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To put it in Texas terms, “You’re mighty welcome to use any and all of my ingredients; just make your own chili!”

For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes

INTRODUCTION

This morning, I am going to jump ahead in Luke as I begin a two-week series entitled, “Share the Joy with the Children.” I love kids—they say the funniest things. I heard of one little girl who was standing outside big church after Sunday School waiting for her parents. One of the ushers asked her what she had learned in Sunday School that morning. She replied that they had learned about Jonah and the Whale. The usher said, “Do you really believe that a man could be swallowed by a whale and live for three days?” The little girl said, “I sure do. It’s in the Bible and so I know it’s true.” The usher said, “How can you be certain that the story is true? Can you prove it?” The little girl was getting a little frustrated, but she said, “Well, when I get to heaven, I’ll ask Jonah.” The usher said, “Well, what if Jonah’s not in heaven?” Without hesitating, the little girl put her hand on her hips and said, “Then YOU can ask him!”

This morning, I want to give you the information about Share the Joy with the Children. Over the next month, I pray that every one of us will enter into this experience. The purpose of the STJWTC is to motivate our membership to trust God enough to make a sacrificial gift to continue to provide the space we need for our growing congregation.

Perhaps you have forgotten, but it was exactly one year ago today that we occupied this new building. It was on the last Sunday of April that we came together in this room to worship for the first time. Before we occupied this building, our worship attendance was averaging around 3,000 people each Sunday. Since the first Sunday of January, 2002, our average attendance in worship has jumped to over 4,000. Now that we have provided this first—class space, we must continue to provide educational space for our children and teenagers. Let me give you an update on where we stand on our giving.

First, the need: The cost of a new Worship Center was \$26,800,000. As of the end of March, you have given to Discover the Joy and Share the Joy a total of about \$24,300,000. When you were giving two or three years ago, the gifts were coming in faster than the construction bills were due, so Everett Brazeal invested that money in super-safe investments, so we earned an additional **\$979,000** interest. We have also been supplementing the building cost with some of our budget overage from last year, so we were able to pay down the principal by another **\$602,000**. So, the bottom line is, one year after entering this facility, we owe less than one million dollars on it—**\$919,000** to be exact!

That’s worth rejoicing about. To help you understand what a blessing that is—it would be like you moving into a brand new house that cost you \$200,000—and after living in that house for 12 months you have paid off your mortgage until you only owe \$6,800! In other words, we have paid for about 96% of this building.

At this time, we are in the middle of the much-needed renovation of our Children’s Building. The cost of this project is: \$2,700,000. So when you add this amount to what we still owe on this building, the total needed to eliminate our debt is about \$3.6 Million. Now, we have a line of credit set up with Southside Bank, and we can access it and pay interest. If you are keeping up with the “interest factor” we are way ahead in that category. We have paid about \$186,000 of interest and we have earned almost \$1 Million. However, I think there are better things to do

with the Lord’s money than to pay interest. You can use your interest payments as a deduction on your tax return, but there is absolutely no benefit to God’s church paying interest. So, in order to pay as little interest as possible, we are going to continue Share the Joy—but now we are going to share the joy—with the children.

Since most of this expense covers the renovation of the Children’s building, we have come up with a simple plan: Our children will seek a return on their “talents.” Isaiah prophesied that “a little child shall lead them.” (Isaiah 11:6). That’s what Share the Joy with the children is all about. Ms. Lanette, our Children’s Minister, has come up with a wonderful idea that is teaching our kids the valuable lesson of using their resources for God’s work. A couple of Sundays ago, our preschoolers were given special banks to fill up for Share the Joy. Our older children were all given a small amount of money and were taught the “parable of the talents” that Jesus gave in Matthew 25. In this story, the master gives each of his servants a certain number of talents—which was a form of currency. When the master returned, each servant was required to give an accounting of what they did with their money. The ones who returned MORE money to the master were praised—the one servant who returned the same amount was punished for being lazy. Our kids are spending the next few weeks using their money to “earn” more. You’ll be hearing about some of their strategies next week when I speak on this parable.

Then on May 12, Mother’s Day, the kids will bring their offering back to God. During the worship service that morning, each child will be able to bring their money forward and place it in special receptacles for this purpose. I’m expecting that some of our kids will bring to the Lord two and three times the amount they received. Some may even bring 50 or 100 times their original amount. These kids are smart and they are going to amaze each of us.

Then on the following Sunday, May 19, I’m asking all of the rest of us to follow the lead of our kids and to bring a special one time offering to help pay off this construction debt. You’ll be receiving a special envelope in the mail for this purpose. I hope you’ll start praying about giving an amount that will honor God and will reflect the kind of proportional sacrifice that our kids will be making. Finally, I’ll be asking everyone to make a commitment to give a regular amount each week or each month over the next 12 months. This amount should be in addition to your regular tithe or offering to our budget.

So, there’s the need and there’s the plan. That’s what Share the Joy with the Children is all about. This is not about raising money—it’s about teaching our kids to trust God. It’s about teaching each of us that God is Good and He has blessed each us in many ways. Our children are precious to Jesus, so they are precious to us. Let’s look at our text today and consider the topic, “Jesus loves the little children.” In Luke 18:15-17 we read: People were also bringing babies to Jesus to have him touch them. When the disciples saw this, they rebuked them. But Jesus called the children to him and said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like little child will never enter it.”

In this passage, we find an example, a warning, and a principle about children and ministering to children. First, let’s consider

1. THE EXAMPLE: OPEN YOUR ARMS AND WELCOME CHILDREN!

The parents in this passage were trying to get their children to Jesus. The disciples thought that Jesus was too important to waste His time with little children. The disciples thought that since these children were little people that they were of little interest to Jesus. I’m so glad that Jesus set the disciples straight and welcomed these children.

In the late 1800’s, a pastor in Chicago, Herbert Woolston, wrote a hymn that has been sung by millions of children. We all know the chorus, but the first verse goes: “Jesus calls the children clear, ‘Come to me and never fear. For I love the little children of the world. I will take you by the hand; lead you to a better land; for I love the little children of the world.’” Then the familiar chorus says, “Jesus loves the little children; all the children of the world; red and yellow, black and white; they are precious in His sight; Jesus loves the little children of the world.” Because Jesus loves the little children, we ought to love them, too!

Parents, the best thing you can do is to follow the example of the parents in this passage of scripture—bring your children to Jesus so He can bless them. If you have children, you have the awesome responsibility to see that your children learn about God. The very best thing you can give your child is the gift of knowing that they are loved by God.

My very earliest memories are of my family going to church. I can recall sitting in Sunday School and learning the songs and hearing the Bible stories. I can recall sitting in church—I liked to sit on the front row with my best friend, the preacher’s son. I didn’t always behave—and I even recall on one occasion when the preacher stopped in his sermon and told us to settle down and be quiet. I repented in a hurry, but I knew I was too late. As soon as I got home, my dad applied the board of education to the seat of my learning—if you know what I mean. I will always be eternally grateful that my parents took me to church and introduced me to God.

God has given me the wonderful privilege of leading many people to Christ, and I have forgotten most of those experiences. But I will never forget when both of my daughters came to know Christ. Jenni trusted Christ in the car on the way home from church one Sunday night. Laura Grace accepted the Lord after talking with Cindy in her bedroom one night. Those are the two most precious conversion experiences of my entire life.

I love the way Mark describes this scene. He writes, “And Jesus took the children in his arms, put his hands on them and blessed them.” (Mark 10:16) Remember, Jesus is on the way to Jerusalem to die, and the disciples don’t want to bother Him, but He calls the children to Himself. Isn’t that a beautiful picture? Those rough hands of a Carpenter became soft and tender as Jesus used them to hug and caress those children. Those hands that would soon be hammered to a cross were used to express affection to little toddlers. I’ve mentioned before that I don’t think it’s wise to use your hands to spank your child, or to grab or shake your child. Your hands should always be used to show affection to your child. Proverbs speaks of the “rod of correction.” When my girls were small we had a flat piece of board about twice the thickness of a ruler that we called “the trouble stick.” Like Jesus, hands should be used to affirm and love children.

Parents, what kind of spiritual heritage are you giving to your children? My generation of Baby Boomers were raised by the men and women who fought and won WWII. It was a tough time of rations and sacrifice. Many of our parents said, “I want my kids to have all the things I never had.” Now, my generation had the attitude, “we want our kids to have MORE of the things we had.” Now Generation X is having kids and they are wanting to have the best and newest for their kids, too.

One of the greatest American Patriots was Patrick Henry. Most of you recognize his famous quote, “Give me liberty or give me death.” That wasn’t the only noble thing he said. When he was preparing His last will and testament, he added this statement to be read to his children after his death:

“I have now disposed of all my property to my family. There is one thing more I wish I could give them, and that is the Christian faith. If they had that, and I had not given them one shilling, they would have been rich; and if they had not that, and I had given them all the world, they would be poor.”

Frankly, I love the bumper sticker that you see on RV’s that say, “We’re spending our kids inheritance.” You don’t have to leave your children or grandchildren a lot of money—they’ll only fight over it. Instead start giving them the one thing they really need and the one thing that will be important to them for all eternity—bring them to Jesus.

If we claim to be the Body of Christ, we must treat children the same way Jesus treated them. In other words, we must open our arms and welcome them. Our goal is to simply have the finest children’s ministry of any church in America. When new families with young children visit our church, they are more concerned about the children’s space and children’s ministry than they are about the preaching or the music of our church. Someone has said that a nursery is the handshake of the church. In the process of upgrading our facilities, we are also going to be upgrading our entire Children’s Ministry. We are doing a good job of reaching the children who are brought by their parents each Sunday, but as I drive through these neighborhoods surrounding our building, I see dozens of kids who aren’t attending church anywhere. We need to open our arms to those children because they are deeply loved by Jesus. I pray that God will place this burden on someone’s heart and you will do something about it. We need more adults to volunteer to reach and minister to children. Take a moment and look at the list of needs on the handout on your worship bulletin—complete it and then drop it off at the information desk after this service. There’s an example and also

2. THE WARNING: DON’T HINDER A CHILD WHO IS SEEKING GOD!

In Mark’s account of this, the scripture says that when Jesus learned that the disciples were trying to keep the kids away, He became indignant. That’s a nice word for “good and angry.” It’s the same word used when Jesus took a whip and drove the crooked money changers out of the Temple area. Jesus gets hot in a hurry when He sees people trying to keep little children away from Him. In verse 16, Jesus called the children to Him and said, “let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them.” That is a strong warning that we should heed.

Through the years, I’ve known adults, even parents, who kept their children from coming to Jesus. I’ve known children who came to Vacation Bible School and learned about how Jesus loves them and died on the cross for their sins. These precious children accept Christ at VBS, and when we contact the parents about their child’s decision for Christ, many times, the parents either are very unenthusiastic about their child’s decision, or they completely refuse for their child to follow Christ in baptism. How tragic—to keep you own child from coming to Jesus!

Or we have all heard of people who are so wicked that they use Christianity as a cloak to hide their true desire to hurt and abuse little children. Those people are committing the terrible sin of keep children away from Jesus. Or perhaps, a child looks up to you as a spiritual mentor, and that child sees you doing something that is not pure, or hears you uttering some vile profanity—by that act you are hindering that child from coming to Jesus. It is a serious mistake. How serious? Listen to the words of Jesus recorded in Matthew 18:5-6: Jesus said: “When you receive the children on my account, it’s the same as receiving me. But if you give them a hard time, bullying or taking advantage of their simple trust, you soon wish you hadn’t. You’d be better dropped off in the middle of the lake with a millstone around your neck. Doom to the world for giving these God-believing children a hard time!” (*The Message*)

Notice the two extremes of this warning. First, when we welcome children, we are welcoming Jesus. If the Lord Jesus walked into your Sunday School classroom today, would you stand up and welcome Him? Of course you would! Jesus said that whenever you welcome a child in His name, you are doing the same thing as welcoming Him!

On the other hand, if you hinder children from coming to Jesus, you are in real trouble. Jesus said it would be better for you to have a two ton mill stone died around your neck and then have that millstone heaved to the bottom of the lake—glub, glub. Those are strong words, but He said you’d be better off dead than to hinder children from coming to Him.

We have a great opportunity to influence children for Christ. Every child developmental expert will agree that children have “windows” of learning. If a child doesn’t master a particular lesson during this “window” they will never fully reach their potential in that area. For instance, if a child doesn’t learn to walk within the first two years of their life, they will never walk as good as they could have. If a child doesn’t learn to read by a certain age, they will never read as well.

The same is true spiritually. There are certain “teachable moments” for children to learn about Jesus and if they aren’t taught at that time, chances are they will never have the same spiritual growth potential. Studies have shown that of everyone who is a Christian as an adult, 85% of them trusted Christ before the age of 18. Of the people who reach the age of 25 without accepting Christ, only 1 in 10,000 will be saved. Of those who reach the age of 35, only one in 50,000 will be saved.

Let’s demonstrate these statistics right now. If you were saved before the age of 18 raise your hand now. Okay, if you were saved between the age of 25 and 35 raise your hand. If you were saved after the age of 35 raise your hand. Some of you probably didn’t raise your hand at all because you either have never been saved, or you don’t know when you were saved—either case, you can come to know Christ today.

That’s why it is important to teach our children and our teenagers about Christ.

Our new Children’s Minister, Lanette James, has affirmed that our goal at Green Acres is to lovingly introduce children to Christ and to lead them to a place where they trust Him as Savior and Lord. Pray for her and our Children’s Workers. And pray for Don Allensworth and our Student Workers. Don is passionate about seeing kids come to Jesus. He and his staff realize that if students reach the age of 18 without Christ, the odds are they will never come to know Jesus.

Someone has said that children are like wet concrete—whatever we write on their hearts at this age will be there forever. That’s true whether we influence them for good or for bad. I came across an interesting poem about this. It says:

Whatever you write
On the heart of a child,
No water can wash it away.
The sands may be shifted
When billows are wild
And the efforts of time may decay.
Some stories may perish,
Some songs be forgot,
But this engraved record,
Time changes it not.
Whatever you write
In the heart of a child
A story of gladness or care –
That heaven has blessed
Or that earth has defiled,
Will linger unchangeably there.
Who writes it has sealed it
Forever away.
And must answer to God
On that great Judgment Day.

All of us are writing something on the hearts of children, we must be careful that we don’t HINDER children from coming to Jesus—instead we must HELP them come to Christ! Finally, Jesus gives us

3. THE PRINCIPLE: YOU MUST RELATE TO GOD AS A CHILD

In verse 17 Jesus said, “I tell you the truth...” In the KJV, that phrase is always translated, “verily, verily, I say unto you.” Anytime you see those words, put up your spiritual antennae because Jesus is about to say something that has eternal significance. Then He continued, “anyone who will not receive the Kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.” Do you want to enter the Kingdom of God? Then you must become like a little child, and simply receive the King of the Kingdom by faith.

There is a difference between being “childish” and “childlike.” The Bible warns us many times about the dangers of spiritual immaturity, but there are some wonderful qualities of children that are necessary for us to enter the Kingdom. If you don’t reflect these qualities, you’ll never see the Kingdom. Compare this verse with what Jesus said in Matthew 18:3-4: Jesus said: “I’m telling you once and for all, that unless you return to square one and start over like children, you’re not even going to get a look at the kingdom, let alone get in. Whoever becomes simple and elemental again, like this child, will rank high in God’s kingdom.” (*The Message*) Let me share with you three simple qualities that describe a childlike spirit:

(1) A sense of awe and wonder

Tennyson wrote of going one morning into the bedroom of his grandson and of seeing the child “worshiping the sunbeam playing on his bedpost.” The older we get it seems we live in a world devoid of wonder—it becomes old, dull, gray and tired. But it is not the world that has changed, it is that we have lost that childlike sense of awe and wonder.

(2) A simple trust

When you were a child you never worried about where your next meal was coming from or what clothes you would wear. A child’s trust in his parents is simple and absolute—as should be our trust in our Heavenly Father. But it seems that when we grow up, we spend much of our time worrying about food, clothing, and other matters.

(3) A spirit of forgiveness

A child is not always treated fairly. Sometimes parents require things that aren’t possible, or siblings may agonize them—but have you noticed that little children are quick to forgive? Little children don’t carry grudges. They may fuss with one of their playmates—and thirty seconds later it is all forgotten and they are at play again. It’s only as we grow older that we develop this sensitivity to being wronged and an unwillingness to forgive.

Look again at these three traits: (1) A sense of wonder; (2) A simple trust; (3) A spirit of forgiveness—know them well because Jesus said that they are the passport into the Kingdom of God.

CONCLUSION

Let me finish with a true story that happened many years ago. It was on a cold, rainy morning in New Jersey. A ten-year-old boy wanted to attend church, even though his parents never attended. He walked in the cold rain to a little church in the community. The weather was so bad and the church so small that the 10 year old boy was the only one there—along with the preacher. Years later, after the boy became a man, he wrote about his experience on that Sunday morning. “I wondered what the Minister would do, but when the hour set for worship arrived the pastor walked into the pulpit and began the service as if the church was filled to capacity. He looked down at me with a smile of great sincerity and spoke earnestly to me and to God. When the time

came for the offering, the minister held out the offering plate and I walked to the front and placed my nickel in the plate. The pastor smiled at me and placed his big, gentle hand on my head. In walking back to my seat, I knew this man’s God was a real God, and that his faith was God-like in its monumental simplicity. It left a lump in my throat, and I cannot think of it today without emotion.” That little boy came back to church and started reading the Bible—his name was Cecil B. Demille, who would go on and produce some of the finest Christian movies in history including the Ten Commandments, The King of Kings, and The Sign of the Cross. Who can calculate the influence of this man because one preacher cared enough to welcome a little child to Christ?

Every Sunday, we have the chance to influence children—who will go on and have a greater influence than any of us can ever imagine. Who knows? We may have the next Billy Graham among our children, or the next Jonas Salk, or a future governor or president among our kids. Let’s accept them. Let’s love them. Let’s treat each one of them as if they are the most precious person on earth, because in God’s eyes, they are!

OUTLINE

1. THE EXAMPLE: OPEN YOUR ARMS AND WELCOME CHILDREN!

“And Jesus took the children in his arms, put his hands on them and blessed them.” *Mark 10:16*

2. THE WARNING: DON'T HINDER A CHILD WHO IS SEEKING GOD!

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1. A sense of awe and wonder
2. A simple trust
3. A spirit of forgiveness