

“Train Up a Child”
Proverbs 22:6, Matthew 19:13-15
Tenth Sunday of Pentecost
August 5, 2007

There are two very similar sounding references to children in Matthew’s gospel. In chapter 18 Jesus says, *“Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”* Then, a couple paragraphs later, in chapter 19 of Matthew, Jesus says, *“Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs.”* Now as I said, both of these passages sound fairly similar. They both talk of children. They both speak of those who will reside in the kingdom of heaven. And it seems that they were both uttered to resolve a dispute that had arisen among the disciples. Each of the verses seems to have a whole lot in common. But if you look again, there is a big difference. The first passage I mentioned was in response to an argument the disciples were having about who would get top billing in the kingdom that was coming. Was it the one who was the best preacher, or the one who had the church with the most members, or the one who had built the biggest sanctuary with the highest steeple? Jesus, of course, said that the kingdom had different entry criteria than that of the disciples. And that’s when he brought a little one into the circle and said that it was those who received the kingdom as a child—in total trust, with open arms, and filled with wide-eyed wonder—that would get the best seats. Now all of that is very important for all of us to remember, but is very different from the second passage that I mentioned.

In that passage we read that Jesus had attracted a crowd. It seems he always did so. Wherever he went, people were always pressing in on him, each wanting a special favor, each hoping that he would “lay hands on them and pray,” as Matthew wrote. Now those are important words for us to consider, because their doing indicates a liturgical act. To “lay hands on and pray” was an action that a revered teacher, an esteemed rabbi, would do for his people. It was something you would expect a “man of God” to do for adults *in an organized religious service*. But in this particular story, it was children who were the recipients of this action. The disciples rebuked the crowd for doing so, not out of heartlessness, but because what those in the crowd were asking Jesus to do was not

normal. In the ancient world, children were to “be seen and not heard.” They were not understood to be full members of the community, they were not afforded the same rights as adults, and they were certainly not expected to bother a revered teacher who was going about the business of teaching about God’s kingdom. What those in the crowd were asking Jesus to do was far out of the norm and standards of the day. The disciples were simply acting according to what they understood to be proper.

But it is here that Jesus put up his hands and said to the disciples, “*Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such that the kingdom of heaven belongs.*” Knocking the accepted norm and standards of the day for a complete loop, Jesus embraced those children, and in doing so recognized them as valued members of the community of faith. Unlike the verse in chapter 18 that anticipated the future, this verse from chapter 19 is all about the present. Jesus did not see those children as “the church of tomorrow,” as we so often hear them referred to today; he understood them to be full members of the present community of faith, those fully entitled right now to all of God’s blessings, the full attention of their teacher and their parents, and their total inclusion within their community of faith.

That passage is very appropriate for us to hear as the 2007 edition of Vacation Bible School comes to a close. During the past week over 100 kids a night have come to take “a wild ride through God’s word.” We have had a whole lot of noisy fun here at “Avalanche Ranch.” It has been great to have all of these kids at church every night. I am so grateful to all of their parents and grandparents who made a special effort to make the daily trip to Elkhorn Hills. Today’s service is for you. Their singing and my sermon are a way of saying thanks for all you do. But both are also a challenge. As if you didn’t already know, your work is not yet done. As a parent myself, let me probably not be the first to remind you that your work never ends. And that is especially true when it comes to teaching your children the faith. Your task at a parent or a grandparent is best summed up in that rather famous verse from the Book of Proverbs. It’s most familiar rendition, from the King James Version of the Bible, goes like this:

“Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it.”

If that particular rendering sounds as dated to you as it does to me, then perhaps a newer translation might be more appropriate. Here is how The Message does that verse:

“Point your kids in the right direction—when they’re old they won’t be lost.”

Whichever translation you prefer, that verse from Proverbs 22 seems to give some major reinforcement to what Jesus had to say in Matthew 19. And a recent survey by The Barna Group seems to give credence to the wisdom of both passages. That particular survey confirms that adults who regularly attended church as children are much more likely than their unchurched peers to be involved in church-based and personal spiritual activities. The survey found that roughly 7 out of 10 American adults had a period of time during their childhood when they regularly attended a Christian church. Today 61% still attend regularly, while 71% of those who were not church goers as children are still absent from the church today. The conclusion seems to be very clear. Apparently old habits die hard. If you want your children to be church-going people tomorrow, then take them to church today.

But just don’t take them to church. That survey and those passages should remind us of two very important things. First of all, if you want to *“point your kids in the right direction,”* then fully involve them in the community of faith. It was great to have some of our Vacation Bible School-ers in worship this morning. It was a real treat to hear them sing. But I hope you saw them as more than just a “treat,” as an “act” designed to make you and me feel good about what we do at this church. In saying, *“Let the children come to me,”* Jesus intended for us to see them as full members of the worshipping community. Vacation Bible School and Sunday School are important parts of a child’s faith education, but they should not be the only parts. It is important that children worship as well. That is the main reason that we are changing our Sunday morning schedule beginning next month. We have noticed that the majority of parents who have children come to our contemporary service. We have also noticed that our children like to sing

many of the songs we sing at the contemporary service. But both Sunday School and the contemporary service are held at 9:30. After the hour is over, most parents simply pick up their children and leave. We understand why, but we also understand what Jesus calls all of us to do. So after a lot of thought, prayer, and discussion, we thought that it would be more likely for those parents to bring their kids to worship if the contemporary service was after Sunday School—at 10:45. Then the whole family could enjoy the music and feel a little more comfortable than in the traditional service—which will now be held at 9:30. We are not trying to ignore or disrespect those of you who like traditional worship, we are just trying to provide opportunities for our children to come into the presence of God—even if they do not totally understand all that goes on while doing so. Did you listen to the words of the song we sang earlier? In [Where Children Belong](#), James Ritchie put the meaning of Jesus' actions very well:

*“This, this is where children belong,
welcomed as part of the worshiping throng.
Water, God’s Word, bread and cup, prayer and song:
This is where children belong.*

To “*point your kids*—our kids— *in the right direction*,” they need to be a part of worshiping community. That’s what Jesus says. But that is not all. There is a whole lot more to what that survey and those verses imply than simply taking your kids to a contemporary worship service on the first day of the week. To “*point your kids in the right direction*” includes what you do the rest of the week. To “*point your kids in the right direction*” involves an understanding of your own life that puts God at its very center. It is not only about what happens at church, you see, but about what happens at home as well, about the example set by those to whom our children look for guidance. In training up a child, in setting him or her on the right path, the lives led by parents and grandparents are the starting point—whether you want it to be or not. What kind of life do those young children you love see you live? What kind of precedent do you set? How do you act when times get tough? Where do you go when you don’t understand? Do you practice what our own Methodist tradition calls The General Rules: “Do no harm, by

avoiding all kinds of evil. Do good, of every possible sort. Practice those spiritual disciplines (like Bible reading and prayer) that will bring you closer to God.” If you desire your children or grandchildren to live lives that are pleasing to God, then you live a life that is pleasing to God. If you want to “*point your kids in the right direction,*” then you need to already be traveling down that road.

And that right direction can begin this very morning with the meal that you see set before you. I am so glad that our United Methodist Church practices open communion. Unlike other traditions that close communion to only full members, we believe that everyone—members, visitors, and even children—is welcome at the table of the Lord. United Methodists understand the Lord’s Table to be the church family table, that place where every member is fed and nourished. Now some will object and say that children should wait until they can appreciate the sacrifice that brought about this meal. Perhaps. But think about your own family table. Do you keep your children away from it until they understand the sacrifice that brought the meal you set upon it? Of course not. It is at your family table that your children, even though they do not understand all the whys and every how, are nourished—physically and emotionally. It is no different with the church family table. Here our children are nourished. Here our children are fed. Here, in ways they have yet to understand—or maybe understand even better than you—that our children meet the risen Christ. If you want to “*point your kids in the right direction,*” then perhaps it needs to start by giving them a place this morning at this most important table.

As we prepare ourselves to do so, I would like to thank everyone who had a hand in making this year’s Vacation Bible School so wonderful. As taxing as it sometimes could be, you did your part to help point our kids in the right direction. Now it is up to the rest of us to continue the task. Let’s begin by coming to the table and sharing this meal. For “*this is where children belong.*”

