

# Sermon Text for February 23, 2025

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

*II Kings 2:23-24 and Matthew 19:13-15*

*“Let the children come unto me”*

Welcome to preschool Sunday. What a privilege it is for us to be able to be entrusted with some formative time in the life of your child. We don't take that for granted and we recognize the trust that you have put on us and we hope that we are able to use the time that we have with them to shape them and mold them closer to the image that Jesus would want them to be. This preschool began in with Jean Pontz leading the way. Then Beth Feiler took over, and then Lynn Underhill and now it is in the capable hands of Heather Reynolds. Let's have the teachers stand and recognize them and give them thanks.

I have been here and doing chapel with your kids for 14 years now, which means that when I am at the church's table at the fair I see some of my earliest students who have graduated from high school. That is crazy to me. In 2014 the leadership of this church made it a goal to strengthen this preschool and to bring its ministry more in line with the ministry of the church so that there would be crossover and overlap and we did that with our first preschool Sunday on February 23 of that year. In a letter that I wrote to the parents that year I stated: "Our church leadership at their retreat last week made children and youth a priority for this year and we are hoping that this would be a great first step in getting the kids and all of you aware of how important you are in the eyes of Christ and First Presbyterian." That is the goal of this Sunday, that Jesus would be glorified and that you as parents would know how important you are in the eyes of Christ and in our eyes as a church as well. If you haven't felt loved before today by a church, I pray that today would be the start of that.

The history of our preschool reflects our commitment to the Gospel which demands us to be deliberate in our care of children. If you have been to the last two preschool Sundays you would have heard a sermon on Matthew because we have been making our way through this Gospel since January of 2023. Last week we looked at Scriptures which addressed divorce and celibacy so I am so grateful that the Scriptures we have this week seem to align much nicer than last week.

This week Jesus makes a statement on his perspective on children which was very different from that of his disciples and very different from that of the world. Which is good, because the church ought to be different from the world in how it treats children and also how it shows mercy and compassion to the least of these, including children, but not just children.

Today, Jesus lays the foundation for all things we do here in this church, and specifically in respect to children. Let's read.

## **READ**

We have two very different Scriptures today. The first was a bit shocking where you have a prophet of the Lord cursing children in the name of the Lord and the result is immediate. It seems like more of the perspective that the world has, children are better seen and not heard, and when they act up you drop the hammer. That may also have been some of the experiences that you may have had in churches, where your experiences created a type of PTSD, or what some call loosely church hurt, that as an adult you promised yourself you would never step into church again.

Churches will make the headlines when horrific things happen in them because they are meant to be places of safety and growth and learning. My experiences in church may be similar to yours. I grew up as a missionary kid so lived all over the world but spent some time in Southern Jersey, graduated from Atlantic City High School, go Vikings. There isn't much I remember about church when I was growing up except knowing that I didn't want to be there and my parents making me go, for which today I am eternally grateful. That is the biggest gift you can give to your children, and to yourself, make them go to church. I promise you they will not thank you now, maybe not ever, but for me I was grateful when I got older that they made me go.

I do remember Ms. Nancy taking me and one of my three brothers aside and scolding us for the racket we were making. I remember sitting up front with 5 or 6 of us and we all went to different schools, but we looked forward to being together on Sunday. I remember in high school a youth leader named Big Al who took me under his wing and it wasn't until I was a senior in high school where I heard God speak to me and he told me to follow him, and so I did. But if my parents had not brought me to the feet of Jesus, if my parents had not brought me to church, I know things would have turned out different, so I am eternally grateful for the work that the church has done in my life when I was a child through all the way when I was a youth.

But this Scripture begins with parents who are bringing their children to Jesus to be blessed. It all has to begin here. There are a lot of reasons why parents today would not want to bring their children to church. I have often heard that Sunday is a family day and one where we just want to be together as a family without any schedule or events or activities. We live such a frenetic life that the one thing we don't seem to ever have enough of together is time. My response would be what better family time can you have than to be together in church?

Some would also say a reason for not attending is that the state of the church today is troubling. Hypocrisy is so visible as Christians have aligned themselves with movements and policies that are not merciful and just and fall very very short of compassion or churches have aligned themselves with movements that disregard sin and seem to create a society where there is a free for all. As parents you don't want to be associated with a group of people who are don't show mercy and compassion because of what they support. I understand that. I don't want to be associate with that type of church either.

But probably the greatest barrier which prevents families from coming to church are these disciples that we find who are trying to prevent the parents from bringing their children to Jesus. These disciples who spoke sternly to the parents. These disciples who were probably married and even may have had children of their own admonish these parents as if Jesus had more important things to do than to waste his time with children.

It is like when a baby cries in church, I am so pleased with the number of babies we have that are making a beautiful cacophony which reflects the life that is present in this church. But if you have not been to this church before but another church and a baby cries and the parents get that look. You know that look, every parent who has been to church someplace other than here knows that look. You don't need words with that look. It is a stern look.

When I was growing up this gang of kids that we had in church we would always race over to our fellowship hall which was across the church yard so that we could be the first in line of the cookies of Fellowship Hall. We were oblivious to the fact that some people thought that was a problem. Until one Sunday we go there and we had gathered our stash and like squirrels we were munching away when a woman went up to the pastor, pointed at us, and said loud enough for everyone to hear: They are eating our food! The pastor smiled at us and said to her, that's okay, we'll get more. The church tends to sometimes act more like that prophet who was bothered by the children making fun at him and so made them snacks for bears than how Jesus responds to his disciples and the parents.

After seminary my wife and I were called to serve on the mission field just outside of Naples Italy in an orphanage for children. The orphanage was founded in 1905 and was right on the bay of Naples with Vesuvius menacingly watching over it. It had been a villa owned by the Prince Monaco and when a Methodist pastor took it over it reached its peak with over 500 children living there after WWII. When we moved there in 1994 there were 60 children and we lived in the boys wing. There was a school that we ran which had 300 children enrolled. Every day, not once a week, but every day we had chapel and I taught them not only the 10

commandments but also a song so that they could learn the books of the Bible in order. To this day if I have to find a difficult book of the Bible I sing that song in Italian in my head to find it.

It was in the midst of one of the most populated cities in the world and you would come from the busy streets and open the main gate and one view was the bay of Naples and the other was a palace, the main palace, and on the façade of this palace were the words: *Lasciate i fanciulli venire a me*. Let the little children come unto me. This was our life, two of our daughters were born in that place, and this is what Jesus responds to these disciples, to this church, to this world that might want to tell us that children play a role, but not one that is primary in any way shape or form. Jesus says, we say here at this church, let the little children come unto us. Let them know Jesus in a way that will resonate with them for the rest of their lives and they will not experience any kind of sternness simply because they are children.

Jesus overrides his disciples and their approach to children and shows them a new way. Not because they are our future, but because they reflect our present. This is who we are as people who invest in children. In Matthew 18:3 Jesus tells his disciples that they are to become as children if they have any chance of inheriting the kingdom of God. The child represents for us what it means to be helplessly dependent on the Father in heaven.

We treasure this Scripture because it reveals to us Jesus' real feeling about children. He loved them. We believe that being a follower of Jesus, and Christianity in general, offers a family religion in which both male and female and all ages can participate together. That a teacher like Jesus should be asked to impart a blessing on children was not unusual in his day. What was unusual was Jesus' willingness to take children seriously as persons and to propose them as models of human behavior.

You know, I feel for you raising children today. The pressure you have on you begins early. All of our kids are in their 20's and we felt the pressure to ensure that they did all the things that would set them up to either get into the best college, or give them some advantage once they get out of high school. They all participated in varsity sports and that is a whole other thing in dealing with pressure, travel teams, AAU, tennis tournaments. Parents are all looking at some advantage on how to raise their kids.

I can tell you just from the social science perspective there is a huge disadvantage to not getting yourself and your children into church. Children and youth who attend church with their parents are known to have a distinct advantage. That isn't the reason why we would encourage you to try any of the 7 churches in Strasburg, the reason is Jesus, but if Jesus isn't enough for you, then just think of the advantage you are providing your children by coming to church.

We have a class of 7 seventh grade girls who are going through confirmation this year. At the end of this journey they are each to profess their faith in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. For the most part they grew up in this church because their parents insisted in bringing their children where Jesus would be present and active and be able to bless them on a day in and day out basis. They are going to be better equipped to face the world than any other 7<sup>th</sup> grader who hasn't been on this journey through church with Jesus as their Savior and with a community at their back. Just ask their parents, they'll tell you.

The living of life together finds its beginning in how you treat children and how much value you place upon their present and their future. May God bless you and keep you as you raise your children in this world under the loving gaze of our Savior. Amen.