

Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me...”

In the ancient world, children were often valued because they were useful. Children were valued because they would someday ensure the continuance of the clan, or because they would someday protect and care for the elderly, or because they would someday provide more hands for the farm. Children were valued because they were useful. But when they were not being useful, they were often considered to be in the way. *We can’t have all the children running around here. People are trying to learn from Jesus.* Jesus said, “No, let the children come to me... for to such belongs the kingdom of God.”

Today you will hear people say that *the children are our future*. We have all heard that. No one in their right mind would disagree with that. So bear with me for a moment while I argue against that. In the church, we do not value children for what they may someday do or be for us. We value children for who they are now to God. Jesus said that they are a part of the kingdom, so this morning on Children’s Sunday, we recognize children as a valued part of our church family.

At the end of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus said, “Go, make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” When is the right age to start making disciples? I believe that it begins in the cradle.

A few weeks ago we began a new year for our weekday school. Sometimes babies cry when they first come to our nursery. This is a great place for ministry. We are helping children learn that yes, mom and dad step away for awhile but they always come back. We are teaching children that family is more than mom and dad. This is also our home, God loves us, and we love you. Children get that.

Bishop Schnase told the story of an older gentleman in church one Sunday holding a baby. People came up to him saying, “Oh, is this your grandchild.” He said, “No. There is a couple that wants to join the church and I told them that I would take care of their son while they go through the new member class.” That is radical hospitality. But people came up to him saying, “I didn’t know you had grandchildren.” “I don’t...” “Why haven’t you brought him to church before?” “He is not mine.” “Oh he is so cute - he looks just like you.” Finally he said out loud: “This is not my kid!” And as soon as he said it he realized that he was wrong. This is God’s child. The church is a family. This is my child. So the next morning he came to the pastor’s office and said, “I want to change my will. I want to leave half of my inheritance to my biological children and half to my church children.” Preachers love a story with a happy ending.

I take this story to heart and I hope that you will too. Nursery workers, Sunday School teachers, children’s choir leaders, and older gentlemen holding babies – we are all apart of the Kingdom. Jesus said, “Let the children come to me.”

I have two bible studies that I lead here at Providence. One is on Wednesday evenings at 6:30. We are studying the book of James and everyone is invited. The other is on Wednesday morning at 10:00. It is for our weekday school. Every week we meet for an hour here in the sanctuary. For some of our weekday children, that will be the only experience they have with church in their formative years. This pulls at my heart.

Years ago in another town at another church, one day a woman knocked on my office door. She was angry. She said, "I have just learned that your weekday school is teaching my child bible verses." I said, "This is a church." She said, "I know that. We're here because we love the program and we love the teachers, but I'm afraid that this is going to influence my child. I want my child to be free to choose religion for himself." I thought about that for a moment. I am thankful that we live in a country where we have freedom of religion. But my generation has interpreted freedom of religion as meaning absence of religion. So, I said to this mother, "Look, your child is going to be influenced. There is no way that your child will grow up without being influenced. And when I think of what is out there in the world today that will influence your child, we want to be the strongest possible influence from the very beginning.

Friends, our children are growing up in a world where they will have instant access to wonderful things and terrible things. Absence of influence is not the answer. It is imperative that we combine the strongest possible influence from home with the strongest possible influence from Church, in order to guide our children in the right direction. Jesus said, "Let the children come to me."

To share with you how Providence is making a difference in children's lives, I want to yield part of my sermon time to Cindy Smith, or minister of children.

Making a Difference in the Lives of our Children ...

... How are we doing that here at Providence, as a church family and as Disciples of Christ? At the same time, I'd like for you to also consider the flipside. We are in ministry with our children, but they are also in ministry with us. As Reverend John said, we are providing a firm faith foundation that our children will carry throughout their lives, but I also love how our children 'minister' to us, touch our lives, and enrich our faith journey. I remember years ago taking a group of children from church to provide a meal, arts & crafts, and music to a group of children 'in need' (in need of food, love and care). It was a mini Vacation Bible School like Providence provides for St. John's. Our art activity involved glitter and glue, and there is really nothing on this planet that is messier than glitter and glue. But that was okay. The children were going to have a great time! We had over 100 children painting pictures that day, and glitter and glue was everywhere! I was so busy sweeping it up and helping the children, that I barely noticed a tug on my pants leg. The tug was persistent, so I finally looked down and the sweetest little face smiled and said, 'Can you hold still? I'd like to hug you?' Well the whole room stood still just like a slow motion movie. I could just imagine God saying that to us. 'Could you hold still for a moment? I'd love to pour out my love on you.'

For me, that's what Children's Ministry is all about ... pouring out God's love on our children. So, let's hold still and take a moment out of our busy lives to celebrate 'Children's Sabbath' and the role our children play in ministry.

This fall, we kicked off our Children's Sunday School with 'Promotion Sunday' and the theme: 'JUMP' which means 'Jesus Use Me Please!' We literally jumped into a new year of ministry. We signed a giant 'toe happy to come to Sunday School' banner, enjoyed foot cookies and even held a jump rope contest. I loved seeing the joy and excitement on our children's faces as they 'jumped' from one activity to the next. One mom told me that her son really enjoyed Sunday School. She asked him 'Why?' He said 'Because I jumped for Jesus today.' Now, all morning we had talked about jumping for joy. How wonderful that he thought of 'joy' and 'Jesus' and felt 'moved,' even literally. I think it is so important for our children to know that we can live joyful lives as Christians and that it can be fun to come to church, learn about God's Word and be excited about sharing our faith with others.

Our Children's Sunday School features a curriculum called 'Live B.I.G. – or Live your Belief in God' and over a three-year-period the stories take us all the way through the Bible. We also offer special Christian Education opportunities such as our 'Worship Readiness' class for 1st graders who are 'graduating' this morning and receiving their Bibles. They have been working with an amazing team of volunteer leaders and teachers to learn about worship so that it may be a very meaningful part of their faith journey. Boys and girls, we are so proud of you!

Our fourth and fifth graders participate in a pre-teen youth group called 'Junior Mints' which means 'Junior Methodists in training.' They meet on the 'second and fourth' Sundays and are using a study called 'Rock Solid Faith.' We'll focus on building a faith foundation while having fun with our 'rock' theme as we go on outings to 'climbing walls' and enjoy 'boulder tossing,' otherwise known as bowling. Junior Mints helps to prepare our children for confirmation and youth group.

Children's Ministry also includes family events and we have some great traditions here at Providence. We're about to enjoy a 'Fall Festival' next Sunday, the 'Mary & Joseph Advent Breakfast' is coming in November, and a Children's Christmas Pageant in December. As you know, in the spring we celebrate 'new life in Christ' with our Butterfly release and this summer, we enjoyed an amazing Vacation Bible School with over 300 children and volunteers.

Mission and service is an important part of our Children's Ministry as we mirror the values we have as a mission-minded church family for our children. Next Sunday, our Children will participate in a 'Mini-CROP Walk' during Sunday School to help fight hunger in our community and in the world, and soon we will host a 'Bethlehem Star Tree' to share God's love with children at Christmas-time.

I could go on and on about all of the things our children are doing here at church ... but this is not a report or a state of the union. It's merely a glimpse of God in motion. That's how I like to think of children ... as God in motion. I have twins, Keith and Katie, who are college students now and that was their nickname when they were little toddlers. We called them 'motion and commotion.' Well, Children's Ministry is a very 'active' endeavor.

That's where you come in. 'Making a difference in the life of a child' sounds like an expression, or a slogan, or even a bumper sticker. But, it is so much more than that.

Whether you have a child or grandchild involved in our Children's Ministry, you are vital part of this ministry. I think of the children of our church as 'our children' and our congregation as a 'church family.' It may be a little surprising to learn this morning that you have so many children! Relax, you are not 'raising' all of our church children alone. Together we are a family of faith.

We are called to be like Christ, to be his disciples, and in his example we can invite 'the little children to come to him' by loving them, encouraging them, and teaching them here and now. When you consider all that you will do in your lifetime, change a child's life for the better and you will truly know what it is like to have followed Jesus.

Making a difference in the life of a child. Providence made a difference in my life. I am a graduate of our weekday program, I was in Mrs. Betty Holland's first grade Sunday School class, and I am an alumni of the Providence children's choir. This church gave me a great start in life. So, I conclude this morning by saying thank you for all that you have done for me and others and for what you are doing and will do to bring our children to Christ.