



**VILLAGE**  
**CHURCH**  
Presbyterian (USA)

## Giving Thanks for Children

SCRIPTURE:  
Mark 10:13-16

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October 22, 2023 — Sermon by Rev. Dr. Rodger Nishioka

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Jesus is in a house in Capernaum and some people, likely parents, are bringing their children to him. The scripture says it is so Jesus might touch the children. It's a form of blessing. We do this as a church. On Tuesday, at our celebration and sending for Carol and Tom Are, we put them in the center of the Sanctuary and we gathered around them and laid our hands on them to bless them.

These people were bringing their children so that Jesus would bless their children. Then the disciples intervene and the scripture says they spoke sternly to them. They yelled at them and scolded them for wasting Jesus' time on some children. But you can't really blame them. In the ancient world, children were not loved and valued as they are now. Today, we understand human development—from infancy to adulthood, we grow and develop and mature. There was no such understanding in Jesus' day. Infants were thought to be selfish and demanding. Young children were the same. They were often ignored to break their spirit. They were more nuisance than blessing until they reached adulthood at 13 years old—at their bar mitzvah for boys and bat mitzvah for girls. Then they were seen as people.

So no wonder the disciples see bringing children to Jesus as a waste of time. And yet, once again, Jesus changes their understanding. He becomes indignant and ends up scolding the disciples. He once more changes the world order. Then Jesus says something extraordinary. He says, "Let the little children come to me for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs." Jesus says that the kingdom of God belongs to children. Jesus says children get God in ways that we adults do not. We need children to better understand God.

Rev. Dr. Kathy Dawson is an expert on children and ministry. She teaches at Columbia Seminary in Atlanta, Georgia and on most Sundays, she is a Sunday school teacher at Oakhurst Presbyterian Church near the campus.

De Andre is one of her students and truth be told, one of her favorites. He is a very active third grader who barely sits still through the Bible story. As soon as he is set free, he heads to the play area and explodes with exuberance. So Kathy was surprised one morning when after the Bible story time, De Andre went directly to the coloring area and gathered a piece of paper, some markers and diligently and intently went to work. Kathy went and sat down next to him and said, "De Andre, what are you doing?" He said to her, "I'm drawing a picture of God." Kathy smiled and said, with her Ph.D. in theology from Princeton, "You know, no one knows what God looks like." De Andre—without missing a beat—said, "Well, they will in a minute."

Jesus says, "Let the little children come to me. Do not stop them. For it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs."

That's why our hearts break especially when children are harmed. That is why I believe God's heart breaks in a unique way when children are hurt, neglected, abused or killed.

Nearly 25 years ago, I was privileged to be traveling with ruling elder Marj Carpenter, moderator of the 207th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA). The moderator is the highest elected officer of the Presbyterian Church. We were in northern Uganda visiting sister churches. The moderator desperately wanted to visit with church members across the border in Sudan but due to the civil war there, the last word we heard was that it was not safe,

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so we stayed in Uganda.

At 3 a.m., I was awakened by pounding on my hotel-room door. I got up to answer the door and a pastor was there telling us we were going to a refugee camp in Sudan and to be ready to leave in a few minutes. We traveled for nearly four hours crossing into Sudan as the sun was rising and then driving for five more hours to a refugee camp.

Our group was welcomed into the refugee camp, which housed nearly 2,000 Sudanese Christians, mostly Presbyterians. They had fled their homes and farms because marauders were killing women, men and children and burning their crops and villages trying to force them to leave their homeland.

They were told the American Presbyterian moderator was coming to see them and had built a stage in the middle of an open, dry, dusty area. For our comfort, they had put up a tarp for shade. We sat in the shade on the stage along with other pastors from Sudan and Uganda. I remember it being stiflingly hot—even in the shade. I remember feeling sweat dripping down my face and body just sitting there. There were flies everywhere and we were surrounded by hundreds of people who were sitting and standing around us in the sun. There were many prayers, speeches, songs and sermons given—most of which were spoken in a language I could not understand. I remember thinking about the comfort of the hotel room I had left early that morning. Even in the shade, I remember feeling sweat dripping down my face and body. I was miserable.

At one point, the moderator leaned over to me and asked, “Rodger, what is wrong with this picture?” I replied, “I am way too hot.” “No,” she said. “Look around. What is wrong here?” “That man is preaching way too long,” I said. “No!” she said more emphatically. “Look around. What is wrong?” Out of frustration, I said to the moderator, “Marj, I don’t know. Tell me!” “What do you hear?” she asked. “I don’t hear anything except all these flies!” I responded. “Exactly,” she said. “Look at the babies.” I looked out and saw babies being held by mothers, fathers and older siblings all around us. “Madam moderator, they’re all

quiet,” I said to her. “Rodger,” she said. “Don’t you see? They are too weak to cry. They do not have the strength to cry. They are dying, Rodger, in their mothers’ arms.”

I looked around. She was right. Their mothers were malnourished so they did not have enough milk. The babies were dying. Then Marj said to me, “The next time you are preaching somewhere or on an airplane and you hear an infant cry, you give thanks to God that the baby has the strength to cry. And you pray for the children and the mothers and fathers of the Sudan.”

After the long service, we were escorted through gates into a more secure area of the camp. There, we shared a meal with the Sudanese Christian leaders. They insisted we eat first. It was a simple meal and delicious and I was hungry. I remember Marj nudging me and telling me to stop eating. I told her I was hungry and she said, “Rodger, leave as much food as you can on your plate. After we leave, they will eat the rest. I imagine this is more food than many of these people have seen in days.” I remember being sure to leave more on my plate.

We prayed together and got into our Range Rovers to leave that inner compound. I had the window next to me open because it was so hot. One of the missionaries told me it would be best to close the window. I told her I was really hot. She explained that we are about to enter the larger part of the camp and if the parents see an open window, they will likely run alongside the car and try to throw their infants into the car. I was stunned and asked “Why would they do that?” She said, “Don’t you see, Rodger? It’s because they want them to live.” I remember quietly rolling up the window and as we drove out through the main part of the camp. I was looking away and Marj elbowed me and said, “Look out your window so you will remember their faces and smile and wave at them. They are counting on us to remember them and to carry them with us.” I did as she said and saw these smiling faces looking back at me.

Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me and do not stop them for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.” I believe God

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has a special place in God's heart for children. I believe it grieves God when children are hurt or abused or die. God wants every Israeli child to grow and thrive. God wants every Palestinian child to grow and thrive. God wants every American child, every Ukrainian, every Russian, every Haitian, every Sudanese—every child to grow and thrive.

Nelson Mandela said, "There is no keener measure of the soul of a society than how it treats its children." That's why our ministry with children and families is so vital to us. Because it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.

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