



# Good Shepherd Lutheran Church

## **“Receive the Child ”**

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*“Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me,  
and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent  
me” (Mark 9:37).*

September 23, 2012

**Collect of the Day**

O God, whose strength is made perfect in weakness, grant us humility and child-like faith that we may please You in both will and deed; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Do you ever find yourself feeling grateful that your growing up years are behind you? Do you ever find yourself grateful that you made it safely through the perils and dangers of childhood and adolescence mostly intact and healthy? Are you ever grateful that you don't have to do that again today, with all the dangers that our children must confront?

As a boy, when I came home from school, that was pretty much the end of the interactions with classmates. I could completely relax and take down my guard and be myself. Today, when kids get home from school, the banter continues mostly uninterrupted through text messages and facebook. So the possibility of the hurtful and the untrue, the misunderstood and the slanderous . . . the possibility of all that actually increases after school.

Some of my classmates were drinking in high school but drugs were the stuff of remote myth. I never saw any and made it through college without ever being offered any. Neither of my daughters could say the same by their second year at Watertown High School.

As a boy sex remained mostly shrouded in mystery. I had a vague, inaccurate view of how it all worked. With the internet, what are the odds of that with our children today?

Someone compiled a list comparing the top discipline and behavior problems occurring in California public schools in 1940 and then, more recently.

The 1940's list:

Today's list:

1. Talking
2. Chewing gum
3. Making noise
4. Running in the halls
5. Getting out of turn in line
6. Wearing improper clothing
7. Not putting paper in wastebaskets

1. Drug and Alcohol abuse
2. Pregnancy
3. Rape
4. Robbery, assault and burglary
5. Arson, Vandalism,
6. Gang Warfare
7. Abortion

You might conclude that never in history have childhood and adolescence been so treacherous as they are today. There is a sense in which that is true. On the other hand, 2,000 years ago in the Mediterranean world many infants never even made it to childhood . . . because their parents simply abandoned them as newborns.

One time Jesus confronted and challenged that culture in a most dramatic way. They are heading back to Capernaum where Peter lived and where they had a home base. On the way, for the second time, Jesus foretells his death and resurrection. Clearly, the disciples don't get it, but they understand enough of it that they don't want to ask and follow-up questions.

Time passes. The uncomfortable topic recedes. They walk on. Along the way, the disciples start bantering something about. Actually they were arguing about who among them was the greatest. I suspect they assumed Jesus was out of earshot. I probably make that assumption too sometimes . . . and so do you. He never is.

But imagine: he had been talking about being delivered into the hands of men who would kill him and they were arguing about who among them was the greatest. He's talking about self denial and sacrifice and they're arguing about who's number one. I'd like to think that it was just some light hearted, humorous teasing, but clearly Jesus was not amused.

When they arrive in Capernaum, he asks them about it: "What were you arguing about back there?" Silence. Can you see them out there . . . grown men, hanging their heads like school boys, avoiding eye contact, kicking at the dirt. They are ashamed

of themselves. He gathers them around him inside the house and sits down. It's a signal that there's going to be some formal instruction now. This is an issue that he must address. And he says to them, "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all."

We've heard it a thousand times. We've heard it so many times that we don't hear it anymore. But at that time, it was a stunning reversal of values, a radical lesson on status. It's such a dramatic shift that he feels compelled to come back to it and reinforce it. In chapter 10, he says to them, "You know how the Gentiles work, how they lord it over one another and how *their* rulers lord it over them. It shall not be so among you. Whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all."

In Matthew 23 he says, "Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted." It's such a stunning reversal of values that he continually comes back to it. In John he teaches it again in a memorable way, by getting on his hands and knees before them and washing their feet (Jn. 13:12-17).

Then, in that house in Capernaum, a strange thing happens. A child wanders into the room. I don't know how old the child is, but in my imagination I see a toddler, maybe one and a half years old, that delightful age when children toddle about, and want to touch everything and examine everything, and are completely comfortable with themselves, their bellies sticking out and maybe a little snot running from their noses. You hear them breathing through their mouths and you cannot resist waving or smiling or patting them on the head. I suspect this toddler is an escapee from his mother, intruding into this very serious, very adult moment: a group of men standing around, heads down, deep in thought, feeling some discomfort and shame, and in front of them a man seated, looking at them intently, talking to them – all very serious adult business. The one teaching pauses, but not to scold the child nor to wait until the little intrusion is removed. Rather, he pauses only to stand the child before his disciples, facing the half-circle of men. Then he pulls the child in his lap and wraps his arms around it and says, "Whoever welcomes one such little one welcomes me."

It's the perfect little sermon illustration. The disciples were after status and authority. The toddler has no status and no authority. The toddler cannot touch everything it wants to touch

or eat everything it wants to eat or go wherever it wants to go. In that culture, the toddler was under the authority of every adult. Not even slaves had to answer to everyone. And so that child represents the lowest order on the social scale. And Jesus tells his disciples “Whoever welcomes one such little one, welcomes me.” It’s about service. It’s about humility.

There’s more: Jewish culture valued children very highly, but the wider Greek-Roman culture in which Jewish culture lived often did not. In fact, there was a brutal and widespread custom in the Mediterranean world of “casting out,” abandoning infants who were unwanted. You simply put the baby out and it died of exposure, or someone picked it up and raised it to be sold as a slave. The practice was fairly widespread and it was based on the common assumption that a child was a non-entity, a non-person *until* that is, until the father received it as a member of the family. If the father wanted a son, he simply didn’t touch his infant daughter and she would be cast out.

Archaeologists uncovered a letter written one year before the birth of Jesus. It’s from an Egyptian worker named Hilarion writing to his wife who was about to give birth. It’s a chatty, loving letter, but at the end he says, “If by chance you bear a son, let it be, if it is a girl, cast it out.”

So what Jesus did by welcoming the child was dramatic. His act of receiving that toddler and holding it in his arms – surely it was a girl, just to punctuate the point – that act was the official action that a father would take at the time, designating a child for life rather than death, accepting it into his family rather than casting it out into the elements.

Today we would be appalled if a child were simply cast out and we would fiercely prosecute the parents. And yet, legally, we turn a blind eye when it happens to an unborn child. In our nation the unborn child is a non-person with no legal rights (not even the right to life), unless, that is, the mother and father decide they want the child. If for whatever reason they don’t want the child . . . maybe it’s an inconvenient time to have a baby, or they really wanted a male rather than a female, or a baby that didn’t have any impairments . . . then they can abort the child, our version of “casting out.”

God doesn’t distinguish between the born and the unborn like we do. The Bible teaches our humanity, our personhood, our value in God’s sight does not depend on our status or authority, our size or weight, our stage of development, whether we’re male

or female, quick learners or delayed. It depends on the love of God and he loves them all. He treasures them all. Jesus scooped up that little intrusion and said, "Whoever receives the child in my name receives me."

I think the early church got the message because one of the first things the early Christian church did as it spread out into non-Jewish lands was to start scooping up the unwanted children. Christians literally picked up and adopted the discarded babies. Historians say legal adoption (not as slaves but as children and heirs) had its origin in the early Christian church. And the idea of orphanages for abandoned, abused or unwanted children, that's a Christian invention too, the church's response to this text and others like it.

And I think this text is one of the reasons why pour a lot of resources into our school, preschool and day care, to receive the children in Jesus name. And it's why we pour our time into the Sunday School and the Vacation Bible School, and it's why just about every Sunday evening, our high school youth know there's a safe place here for them, for Bible Study and fellowship and service, a place where they are known and loved and welcomed. It's all part of trying to duplicate what Jesus did that day in Capernaum.

As you might imagine not everyone liked what Jesus was saying and doing. Not everyone liked his ministry to the poor, the sick, the sinners, because these people were thought of as a problem and a burden on society, and wished they would simply disappear. We do that too. We believe all those unwanted babies would be a terrible drain on society and are relieved that they just sort of disappear. (But you know; that's not how abortion works. They don't just disappear.) For his part Jesus serves the unwanted and marginalized; he serves them like a slave and mandates his disciples do the same. Jesus teaches all human life is sacred . . . that no matter how small or sick or unproductive a person is, he or she is worthy of our care and compassion, worthy of our most precious resources.

Finally, have you had an abortion? Did your girlfriend or wife or daughter have an abortion? Let me remind you of God's Son Jesus Christ who came to those who thought they were unforgiveable and unlovable. He came to those who knew they had done nothing to deserve God's love. He came with grace and forgiveness and healing. He came with powerful words of hope and redemption. He came with a heart full of love and he came

intent on dying on a cross for all who knew they were sinful and needed forgiveness.

And that is what Jesus, I think, means also to convey in our text. The children are loved by him even though they have done nothing to earn his love. He would receive them all, every one.

The disciples in that room with Jesus needed to hear that and see it. They were working so hard at the things adults work at – getting ahead, succeeding, being number one. They needed to hear the lesson of humility and service and life.

Our children today need to hear that . . . that there is a place for them in the strong arms of the Lord, the one who treasures them, the one who willingly went to the cross to die for them, the one into whose name they are baptized. Amen.



**GOOD SHEPHERD LUTHERAN CHURCH**

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