

## **“The Kids are Watching”**

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<sup>35</sup>[Jesus] sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” <sup>36</sup>Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, <sup>37</sup>“Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

<sup>38</sup>John said to him, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.” <sup>39</sup>But Jesus said, “Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. <sup>40</sup>Whoever is not against us is for us. <sup>41</sup>For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.

<sup>42</sup>“If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea. <sup>43</sup>If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. <sup>45</sup>And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell. <sup>47</sup>And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, <sup>48</sup>where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched. <sup>49</sup>“For everyone will be salted with fire. <sup>50</sup>Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.” (Mark 9:35-50)

One of the things that family counselors preach consistently is that it is not a good idea for parents to fight in front of their kids. Studies have shown, for example, that kindergartners who witnessed their parents fighting frequently were more likely to struggle with depression and anxiety by the seventh grade.<sup>1</sup> The more intense the arguments are, the more intense the ill effects are likely to be.<sup>2</sup> The science is pretty undeniable on this: whatever the children learn by watching and hearing grownups fight, those lessons are bad -- frightening, disorienting, and ultimately unhealthy.

This ethical truth points to Jesus’ probable intentions here in the 9<sup>th</sup> chapter of Mark. On the way to Capernaum, his disciples had been fighting over authority. They tried to keep it quiet, but Jesus knew what they were saying. He knew they were arguing over who was the most important, who had the strongest voice, who had the most influence in the group. Instead of chastising the disciples directly, Jesus takes a different approach. He stops, takes a seat, and then, the scripture says, “*he took a little child and put it among them.*” More specifically, Jesus took the child into his arms and put her on his lap. “*Whoever welcomes [a little child like this] welcomes me,*” Jesus explains, “*and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.*”

The disciples, however, were not at all interested in this lesson about humility or hospitality, or whatever else it was that Jesus was saying. And they were certainly not

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.parentmap.com/article/arguing-front-kids-john-gottman>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.hindustantimes.com/sex-and-relationships/don-t-fight-in-front-of-your-kids-you-can-scar-them-for-life/story-U4dGYtECPk1WnOR12zW5NJ.html>



worried about the little kid on Jesus' lap. They had bigger fish to fry. They had adult problems that needed adult attention. Apparently a man was casting out demons in Jesus' name, even though he had not been approved or endorsed by the core group of the disciples. The Jesus movement was growing and other groups were purporting to do ministry in the name of Jesus, and the disciples didn't like it. They were the original band, and they didn't like others playing their tune without permission. They presented it as a new debate, but it was really just a continuation of the argument they were having on the road. It was still a fight over about authority and turf.

This time, Jesus does answer the question directly. "Don't stop him," Jesus said. "If he is able to cast out demons in my name, then he must be doing something right." And that was almost certainly the case, because we have to interpret "casting out demons" as an act of help, kindness, and mercy. For example, if the so-called demon was causing a fever, then stopping the fever was an act of healing. If the demon was causing seizures, then stopping the seizures was an act of compassion. If the demon was making a person hurt himself or others, then ending that pain was an act of peace. "Whoever is doing something like that is basically on our side," Jesus said. *"Whoever is not against us is for us."*

Then Jesus turned back to the child on his lap. The real lesson, it seems, was not about exorcisms or authority or who was in the club and who was not. The real lesson was a warning about fighting in front of the kids. *"If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me,"* Jesus said, *"it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea."* The adult haggling over who the star disciples were, and who had the right to call the shots in the church, was becoming a real problem. Not only were their fights missing the point, those petty and selfish fights were teaching bad lessons.

One of my Christian Education professors in seminary would often repeat and return to a simple lesson that I've never forgotten, because there is no way to deny its inherent truth. What she said was, "Everything the church does teaches." The lesson might be good. It might not be so good. But everything the church does says something and teaches something. Jesus did not like what the disciples were teaching with their actions and their petty arguments. With the sternest possible language, he warned them to be careful that the lessons they were enacting could be harmful to the health of the next generation – that they better be careful, because the kids were watching.

The night of Easter Sunday about ten years ago, two young men were gunned down in a drive-by shooting in Rocky Mount, NC. Both were victims of drug and gang violence that was on the rise in the city, and both of them were just 22 years old. The faith community tried to rally around the loss and come together as best it could, and I, as the pastor of First Presbyterian Church, was invited to be among the pastors who would preside over the funeral service.

When I arrived at the church, I realized that all of the pastors would be seated up on the chancel of the church. That was no small detail, because 25 - 30 pastors had been invited. From that vantage point, we looked out at least 700 stunned and grieving people. And we saw them all, because in that tradition, the service began with a viewing of the two caskets up at the front of the church. I remember well watching as family after family made the somber walk by those two young men who had been so violently and senselessly struck down in the prime of their lives. Grown women crumpled to the ground crying and wailing.

Adult men broke down in tears, overwhelmed by sorrow. It was the most visceral and full-bodied expression of corporate grief that I had ever seen.

But soon my attention shifted to something else that I saw happening... something less obvious but even more disturbing. It was the children. There were children everywhere, of every age and stage -- boys in suits, little girls in pretty Sunday dresses, babies cuddled in their mothers' arms. And not one of them was making a sound. Only once in the entire service do I recall hearing a baby cry, and then only for the briefest moment. The children were completely silent. They seemed completely confounded. Whatever this was, they knew it wasn't good. Whatever it was, they knew it was scary. And in their innocence, in their vulnerability, they did the only thing they could think of to do. They looked up at their parents, their aunts, their uncles, the men and women who were holding their hands in this line. I watched as these kids silently pleaded with their eyes, *"Please tell me what all of this means. Please show me what to do."*

Sadly, I knew what those kids did not -- that the parents didn't have any idea what to do either. In the fact of that kind of tragedy and grief, they had nothing. Even so, those adults were teaching that day, because everything the church does teaches. And there were some very faithful lessons taught that day. Those children learned that there are things that happen in this world that are scary, that do not make sense. They learned that, when these things happen, it is OK to cry. It is OK to be sad. It is OK to show emotion. And, in certain cases, it is OK to admit -- through word and action -- that we do not have it all together, and to try and act otherwise would be a lie. Those kids did not learn those lessons in a classroom, or in a sermon. They did not read them in a book. They learned them from adults who were acting out a mature and honest faith, and they did it knowing that their kids were watching.

It is both a lesson and a warning for us -- those of us who are supposed to be mature -- to be very careful in the lessons we teach, especially when we are arguing about what is right and what is wrong. What kind of lessons are we teaching our children when we complain about the inconvenience of masks, as if our periodic, slight, personal discomfort is somehow more important than the safety and health of an entire society? What kind of lessons are we teaching our children in the way we argue about race, gender, the protection of our planet, refugees at our borders, and the respect we have for democracy and the rule of law? What kind of stumbling blocks are we throwing at our children's feet... what kind of millstones are we hanging around our children's necks... in the unhealthy ways we are arguing about these issues?

If we want the next generation to be open to new possibilities, then we need to practice being open to new possibilities. If we want our children to be welcoming, then we need to practice hospitality. If we want our children to have healthy spiritual lives, then we need to invest our time and talent and energy and treasure into our own spiritual health and discipline. If we want our children to be giving and generous, then we ourselves have to be giving and generous. If the church has a calling, if there is any mission we share here in this place, it is to share the teaching of Jesus on how we should act, how we should disagree, how we should care, how we should serve, and even how we should admit when we are wrong. It is a precious responsibility we have been given, to somehow exhibit in our own lives, what the kingdom of God is all about. And we better be careful about how we do it, because the kids are watching.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.