

“On Blessing”  
 Proper 24B (Children’s Sabbath; October 21, 2018)  
 Rev. Dr. David A. Kaden

>>Open our eyes that we might see wondrous things in your word. Amen.<<

Six-year-old Angie and her four-year-old brother Joel were sitting together in church. Joel giggled, sang, and talked out loud. Finally, his big sister had had enough. “You’re not supposed to talk out loud in church.” she said. “Why? Who’s going to stop me?” Joel asked. Angie pointed to the back of the church and said, “See those two men standing by the door? They’re hushers.”

Today is Children’s Sabbath - a day when our church’s children and youth assist in leading worship, and our sanctuary is filled with our littlest ones, some of whom may struggle mightily to sit through a nearly twenty minute sermon. While we’re always delighted as a congregation to have chattering and squirming children in our service, I am aware of the struggle, and so today’s sermon is going to be a bit shorter than usual.

For Children’s Sabbath, we’ve selected stories from scripture that highlight the importance of children in our community of faith. Today’s Old Testament reading highlights the openness of a child to listen for the voice of God. What I love most in this story about Samuel the child is that he hears a voice calling to him, and when he realizes it’s God, he doesn’t bat an eye; he just sits and listens, and *receives* the message. There’s no adult filter in Samuel’s mind to tell him that the voice of God doesn’t exist, or that God can’t speak, or that might berate him for foolishly thinking God could speak. No, Samuel, as a child, has the capacity to listen; his imagination is still open and active; his heart is pure. It’s what writer Victoria Van Vlear calls the child’s capacity to wonder. In a blog post,<sup>1</sup> Van Vlear answered a question from a reader about why adults can’t enter C. S. Lewis’ Narnia. For those of you familiar with *The Chronicles of Narnia*, you know that only children can enter Narnia. At one point, Aslan, the hero in the story, tells two children that they are growing up, and are no longer able to enter this land of fantasy and wonder. In the sixth book in the series, a man named Uncle Andrew secretly enters Narnia, and feels completely out-of-place. Uncle Andrew hears a singing lion, and dislikes the song very much as he tries his best to hear roaring - as lions are supposed to do in zoos and in the wild - instead of singing. “Of course it can’t really have been singing,” Uncle Andrew reasoned, “I must have imagined it. ... Whoever heard of a lion singing?” And,” according to the story, “the longer and more beautiful the Lion sang [in Narnia], the harder Uncle Andrew tried to make himself believe that he could hear nothing but roaring.” The children in the story, on the other hand, hear nothing but beautiful singing.

It’s the same message as we find in Philip Pullman’s novel *The Golden Compass*, where every human being is accompanied by an exterior spirit that takes the shape of an animal. Children in the story have spirits that can shape-shift. The main character is a girl named Lyra; and her spirit named “Pan” takes many different shapes: a moth, a bird, a mouse. The spirits of the adults in the story can’t shape-shift anymore. They’ve settled into a single form. The message, writes one commentator on *The Golden Compass*, is that the natural openness

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<sup>1</sup> <https://victoriavanvlear.wordpress.com/2016/05/30/why-cant-adults-enter-narnia/>

of children narrows as they grow up. Their innocence gets lost over time as their spirits take a single form.

This innocence, this openness, this capacity to wonder that children have - and that many adults have lost as life takes its toll on them - is why, I think, Jesus in today's gospel reading highlights the receptiveness of children when he speaks of entering the kingdom of God. There are three versions of today's gospel reading in our New Testament. The version we heard a moment ago from Matthew's gospel is one; and then there are two other versions from the gospels of Mark and Luke. The broad strokes of the story are the same in all three versions. In all three of them, little children are brought to Jesus; the disciples grumble about it, and try to stop the children from approaching; Jesus rebukes the disciples for not being open and welcoming; and then Jesus proceeds to bless the little ones. The three versions agree on the broad strokes, but they disagree on the details. Luke's version says that "even infants" were brought to Jesus - the tiniest and most vulnerable. In Mark's version there are no babies, just "little children." But in Luke and Mark, it says Jesus "touched" the children. It's the touch of blessing. The version of this story we heard a moment ago in Matthew's gospel makes this act of blessing more explicit when it says that Jesus "laid his hands on the children and prayed over them." And Matthew's version adds that the little children "were being brought" to Jesus. The Greek grammar implies that they were brought one by one, so Jesus could look each child in the eyes, and bless each one as an individual human being. It's one of the tenderest moments in the entire story of Jesus. And Jesus uses it as a teaching moment to say - as C. S. Lewis did in *The Chronicles of Narnia* and as Philip Pullman did in *The Golden Compass* - that the openness of a child, the capacity of a child to wonder, the innocent trust of a child *is* the posture that we - sometimes cynical - adults should strive to assume. "It is to such as these," says Jesus, "that the kingdom of heaven belongs." It's a posture that trusts that something far bigger than us is at work in the world in ways we cannot always see or comprehend; yet is always at work for our good. "God is good," wrote one Psalmist. "God is good," said Jesus. And "all things work together for our good," wrote St. Paul. Entrusting ourselves to that truth - letting ourselves live *into* that truth - can be one of our greatest challenges as adults. Martin Luther King Jr. once prayed, "Use me, God. Show me how to take who I am, who I want to be, and what I can do, and use it for [your] purpose [which is] greater than myself."

In his greatest sermon, a portion of which I read to you a moment ago, I think Jesus provides *one* answer to Dr. King's prayer. One purpose of God, which is greater than ourselves. One purpose of God that it takes childlike faith and openness to see and receive and live *into* is to embrace and bless those who can too easily be ignored.

In his greatest sermon, Jesus named people who were "blessed"; and his list is longer than merely the children brought to him one by one. The Beatitudes, as we call them, writes Oxford scholar Diarmaid MacCulloch, are a "code of life," and a "chorus of love." The Beatitudes are not just a form of well-wishing - not just a request for the happiness, health, wholeness, wellness of others. This ancient sermon on blessing - the Beatitudes also focus our attention. They redirect the life of faith away from what our culture says is blessing: success, achievement, power. The Beatitudes redirect our focus to a different set of childlike values. "Blessed are the merciful," says Jesus, not the powerful. "Blessed are the pure in heart," says Jesus - those with the Narnia-like, open hearts of children, those who still see what's possible because they're imaginations are active. "Blessed are the peacemakers," says

Jesus, not the war-makers. This sermon on blessing - these Beatitudes are like little spotlights that shine light on the forgotten corners of our world, that shine light on those whose lives are easily forgotten or ignored by adults, but who are noticed by those with the compassionate hearts of children.

...In her book *Accidental Saints*, Reverend Nadia Bolz-Weber updates the beatitudes for today.<sup>2</sup> It's a list of Beatitudes that I have shared with you before - a list that isn't merely a form of well-wishing; it's a way to reorient our thinking, so we can pay attention to the people God notices and loves. "Blessed are the agnostics," she said. "Blessed are they who doubt. ... Blessed are they who are spiritually impoverished and therefore not so certain about everything that they no longer take in new information. Blessed are those who have nothing to offer. Blessed are the preschoolers who cut in line at communion. ... Blessed are they for whom death is not an abstraction. Blessed are they who have buried their loved ones, for whom tears could fill an ocean. Blessed are they who have loved enough to know what loss feels like. Blessed are the mothers of the miscarried. Blessed are they who don't have the luxury of taking things for granted anymore. Blessed are they who can't fall apart because they have to keep it together for everyone else. Blessed are the motherless, the alone, the ones from whom so much has been taken. Blessed are those who 'still aren't over it yet.' ... Blessed are those who no one else notices. ... [The lonely] kids ... . The laundry guys at the hospital. The ... night-shift street sweepers. Blessed are the losers and the babies and the parts of ourselves that are so small, the parts of ourselves that don't want to make eye contact with a world that loves only the winners. Blessed are the forgotten. Blessed are the closeted. Blessed are the unemployed, the unimpressive, the underrepresented. ... Blessed are the wrongly accused, the ones who never catch a break, the ones for whom life is hard, for Jesus chose to surround himself with people like them. Blessed are those without documentation. Blessed are the ones without lobbyists. Blessed are foster kids and trophy kids and special ed kids and every other kid who just wants to feel safe and loved. ... Blessed are they who know there has to be more than this, because they are right. Blessed are those who make terrible business decisions for the sake of people. Blessed are the burned-out social workers and the overworked teachers and the pro bono case workers. ... Blessed are the kids who step between the bullies and the weak. Blessed are they who hear that they are forgiven. ... Blessed are the merciful, for they totally get it."

And I would only add: Blessed are the children, for they have big imaginations, and they can see that the Kingdom of God is still possible. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Accidental Saints: Finding God in All the Wrong People* (New York: Convergent, 2015), 184-188.