

***New Years' Eve – Jesus Sits At The Kids' Table***  
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When I was growing up, I always longed for the days that I could go to my grandparents' houses. I can still remember laying on the floor of my grandpa's house in a sleeping bag, him laying to my left in another sleeping bag, late at night. He and my grandma Nonnie had a house in the hills of Lake Oswego that overlooked the heart of the city. The house was built with an entire wall made of windows, so you could look out over the city, the treeline scattered with businesses and homes. During the day it was a wonderful view, but at night, when the city lights were fired up, you could see a cosmos of little fluorescent lights, coming from traffic stops, businesses, car headlights, like multicolored lightning bugs flashing and moving around in the distance. I remember one night, right before bed, looking out over all those lights, and I remember laying back in my sleeping bag, staring at the ceiling. As I laid back, my grandpa spoke into the silent room, and asked me if I knew the Lord's Prayer. Being around 7 or 8 years old, I didn't have a clue, so he had me repeat after him, and slowly, he taught me the Lord's Prayer, quoted from the clunky King James. Sometimes when I am praying the Lord's Prayer today, that moment bubbles up with it in my memories. I remember another night, being in that same living room, sleeping in the same sleeping bag, when I heard the keys of the piano come to life in the dark and quiet home. In the other room, my Grandma Nonnie had sat down at the piano, and began to play. I had only a very few times heard my grandma play that piano, but here, tonight, as I was listening to the rustle of my head against the carpet, my grandma's rarely-heard but precisely-mastered musical prowess had revealed itself. She played until I fell asleep along with my grandpa who was laying a few feet to my left.

These grandparents, who we called Papa and Nonnie, were my dad's parents. Fortunately, all except one of my grandparents are still living. Sadly, my Grandma Nonnie passed away on my birthday nearly three years ago. One thing I can say about my grandparents on both sides of my family is that they were and are incredibly warm with children. It was like they saw in children something worth treasuring, something worth investing in. And when I think back to the amount of investment my grandparents poured into me, I can now see the foundation they were laying for my life. My grandparents never shied away from me, never ignored me. And, of course, they were grandparents, so obviously they weren't with me every day. But, when I was with them, they included me and welcomed me in. And in that posture, I see the very heart of Jesus.

So that's going to be our focus for today. How does Jesus see children, and what does that teach us about the heart of God?

We will begin this adventure in the Book of Mark. In the middle of this year, soon to be last year, I was gripped by a certain passage. The students and leaders in the youth group could probably tell, because I kept referencing it over and over again for like a month in different ways. The passage that was stuck in my teeth, so to speak, was Mark 9:33-37. Now, this is one of those passages that on its face is going to be pretty familiar to most of us. And at first it looks small and simple, but then you keep mulling it over in your mind, and the implications get bigger and bigger. It's like an iceberg. Most of its substance is just below the surface. So, let's read it, and then we'll pick up our magnifying glass and go a bit deeper.

*“<sup>33</sup> And they came to Capernaum. And when he was in the house he asked them, “What were you discussing on the way?” <sup>34</sup> But they kept silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest.*

Notice how similar of a dynamic this is to God approaching Adam in the Garden. The disciples get caught in this debate about which of them should be considered the greatest. They’re all vying to be the GOAT, the Greatest of All Time. Adam was caught eating the fruit that would put him up there with God. And Jesus speaks to the disciples just like God speaks to Adam: He asks an innocent question. “Where are you, Adam?” “What were you discussing on the way, friends?” And the response from both of them is shame. But at least Adam has the guts to actually answer the question. The Disciples can’t even muster the confidence to answer; “they kept silent.” Then Jesus goes into Teacher Mode.

*<sup>35</sup> And he sat down and called the twelve. And he said to them, “If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.”*

So, if you want to be the Greatest-of-all-time, or the GOAT, you have to be the Least-of-all-time, or the...LOAT.

Now, this teaching is a launching off point, a first step, toward the path He is going to take the disciples down. And remember, Jesus is a teacher, so like any good teacher, He goes for an object lesson.

*<sup>36</sup> And he took a child and put him in the midst of them,*

...alright we’re all wondering the same thing, so I’ll just say it. Where did He get this kid? We have to remember that at the beginning of this passage, Mark sets the scene by saying, “...*He was in the house...*” So, He probably didn’t just steal a child from someone on the way there. I mean, Jesus seemed prepared for this conversation, but not quite that prepared.

So, Jesus whips out this kid, and Mark says,

*“and taking him in his arms, he said to them, <sup>37</sup> “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me.” (Mark 9:33-37)*

A couple of notes:

Firstly, the word that Mark uses to refer to this child is the Greek word, “παιδιον,” and “παιδιον” usually means little kid. Think like 1-7 years old. So that explains why Jesus is able to pick this kid up and hold him in His arms. Jesus isn’t cradling a 13-year-old here.

Secondly, Jesus says something here that sounds remarkably similar to another quote of His. This other quote is actually one near and dear to Sonrise Church’s history. It is the quote you would see painted on the wall as you walked into the Dining Hall. The quote is from Matthew 25, and the context is Jesus talking about the final judgment He will be bringing, separating the sheep, or the faithful followers, and the goats, (not like the Greatest of All Time Goats), those who would be cast “*into the eternal fire prepared for the Devil and his Angels*” (Mt. 25:41). And what this eternal judgment pivoted on was how they treated those whom Jesus called, “*The Least of These Brothers and Sisters of Mine*” (Mt. 25:40). The quote you will have probably seen on that wall is as follows.

*“For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, <sup>36</sup> I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.” (Mt. 25:35-36)*

Now, the sheep, the faithful followers that Jesus is talking to here, respond to Him basically by asking Him when they did any of that stuff, and Jesus responds, *“Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers,<sup>[1]</sup> you did it to me.” (Mt. 25:40)*

So here, Jesus looks to the poor, hungry, thirsty, sick, foreign, and imprisoned, among His brothers and sisters, and says, “I’m there in them.” Whatever we do to them, we do to Jesus. And we find out it goes both ways. The next passage goes into detail mirroring the exercise, saying that when we do not respond kindly and hospitably to the Least of Jesus’ brothers and sisters, we will find we have, in reality, rejected and ignored Jesus Himself. Bet that’ll haunt you the next time you pass by someone with a cardboard sign on the road.

Anyhow, like I said before, this passage sounds remarkably similar, and shows a nearly identical relationship between Jesus and the little children on the one hand and Jesus and the Least of These on the other. The way we treat both Little Children and the Least of These is how we are treating Jesus. So, where is Jesus? Jesus is there among the Least of These. And again, where is Jesus? Jesus is there among the Little Children.

Now, Jesus’ heart for children shouldn’t shock us. After all, this is not the only thing that Jesus has to say about children. In Matthew 18:3-4, Jesus says,

*“Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven.”*

So here we see that not only are we to welcome the children, but that unless we ourselves become like little children, we will not be welcomed into Heaven. Child-like people aren’t the exception when it comes to the Kingdom. They’re the rule.

Then, again, in Luke 18:15-17, Luke writes,

*<sup>15</sup> Now they were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them. And when the disciples saw it, they rebuked them. <sup>16</sup> But Jesus called them to him, saying, “Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. <sup>17</sup> Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.” (Luke 18:15-17)*

In response to these sorts of passages, the famous German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, once wrote,

*“For Jesus, the child is not merely a transitional stage on the way to adulthood, something to be overcome; quite the contrary, he or she is something utterly unique before which the adult should have the utmost respect. For indeed, God is closer to children than to adults. In this sense, Jesus becomes the discoverer of the child. He sees the children and wants to belong to them; who would block His path? God belongs to children, the good news belongs to children, and the joy in the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to children.” (“Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Barcelona, Berlin, New York”, DBW, Vol. 10, 352)*

Jesus had plenty of time for these little kids who were being brought to Him. He didn't busy Himself with important adult business. He wasn't shewing them away so He could go analyze the current political landscape or submit His W-2 Tax Form or hang out with some up-and-coming social influencers. As Bonhoeffer says, "[Jesus] sees the children and wants to belong to them."

How many of you have to set up a Kids' Table for Christmas or Thanksgiving each year. In my family we had 9 cousins that would all come together on holidays, and so we would always have a separate table to eat at. And I loved my cousins and felt most at home sitting with them, but as I got older, oh, how I longed to sit at the adult table. I was the oldest of my siblings and cousins, so I was so close to making the cut and hanging out with the cool, older people, with my funny and insightful aunts and uncles. But each year, it felt like the kids table was excluded from the adult table. But there was always one person at the table that wasn't a kid, and it was my Grandma Kemi. She would always come and spend time with us at the kids' table. And it always felt so comforting to know there was at least one adult that didn't mind spending time with us. And this is my takeaway for today. I think Jesus is like my Grandma Kemi. I think **Jesus sits at the Kids' Table**.

Now, is the conversation stimulating at the Kids' Table? Not unless you consider poop jokes stimulating. Is the etiquette refined? The amount of times my cousins put pieces of food and napkins in my Martinellis would indicate otherwise. Do you come away enriched from the kids' table? Maybe every once in a while, but for the most part, you just come away with stains on your shirt. So why would anyone choose to sit there? Well, maybe you enjoy poop jokes. Or maybe, like my grandma, and more than her, like Jesus, you can see that chasing self-enrichment is empty, and that your life is best spent poured out for those who cannot repay you and do not deserve it.

Now, I'll admit. Even as merely the oldest among the children, there were times I wanted to get up from the table and find some better conversation partners. But passages like these convict me. I've been looking for satisfaction in all the wrong places and all the wrong people. Jesus doesn't live among the refined, He lives among the simple. Jesus doesn't reveal Himself to the Wise, but to Little Children, so much so that He praises God, saying, "*I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children;*" (Mt. 11:25)

And heck, we just celebrated last week the coming of Jesus into the World. How much clearer could Jesus be in that the way He wanted to unveil Himself to the World was as a newborn. Talk about first impressions!

And I think this is where we get into the essence of what Jesus sees in Children. Maybe the most core element of what it means to be a child is to be someone who does not belong to themselves. Because they are so young, so innocent, so simple, and so weak, kids have no choice but to lean on someone else for their life, and in doing so, to belong to someone else. They can't make choices on their own, they can't provide for themselves, they don't understand how the world works. And isn't it clear that the best child is the one that knows they can't go it alone, and because of that, looks to the ones who are taking care of them for guidance, providence, and wisdom? When a child starts to think they know best, tries to make decisions for themselves, and starts looking to put distance between themselves and their parents, usually that gets them into some trouble. And in their disobedience and stubbornness, we say they aren't being good kids! Pretty much the definition of a bad child is a child that won't listen to and respect their parents and their elders. But a good child, a

child that listens to their parents and that doesn't take themselves too seriously, that seeks guidance and help from those who are older than them, and by doing so, renounces their own ideas and ways, can become the pride and joy of their parents, and beyond that will find themselves much better off as they age.

Zooming in closer, I think the essence of childhood is humility, and that's why Jesus emphasizes humility in Matthew 18:4,

*"Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven."*

I think what Jesus is looking for in children is that relationship of reliant dependance, the heart that bases everything on the word of the one who cares for them. Children often misunderstand, they often do silly things, they often mess things up, but a parent can forgive all of this as long as their child is soft-hearted toward them. And I think this was exactly the relationship that Jesus had with His disciples: The disciples misunderstood constantly, they did silly things, and they often messed things up. But Jesus never abandoned them, because they were willing to keep walking with Jesus, and they were soft-hearted toward Him.

And even further than this, I think Jesus is looking for children to join Him because Jesus Himself is the Eternal child. John 1 says,

*"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." (Jn. 1:1)*

And then goes on to say,

*"The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen His glory, glory as of the Only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth." (Jn. 1:14)*

If God's Word is God, and God's Word is also God's Son, then God is both a Father and a Son. And even though I'd love to spend the next 7 hours ranting about the Trinity and how important it is, I'll save that for Facebook and keep it simple: Jesus loves the little children because He sees Himself in them, and He sees in them what He wants for all of us. What children get that other people don't get is that it doesn't matter how cool, educated, capable, pretty, handsome, rich, or successful you are if you run away from home in the process. Just ask the Prodigal Son. And beyond that, most of the time when we chase all these things, it is our way of running away from home, running away from the One who made us, loves us, and knows what is best for us. It's a life that becomes increasingly about me, myself, and I, about proving myself over and against others. And in all this, it's a life that becomes isolated and lonely. As creatures, we were never meant to be all by ourselves, separate from the One who created us, fending for ourselves.

And because of that, the rat race of sitting at the adults' table, so to speak, won't satisfy us. So, as Bonhoeffer says, in the case of a child, "he or she is something utterly unique before which the adult should have the utmost respect." I was sitting in Starbucks a few weeks ago talking about all this with my friend, Tony, and he said something brilliant. He said, "Maybe God gave children to us, not just so that we could raise them into adults, but more importantly so that we could remember what it means to be a child again. What if children are like little images of what it means to be truly human?" And after thinking about it a bit, if Jesus is the type of Human we all want to be, which I think He is, and Jesus, at the center of His Personhood is a Child, the Son of the Father from all Eternity, then maybe children really do show us what it means to be truly human.

So let me now turn to what this means for us as a Church Family. Firstly, if Jesus sits at the Kids' Table, then we should want to as well. And what that looks like for each person will be different and will depend on your circumstances. If you have kids of your own, that means that the way you welcome them is the way you welcome Jesus. So, when they want to play with you, or they want to talk to you, or they want to watch a show with you, how will you respond? Will you try to push them aside for more important things, or will you treat them as the most important thing? Will you seek to be with them, or will you seek to get away from them? Obviously, I'm not saying that you need to spend every waking second with them. But when you think about spending time with them, will you see them as a distraction or a nuisance, or as the place where Jesus has called you?

Maybe you're like me, and you don't have kids of your own. But I'd venture to bet that none of you lack children in your social circles. Do your friends have kids that you could invest time into supporting? Do you have nephews or nieces that you could invite on a day trip or spend time with? Do you have grandkids in your life? I'll tell you what. I know it may seem like Grandparents' Day with how often I'm talking about my Grandparents, but my granddad, who is sitting here in this room with my grandma, used to pick me up every day during the Summer so I could go work with him on Wood Working projects. He would take me to Albertsons every morning, we would get coffee and donuts, and we would go back to his house to work in his garage. He became one of the most influential people in my life just because he was willing to spend time with me and teach me what he knew. But, who knows, maybe you have absolutely no kids in your life? Might I recommend spending time as a volunteer in a classroom or a Sunday School? I first fell in love with the Church when I started teaching the Elementary Class in my Senior year of Highschool. And one of the biggest mentors in my life was a guy I met through Church who walked with me and spent time with me.

Maybe you get nervous being around kids. Like what if they don't like me, or if I can't connect with them? What if it's just awkward? What if they annoy me or I annoy them? I had the same fears before I started working with kids, and my first few weeks were a little uncomfortable. But once I let go of trying to separate myself from the kids, and allowed myself to just be goofy and silly and speak their language, everything fell into place. So go be a goofball, find a game to play, learn a magic trick, show them a movie from your childhood. One of the things I love most about hanging out with young people is that I feel like my anxieties and the tight fists I have around my life and my appearance and my emotions relax a bit. It's like they teach me to trust that there is Someone Who is Looking Out for me. They make me feel like a kid again, running around, snagging candy, talking about cartoons, and most importantly, asking curious questions about who God is.

As a Church, over the last few years, our Kids' ministry and Youth Ministry have been through a lot. We have cycled through leaders over and over, we have at times felt disconnected from the rest of the Church, and we have struggled with hits to our volunteer staff and parent involvement. But, as most of you know, come January, our Church is gearing toward a much heavier investment in Young Sonrisers, starting with reorganizing the Dining Hall to better steward the crowd of kids that belong to this Church, and also by nearly tripling the budgets we will be working with. The volunteers we have are incredibly committed and generous, and they have created some real stability for the kids in the past few years. But as our Church turns its eye toward the Little Children, what a great time for you to begin pouring into that crowd of kids yourself.

Consider me the voice of one crying in the wilderness, in hopes of preparing a path for you. As this year goes on, I anticipate that we will only find our kid population growing, and it will be tempting to step aside and let other people do that important work. But Jesus didn't cheer the children on from afar. He welcomed them. So as you decide how to lead your family, how to parent your kids, how to spend your time, how to invest your money, my heart is desperate to remind you that Jesus is there among the Children, that the Kingdom belongs to the Children, that Jesus is inviting you to become like a child, and that the warmth you show to children is the warmth you show to Jesus. So, the question is this: If **Jesus sits at the kids' table**, will *you* join Him?

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### Life Level Application

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- 1) **Head:** Why do you think it is important for us to see God as both the Father and the Son?
  
- 2) **Heart:** What does it reveal to you about the heart of God that Jesus is so welcoming of Children?
  
- 3) **Hands:** What is it about children you most connect with? What is it you have the hardest time connecting with?
  
- 4) **Habits:** Where do you see yourself welcoming children regularly in your life? Who do you meet with regularly that welcomes the child in you?