

Jeremiah 1:4-11; Matthew 19:13-15  
When Children Become People  
Rev. Jonathan P. Cornell  
11-15-15

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Dave and Mary Nida occupy the same third row pew week in and week out at Hope Presbyterian Church. Dave, a tall, slender, dark haired gentle looking fellow, and Mary, a stately, grey haired woman, dressed to the nines. The two of them are hard to miss when you're in church, unless you're trying to catch up with them after worship.

I asked my folks about them once when I was younger: "Mom, Dad, what's with that couple that always sits up front but doesn't seem to talk with anyone? Who are they?"

"???"

This couple was a mystery to me, that is until I cornered them just last year following our annual visit to my home congregation in Minneapolis. I saw them, once again sitting in their usual place, and when church was over, I made a bee-line for them, practically trapping them when church was over.

One thing that my 7 years of ministry has taught me: it's within the four walls of buildings like this one, I am a fearless extravert—out there, it's another story.

"Hi. I've seen you at this church all my life, but I don't know anything about you. Who are you?"

They both looked at one another and slyly smiled.

"You may not know us, but we certainly know you. We were your Sunday School teachers when you were in Kindergarten, and we know that you are a pastor, and frankly, we're not at all surprised. We knew it then."

We went on to swap stories for a few more minutes until Dave said to me, "I'm sorry to cut this short, but we need to get to our class."

"Oh really, what class is that?" I said.

"Kindergarten Sunday School."

I later learned that the Nidas have taught that same class for 35 years, with no signs of slowing down.

The love for children and a willingness to pour into the next generation began with Jesus. One day, people were bringing their children to Jesus. Jesus had this absolutely infectious way about him, and people brought their children to him to bless them and pray over them. But the disciples

were pushing them away, the disciples were acting sort of like bouncers for Jesus. But Jesus in his compassion has a heart that bursts for children.

So as you're able, would you please stand with me, and let's read together these three verses from Matthew 19 verses 13-15. And when I'm done reading I'll say, "This is the word of the Lord."

**Then children were brought to him that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples rebuked the people, but Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven." And he laid his hands on them and went away.**

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

In the world of Jesus' day, children were viewed in a very different light than we see them today. It was a harsh, brutal environment for kids to grow up in. In fact, many of the philosophers of the day, like Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero, believed that children were not fully human, not real people before the age at which they reached puberty. I mean, you think puberty is hard for parents now, imagine having a pubescent child told that they're becoming a real person for the first time, yikes. This is really different from the way we see children nowadays, in which we adore and spoil our kids right out of the womb.

I still remember driving home from St. Mary's hospital in Evansville with our first born son Christian, clocking in roughly at a blazing 7 miles per hour on the highway. I was white-knuckling it the whole way, because of the gravity of what I was carrying with me in the back seat. This life was now in our hands; what a responsibility!

It reminds me of a story of I heard about a really conscientious first time father who was trying to remember all the right things to do for his newborn. As they were getting ready to leave the hospital, he asked the nurse: "Ok, so what time should I wake the little guy up in the morning?"

Researchers have discovered that the hormone that is released in mothers during delivery, the "cuddle chemical" known as oxytocin, is also released in men. When we hold a newborn, when we toss them up in the air, or when they release one of those delightful infant giggles. So holding children can release this valuable hormone. Now, hold onto it long enough and something else will be released, but the point is that holding a child is a physically transformational experience for us.

Ever wonder who thought that one up? Our God. Every one of them is fearfully and wonderfully made in his image.

But this view is not shared by others in this day. Children in Jesus' day and age were not given names until the 8<sup>th</sup> day because there was still a chance that the child would be abandoned to exposure—especially if that child was of the wrong gender. Children were seen as lacking moral reasoning, and void of the more acceptable traits possessed by their grumpy old predecessors. Children were viewed as a nuisance and a way in which their adult care takers were prevented

from the exploration of more sophisticated endeavors. To which I would say, fine be that way, but you definitely aren't holding my baby.

But it was into this world that a new kind of community emerged, one that believed that every child was created in the image of God. A community that said, whatever you do, even unto the least of these, you do unto me—they did it because it was what their teacher modeled for them. So they welcomed children, embraced them, protected them. Early Christians, unlike the Roman culture around them, saw children as a complete human being; from the time of birth, they were made in God's image. We take this for granted, we think this is something that seems pretty obvious, but you have to remember that their world was radically different. In the Christian Community, the life of a baby was fully equal to that of a mature adult.

Because of this, the early church took in children that were abandoned. Where the culture around them accepted the practice of abandonment, the church took them in and cared for them and raised them as their own. This culture of adoption was birthed out of Christianity. And eventually, the Christian would change the way the rest of the world would view children. When we are at our best, when followers of Jesus are at their best, followers of Jesus are known for their compassion for the least of these.

Over the last few weeks and months, I have begun to share with you the amazing opportunity that is emerging for us to partner with OJ Neighbours Elementary in nurturing and caring for children in our community by coming alongside them as mentors. Kids Hope is an amazing ministry that we, along with multiple other Christians communities around Wabash, are looking to undertake together for the good of these children. And I thought that rather than hear from me about what it is and why it's valuable, I would invite some people who are intimately involved in the lives of our children. This morning, I've invited Danielle Miller and Tracy Peas to join me. Danielle is the Principal of OJ and Tracy is the volunteer coordinator of Kids Hope at OJ. So would you please join me in offering a warm WPC welcome to Danielle Miller and Tracy Peas?

1. Danielle: Why does a program like Kids Hope have the potential to transform the lives of your students?
2. Danielle: Can you say a bit about what you see when a child has hope, as opposed to one who is isolated?
3. Tracy or Danielle: How can we, as the collective church, be involved in bringing Kids Hope to OJ? What are the ways a person might be able to volunteer with Kids Hope?

Can we say thank you to Tracy and Danielle?

The Church gets its love for children from a Savior who saw them as proof that God was still at work in the world around him. The innocence and authentic curiosity with which they approached him became the model for us adults, too. Nothing – not circumstances, not poverty, not a lack of access – should get in the way of children knowing that their lives are immensely

important to Jesus. But the world has a way of putting up barriers. We can help open the way for children to know their value, know their worth, and know the promises of God over their lives.

John Crysostom

“Children were like statues in the hands of artists. To each of you fathers and mothers I say, we see artists fashioning their paintings and statues with great precision. Let us consider the care of these wondrous statues of ours. Painters when they have set their canvas on their easel, paint on it day by day to bring out its purpose. Sculptors too working in marble, we proceed in a similar manner, removing what is superfluous to reveal. Like the creators of statue, you give all you have to fashioning these statues of God.”

May this be true of us in this church, for our future, may we with our children, and with the children of this community who may never darken the doors of this building—may we see the life of the children in our midst as a holy responsibility that we are called to mold in shape in the knowledge and love of Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord. Amen.