

“All kids are our kids”

Matthew 19: 13-15

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One of the great blessings Jesus gave his followers is that he left no doubt about the way he feels about children. “Let the little children come to me. Do not hinder them.” Apparently, the church needs to be reminded of this. In this particular situation it was his disciples who did not get it. The disciples rebuked those who were bringing the little children to Jesus. The disciples did not want the little children coming to Jesus. Just to make sure we don’t allow ourselves to fall into that trap, let me offer a short, succinct, and sweet summary of what happens in Matthew 19. In Matthew chapter 19 we learn Jesus loves the little children.

Some of the happiest moments we have had at church are those times children have been welcomed, when children have participated, when children have been loved through the ministry of our congregation. We have had Easter Egg hunts where the squeals of laughter and joy echoed both outside and within the walls and halls here at Dunn’s Corners. We have done arts and crafts, sang songs, heard bible stories, enjoyed snacks during those long summer days of Vacation Bible School. We have prayed with our children in the sanctuary and then sat with them as they learned the stories and the people of the bible, most importantly the stories about Jesus and the joy of trusting in him with all of our heart. The little children have responded. The little children have asked Jesus to come into their hearts. As the children grow up, they have joined bell choirs and chancel choir, gone on mission trips, spent summers at Montreat and Massanetta, and they have organized teen rallies that have reached hundreds of their peers with a message of hope. You can sense the joy and happiness of these many moments as you see the faces of the children in the pictures we have. Equally important, you sense the joy and happiness in the faces of the adults who have the privilege and the honor and the blessing of being with the children as teachers and leaders and mentors...and as friends.

If you have not noticed, and I would be surprised if you have not noticed, over time it has become more and more difficult to connect with families who have children. Sundays are no longer set aside for church. Children’s sports now have practices and games on Sunday mornings. Across the board less and less people attend church. We have faced that struggle. We are not alone. The dwindling participation of children and young people and young families has touched all denominations and churches of all sizes and all the various settings, be it big cities with large urban populations or small towns and rural areas. And then came COVID. Be assured we have had numerous discussions about what we can do to reach out and let our church be a home for families. We would welcome you to be part of those discussions and plans and activities. We will never stop giving our absolute best effort to be a church that welcomes children and their families with the good news that Jesus loves them.

Along with this general invitation to find a way to help us be a church that loves the precious little children of this world, I want to ask something else from you. What I am going to ask of you is not something related directly to helping our church reach more children and their families, at least not in terms of building our attendance and participation in our programs. Don’t get me wrong. I am all for that. But what I am going to ask of you this morning is simply to create some space in your life for the little children whom Jesus loves so dearly.

I am going to ask you to take a piece of paper like this home with you. We tried to make this piece of paper such that you can imagine it being a picture frame. The rest is up to you. I am asking you, on behalf of our church, and I think we can say on behalf of Jesus, who had a special

place in his heart for the little children, I am asking you to put a picture in that frame of a child. There are words above the frame. "Jesus loves the little children." Will you put a picture in this frame and then place it somewhere prominent, a place you will see often. Tape it to your refrigerator. Fold it up and tuck it in your bible or your daily devotional. Lay it on the front seat of your car. Stick it on your computer screen. Fix it to the doorpost of your house. If you watch a lot of television, slide it under your remote control. Put the picture somewhere you will see it often, and then each time you see that picture, of a child whom Jesus loves, say a prayer. That is all I am asking you to do.

Who will you put in that picture frame? That is completely up to you. If social media is any indication, some of you know exactly who you will put in that frame. Over the summer I have seen some wonderful shots of you playing in the ocean with grandchildren, celebrating the birth of a new grandbaby, cheering on young athletes and scholars and gymnasts and musicians. You already have a child, if not many children, in your life.

I sure hope some of you will consider putting the face of one of the children from our church in your frame. We don't have a lot of children at church right now, but the ones we have are amazing. If you know them, you know how amazing they are. If you do not know the children we have in our church family, maybe this is an opportunity to do just that. What would it mean to our young families here at church to know you have a picture somewhere in a very special place, and when you see that picture, of that special child, you are saying prayers. I hope every child, every youth, every teen, every student who is away at college, I hope each one of them has a person like you keeping them in your thoughts and prayers.

Even though I am giving you a picture frame, with a border, feel free to color outside the lines, so to speak. Maybe you will put in your picture frame the face of a teacher, or principal, perhaps a class-room assistant or one of the workers in before and after-school programs. What a blessing it would be for those who spend countless hours with our children to know someone has their back, someone is lifting them up.

All I am asking you to do is take this picture of a frame home and put the face or the name of a child in that frame. When you see that face or that name, just say a prayer for them. Pray for them because you believe Jesus loves the little children. All I am asking is that you put a face or a name in this little frame.

Even though that is all I am asking, I won't be surprised if more than that takes place. I have a feeling, and I most definitely have the hope, that as you see that face, that name, as you say a prayer, I have the feeling God might spur you to take another step. Maybe you will write a little note of encouragement. Maybe you will go out of your way on a Sunday morning to say hello to that one for whom you pray. Maybe you will take a turn when they are in the nursery and hold them close while their parents attend the worship service. Maybe you will show up at a school concert or an athletic event and cheer them on. Maybe you will bake some cookies or make a pie. Maybe, just maybe, that face or that name will become more than a face or a name. Maybe one day you will realize that little child has become your friend.

At a previous church, the adults were asked to be prayer pals with one of the children in the church. Charles was the type of man who was there to support the church, and so when the call went out for prayer partners, Charles raised his hand. He was given a young boy named Matthew. Charles prayed for Matthew. That was the commitment he made. But as time went by, Matthew's mom invited Charles to some family events, birthday parties, that type of thing. And every Sunday when Charles would see Matthew, he would smile, greet Matthew by name, and ask how he was doing. Charles was about 85 years old at the time. Matthew was a bit younger

than that. The years went by. Matthew grew up. Charles grew older. Their friendship grew deeper.

When Charles was just about to turn 90 years old, his family secretly arranged with the church to have a surprise reception in Fellowship Hall in honor of the big birthday in Charles' life. His children, their spouses, his grandchildren, even his great-grandchildren all snuck into church that day. Oh my, the smile on the face of dear Charles. How could the day be any more special. Well, here is how the day could be any more special. At the time of the anthem, Matthew, who now maybe ten years old, walked over to the piano. He sat down. He announced that he was playing a piece he wrote for his friend Charles. Matthew played a beautiful piece of music. We all basked in the glow of that wonderful moment. How could the day be any more special. Well, here is how the day could be any more special.

In a moment I will never forget...in a moment I will always treasure, Matthew finished playing the piano, and then he stood up. He had a big smile on his face. Matthew had grown quite a bit in the years he had known Charles, but he was still a pretty small guy. Matthew stood up, stretched up and stood on his tiptoes, trying to see where Charles was sitting. When Matthew caught sight of Charles, he raised his hand and waved at his dear friend. As soon as Charles saw Matthew, his friend, he stood up and stretched as tall he could stretch, which was pretty tall for a 90-year-old-man. Charles was beaming with the biggest smile you have ever seen. Then Charles reached out his hand and waved at his friend, his young friend named Matthew.

So yes, all I am asking you to do is take this picture of a frame home and put the face or the name of a child in that frame. When you see that face or that name, just say a prayer for them. Pray for them because you believe Jesus loves the little children. All I am asking is that you put a face or a name in this little frame. And yet even though that is all I am asking I won't be surprised if more than that takes place.

A few years ago I received a message that a couple was in town and they were having their tenth anniversary. They were Presbyterians and so they called the only Presbyterian Church in town to see if the pastor would help them renew their wedding vows on their tenth anniversary. This was on a Tuesday. They wanted to renew their vows the next day, a Wednesday. Even though it was short notice, I thought it would be nice to help them celebrate their anniversary. Plus, they were staying at a nice hotel in town, and wanted to renew their vows there at the hotel. It's this little hotel over in Watch Hill. You might know about it. It's called the Ocean House. I admit, that added to the fun of it. The wife had called, so I returned her call and we arranged the details. At that point I also found it this was the wife's idea, and the husband was going to be surprised.

That Wednesday I arrived at the Ocean House and entered the lobby. Even though I had on a suit, I knew I didn't really belong at the Ocean House. I was looking for the concierge to explain why I was there, when the wife walked in with the husband and their two beautiful young children. We had planned on meeting down on the beach, so we all were a little surprised, particularly the husband, who knew nothing about this at all. I quickly said hello to the wife, and when she introduced me to her husband she said, "Wayne is a pastor at the Presbyterian Church in town." Well, this explained absolutely nothing to the husband. He just looked at me with confusion in his eyes.

By the time we got down to the beach, the husband had figured things out. And now, instead of confusion in his eyes, there were tears. As we talked together, it became clear these two people, this man and this woman, were deeply in love with God, and they were certain God had brought their two lives together, that God had blessed them with their children, and that without God in their lives they would have no meaning or purpose. Their hearts were filled with

gratitude. They renewed their vows, we said a prayer, and then as the kids played in the surf, they shared a bit about their faith in God. At some point the husband said he grew up in a home where neither of his parents believed in God. But he felt some sort of call to learn about God. What does a kid do when they grow up in a home where neither of his parents believe in God? How is a kid ever going to learn about God? But this little boy felt a call to learn about God. Guess what he did?

He said when he was ten years old, he woke up one Sunday morning, got on his bicycle, and started riding around, looking for a church. The first church he found was a Presbyterian Church. He went in. The people welcomed this little ten-year-old boy with his bicycle, and they told him all about Jesus Christ. The husband said he was looking for Christ and he found him. I thought he meant he found Christ. What he meant was Christ found him. And his life has never been the same. Isn't it an amazing miracle that a ten-year-old boy rode his bicycle to a church and at that church they told that young man about the Jesus who loves the little children.

All I am asking you to do is take this picture of a frame home and put the face or the name of a child in that frame. As you do that, I want to end my sermon with a story that captures to me the incredible blessing that just might come your way if you do something like putting the face or the name of a child in a simple frame that has with it the words, "Jesus loves the little children." Here is the story. The power and the poignancy of this story never fails to touch my heart.

I know of a school-teacher named Miss Thompson. Every year, when she met her new students, she would say, "Boys and girls, I love you all the same. I have no favorites." Of course, she wasn't being completely truthful. Teachers do have favorites and, what is worse, most teachers have students that they just don't like.

Teddy Stallard was a boy that Miss Thompson just didn't like, and for good reason. He just didn't seem interested in school. There was a dead-pan, blank expression on his face and his eyes had a glassy, unfocused appearance. When she spoke to Teddy, he always answered in monosyllables. His clothes were musty and his hair was unkempt. He wasn't an attractive boy and he certainly wasn't likable.

Whenever she marked Teddy's papers, she got a certain perverse pleasure out of putting X's next to the wrong answers and when she put the F's at the top of the papers, she always did it with a flair. She should have known better; she had Teddy's records and she knew more about him than she wanted to admit. The records read:

1st Grade: Teddy shows promise with his work and attitude, but poor home situation.

2nd Grade: Teddy could do better. Mother is seriously ill. He receives little help at home.

3rd Grade: Teddy is a good boy, but too serious. He is a slow learner. His mother died this year.

4th Grade: Teddy is very slow, but well-behaved. His father shows no interest.

Christmas came and the boys and girls in Miss Thompson's class brought her Christmas presents. They piled their presents on her desk and crowded around to watch her open them. Among the presents, there was one from Teddy Stallard. She was surprised that he had brought her a gift, but he had. Teddy's gift was wrapped in brown paper and was held together with Scotch tape. On the paper were written the simple words, "For Miss Thompson from Teddy." When she opened Teddy's present, out fell a gaudy rhinestone bracelet, with half the stones missing, and a bottle of cheap perfume.

The other boys and girls began to giggle and smirk over Teddys gifts, but Miss Thompson at least had enough sense to silence them by immediately putting on the bracelet and putting some of the perfume on her wrist. Holding her wrist up for the other children to smell, she said, "Doesn't it smell lovely?" And the children, taking their cue from the teacher, readily agreed with "oo's" and "ah's."

At the end of the day, when school was over and the other children had left, Teddy lingered behind. He slowly came over to her desk and said softly, "Miss Thompson...Miss Thompson, you smell just like my mother . . . and her bracelet looks real pretty on you too. I'm glad you liked my presents." When Teddy left. Miss Thompson got down on her knees and asked God to forgive her.

The next day when the children came to school, they were welcomed by a new teacher. Miss Thompson had become a different person. She was no longer just a teacher; she had become an agent of God. She was now a person committed to loving her children and doing things for them that would live on after her. She helped all the children, but especially the slow ones, and especially Teddy Stallard. By the end of that school year, Teddy showed dramatic improvement. He had caught up with most of the students and was even ahead of some.

She didn't hear from Teddy for a long time. Then one day, she received a note that read:

Dear Miss Thompson:

I wanted you to be the first to know. I will be graduating second in my class.

Love,

Teddy Stallard

Four years later, another note came:

Dear Miss Thompson:

They just told me I will be graduating first in my class. I wanted you to be the first to know. The university has not been easy, but I liked it.

Love,

Teddy Stallard

And, four years later:

Dear Miss Thompson:

As of today, I am Theodore Stallard, M.D. How about that? I wanted you to be the first to know. I am getting married next month, the 27th to be exact. I want you to come and sit where my mother would sit if she were alive. You are the only family I have now; Dad died last year.

Love,

Teddy Stallard

Miss Thompson went to that wedding and sat where Teddy's mother would have sat. She deserved to sit there; she had done something for Teddy that he could never forget.¹

Friends, Jesus loves the little children. All I am asking you to do is take this picture of a frame home and put the face or the name of a child in that frame. I have no idea what God will have in store for you when you put a face or a name in this frame and you start to say prayers for the child in your picture frame. I have no idea what will happen. But I can't wait to hear. If I know God, and the love Jesus has for little children, we have some great things in store for us.

¹ Tony Campolo, *Who Switched the Price Tags*, 69-72.