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First Congregational Church  
United Church of Christ  
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### Learning from the Children

(Sixth in series, *Christian Wisdom for Life, Ten Easy Verses*)

*Let the little children come to me, do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. -Mark 10:15-*

(Supporting Text— Mark 10:13-16)

One clue to a person's character might be found in what makes that person angry. Don't we become angry about the things that matter to us? For instance, let a family member be threatened by someone from outside the family, and you might see real anger. Is it not true that we become angry about what is important to us?

Hence a clue to the character of Jesus might be found in the things that made him angry. One example of when Jesus was angry would be that time when the money changers were making their money in the Temple while neglecting the Temple's religious purpose. On that occasion Jesus made a whip and drove out the sacrificial animals and overturned the tables at which the Temple merchants were doing their business. Jesus was also often angry with religious leaders. On at least one occasion he released a tirade upon them. He called them blind guides, snakes, and vipers. Might we not conclude from those accounts that his understanding of true religion, and the practice of it in the Temple, was very important to Jesus? And he did not seem to be afraid of his anger, nor ashamed of it (there is no record of his ever having apologized for it), nor did he ever hesitate to use strong and direct language and action to express it. In Jesus, love and anger seem not to have been antithetical to each other and working against each other, rather they seem actually to have supported each other, the one making the other stronger.

Depending upon how the words of Jesus are interpreted (how many exclamation points are used and where they are put), it might even be that Jesus was often angry. I don't sense from the New testament record that he was ever angry in a bitter way, or that he was a brooding sort of personality with a chip on his shoulder, or that he was a volatile person filled with rage that accumulated in him over the years, ready to explode at the slightest provocation. I get the feeling, rather, that he was usually a mild mannered sort but would encounter things more than he liked which piqued him to his soul.

We might rightly reject an idea of God as some vengeful demagogue to be feared, but would we be much further along to lay aside any concept of an angry God at all? A God without anger would be a God without passion and that is close to a God who does not care. If God is a God of love then God is a God of anger.

The scripture reading this morning, and our memory verse is a part of it, is the story of another time when Jesus was angry. This time Jesus became angry with the disciples.

There seems to have been something about Jesus that attracted children and their parents. The story begins with parents bringing their children to Jesus in order that he might touch them. Think about that, to touch them. Is there not something about human touch which can bring healing and a stirring of life? It has been found that children who are not often caressed and cuddled can have a difficult time feeling safe and loved for the rest of their lives. I don't think that when Jesus touched the children there was something supernatural bestowed upon them, at least no more so than loving touches always are. To my mind it would be enough for the children to have sought Jesus' embrace just to feel how valuable and important they were. Whatever the case, the text says clearly that the children were brought to Jesus, not so that he might talk to them, or even to teach them, but so that he might touch them, and when the disciples saw it they tried to chase the children away.

Time and again in their life with Jesus the disciples showed themselves to be out of step with him. On this occasion they seem to treat children as a nuisance and it gets the disciples in trouble with Jesus. I wonder if they would have agreed with my grandfather, who was not an evil man, but a stern old Pennsylvania German, for whom everything and everyone had their proper time and place and woe lest breakfast not have two eggs and supper not be on the table at five o'clock, and who would actually say that children should be seen and not heard. How hard it is sometimes for us to shake off our preconceived notions!

Jesus reacted to the disciples with indignation. Would it be going too far to say that he was fed up with them? He is, in a word, angry, and he publically rebukes them. *Stop it!* we might hear him saying. *Don't send them away!* Then after he chastises the disciples he pays the children his highest compliment. *It is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.* And does not the kingdom belong also to Jesus? So we have these two, Jesus and the children, soul mates of each other, sharing with each other their experience of life as God designed it to be—filled in abundance with love and joy, and the unperceiving disciples unwittingly working to ruin it. The disciples needed to learn about life and faith from the children. If the disciples could not see the Kingdom in the children, Jesus says, then they did not understand it.

We rightly say that children must respect adults, and how true that is, but there is also that about children which for Jesus is so worthy of the respect of adults. There was yet another occasion when Jesus was angry, this time just imagining that someone would hurt or neglect a child, or somehow undermine the spiritual certainty that a child has. Jesus said that it would be better for that person to have a millstone tied around the neck and be thrown into the sea. To break a child's trust, to teach a child by precept or example that life is not good, to bring a child to doubt the reality of Love in the world; in other words, to do any of those things which at some point are done to all children causing them to enter adulthood less than faith-filled, less than love-filled, less than hope-filled, is to commit an egregious sin indeed! But in addition to loving children I get the sense that Jesus needed them! God was in the children! They understood Jesus, they would not betray him, their unrestrained love nurtured him!

In light of all this, could it be said that what a church does for children, the quality and quantity of its children and youth ministry, is one measure of how well a church understands its own mission? As we welcome children into our midst, in whom the kingdom of God resides, in other words, in whom God lives, are we not then welcoming even God's Self? And when this grand old Meeting House of one hundred and seventy five years is filled with children, when our halls overflow with their squeals, when we are in the presence of their absolute trust that we love them and would never do anything to intentionally hurt them, when we here as a family of faith witness their excitement as they enter each new stage of life, how close then are we even to God?

How do we respond to the situation of children in our society? Overall, between five and ten per cent of the United States population lives below the poverty line. That percentage is about the same for the subset of senior citizens. Yet the number of children in the United States which live below the poverty line is now approaching twenty five per cent. I don't know what the political solution is, but I do know that we could find one. I do know what the spiritual solution is: it is deeply, deeply to care.

Perhaps we can hardly overemphasize how important we are to the children, how much they need our care and protection and advocacy in the wider society, and also, how important they are to us, how much we need them, and what it was that made Jesus really, really, angry.