they are valued and loved and the younger they are, the more they believe that they are the not only the center of the universe, but also the most important part of the world.

That is, until, we adults, start teaching them differently. Of course, it is important for children to learn not to interrupt a conversation unless it is important and how to do so if it is necessary. Of course, it is important for children to learn to consider the feelings of others. In order to function in our world, children do need to learn that there are other people and that those other people also have needs and wants and desires.

However, sometimes, in this process, a child's sense of wonder and enthusiasm can be smothered. Sometimes, in teaching children that not all of the world is safe, we have given them too much of a sense of fear, anxiety, and caution.

Sometimes, we adults, carry that with us. Through the years, we may have learned, or decided, that we couldn't trust other people, or at the most that we could trust only a very few. Sometimes we have come to see the world as a place to be afraid; a place that is out to get us. Sometimes we think that either God or some other cosmic power is out there causing bad things to happen and when they do, it goes against our grain of what is fair.

It is not unusual for me to be asked, "Why is this happening? He's only 42, it shouldn't be happening to him? She has young children, it shouldn't be happening to her? I've always been a good person, why is this happening to me?"

Through the years, our innocence has been shattered. Our sense of wonder has often disappeared or at least been buried deeply. I remember

sitting on a swing with a two-year-old while she was thrilled by the wind blowing through her hair and her body moving through space. I, of course, was thinking about what I needed to be doing. Fortunately, I received the grace to step back from what I thought were my adult responsibilities and priorities and was given the gift to be able to see the world through her eyes and to revel in her excitement and wonder.

Jesus invites us to once again discover that we don't have all the answers – and we don't have to make everything work just right. Jesus invites us to come to him with the trust of a child – not needing to understand everything, not needing to carry the weight of the world on our shoulders – but to come in wonder.

Children, by their very nature, are vulnerable to what is happening around them, and this was particularly so in Jesus' culture, where children typically were not valued as exciting little beings but were seen as those to be trained as early as possible to be responsible, and to be adult-like.

Jesus reminded the adults to receive the children – receive the vulnerable, the least, the last, the ones who cannot carry their own weight. But Jesus also reminds us to receive God's kingdom as a child would – open to new possibilities, open to new things, open to excitement.

Today as we gather with Christians all around the world to receive Holy Communion, we come as children to a meal that we probably do not really understand, but we know it is important. We come with a million questions, but we don't need to have all the answers. We come as beloved children – whom Jesus is waiting to receive and bless.

It is at least, in part, because of this passage, that I believe that children of all ages should be welcome at the communion table. Yes, there are times in our lives, when we might want to have an adult meal and adult

conversation at a fancy restaurant with fine crystal and fragile dinnerware – and that can be nice. But for me, the pot luck dinner is a better symbol of the communion table. It is a time when everyone is welcome. When people bring who they are and what they are able to bring, and all are welcome. It is a family meal where there are no separate adult and children tables but one big table for all.

Some of you may know that when I serve communion to an adult, where in the ancient tradition of the church I might say, “The Body of Christ, The Blood of Christ. More often you will hear me say, “The Bread of Life, The Cup of Salvation.” They mean the same thing, but may be more welcoming to people who wonder how this bread and juice become the body and blood of Christ. They are the very real presence of Christ with us in ways that even the best theologians may not understand. It is absurd to apologize for mystery. We come to receive the bread that leads us to full life. We come to receive the cup that brings us new life, salvation.

To children, I usually say, “Remember, that Jesus loves you very much.” This meal, at whatever level we understand it, is a mystery, but it is also a proclamation and a witness of God’s great love for each and every one of us. In Communion – it is God who is acting – not just us. We come seeking to be closer to God in whatever way we understand that. But God also comes to us and in that is mystery, celebration, and wonder.

One year, at World Communion Sunday, I had the altar set with a variety of different breads and both individual cups and a chalice or common cup for dipping. It was interesting to watch as people came to the table. Most of the children came and took big clumps of bread, and often more than one. Many of the adults came and took the very smallest piece

of bread they could get, dipped it carefully, and went away with the smallest among they could.

I know we all come from different perspectives and with differing ideas of reverence and understanding. That day, though, it felt to me as if the children were eager to receive as much of the love of God as they could – seeking its abundance, starving for more and more. I wasn't sure whether the adults thought they didn't deserve as large a portion of God's love, or maybe they were so full of God's love that they needed only a tiny taste to remind them of how much God loved them.

Come today to the table as children of God. Come as those whom God loves. Come knowing that no one will stop you, and come to have a meal of love with the God who loves you more than you can even imagine. Come, knowing that all around the world today, our brothers and sisters are gathering to receive the bread of life and the cup of salvation and to remember that Jesus loves you.