

What do you think it means to welcome a child in the name of Jesus?

I suppose we need to reflect on three primer questions before we can answer this particular question in any significant and meaningful way.

What do we know about children? And what do we know about Jesus?
And what do we know about welcoming others?

What do we know about children?

Jonathan reminds us that they are curious. He says they are like sponges – their little minds absorb everything they see and hear and experience, especially in their first few years of existence. My mom is fond of telling me that for parents, children are your heart, and that grandchildren are the heart of your heart.

I suppose I am biased, but in my own children, that's the ones in my household, and in my extended households of faith and community, I see kindness. They often help one another. And they are SO smart. They ask us questions and refuse to be bothered by the societal complications we have created. Why can't we help? Why can't we share? They are energetic. How is it humanly possible to swing on a jungle gym for an hour and beg for more? They experience the world with unmatched wonder. When's the last time you got excited about a leaf on the sidewalk, or a worm squiggling away?

Children are beautiful, created beings; God's gift to us – they are our hope. They are curious, and kind, and smart, and full of wonder, and energy.

What do we know about Jesus?

Here's one without pretense. Here's one who leads others by serving them. Here's one who sees the humanity in others. Here's one who is intentional in recognizing the giftedness, dignity, and value of every neighbor, regardless of age, regardless of social construction.

Here's one who chooses to love God and love neighbor. Period. Everyone Jesus encounters – politicians, religious leaders, merchants, peers, even his own disciples – everyone around him loves with a disclaimer: love God and love your neighbor as long as God and neighbor are a lot like you. Jesus removes the disclaimer. God created everyone and everything, and therefore everyone and everything are your neighbor. So go love them, even if it ruffles the feathers of the establishment.

Jesus is a beautiful, created being, just like you and me; Jesus is God's gift to us – Jesus is our hope. I don't think it's a stretch to say that Jesus is curious, and kind, and smart, and full of wonder and energy.

And what do we know of welcoming others?

It's pretty simple really; to welcome another is to recognize their worth and value in a particular space. Come as you are. Be received just as you are. Have access to all the same rights and privileges of those with whom you gather.

Perhaps a cycle of welcome is beautiful, created beings, God's gifts, inviting other beautiful, created beings, God's gifts, too, into an environment of shared and received hope, and curiosity, and kindness, and intellect, and wonder, and energy.

What does it mean to welcome a child in the name of Jesus? I believe it means to see God's creativity in others, and invite them into communities that seek to live out the potential deeded to each of us in God's shared creativity.

If I am honest with you this morning, a great majority of my pastoral headspace these past few months has been occupied with administrative thinking rather than hospitable thinking. Just this past week, I crunched budget numbers with Jim; I had multiple conversations about how we can recruit volunteers to do everything from worship care to grounds maintenance to fixing that stubborn bench in the labyrinth. I have scheduled more emails, Instagram posts, and website communications than I care to count.

I have attended multiple meetings about how we as faith communities can formally and pragmatically respond to issues ranging from food sustainability to global hunger to reproductive rights to inequities in childhood education. I even rolled some trash cans to the street. And in these Covid times, I often find myself agonizing over if I've done enough, if we've done enough, if all the i's and t's have been dotted and crossed in order for Sardis to survive, and thrive, and live out its calling. I think too often, I've been in tabulation, and calculation, and organization mode. And I don't think I've been as intentional as I've needed to be in asking the question, "How do we welcome others, how do we receive them like children, in the manner of the One whom we follow?"

I'm grateful for today's text, because for a few hours, it directed my attention back toward two much, much, much more important events in the life of our community that have bookended this period of administrative minutia.

Several weeks ago, we joined a family in celebrating the gift of a child to our community of faith, and we dedicated ourselves to making God known, and felt, and experienced in his life. And then this past week, we have gathered, this time in more virtual ways, to grieve with and console another family in the loss of an adult child to an unspeakable virus.

The birth of every child reveals for us the shared hope we have in God and one another. The loss of every child reveals for us the pain, and grief, and sadness, and fragility of the human experience. When we love one another, when we welcome one another, when we make sacred space to be in lasting community with one another, we become fused in one another. Celebration and loss, joy and pain, thanksgiving and petition become a shared experience. Every child becomes our child. Every family becomes our family. Every community becomes our community.

When we know one another, when we model a lived empathy and practiced compassion for one another, neighbors stop being statistics and start being people, family even.

But the benefit, and indeed the power and uniqueness of faith communities doesn't stop with the sacred spaces and relationships we have carved out for one another. There is also great power in what this lived empathy and felt compassion inspires in our world. If we experience the pain of our neighbors, then we also find the provocation, and ultimately, the courage to create a world of welcome.

If we share in the hope of the children we dedicate, then we cannot stand idly by and be silent when thousands of their peers, in Charlotte alone, lack access to stable housing, to adequate healthcare, to real

nutrition, and to sound education, the very same things we demand for children in our own households.

If we share in the grief of the children we've lost, then we cannot stand idly by and be silent when the systems of this world expose even more children to dangers like gun violence, and fearmongering, and body-shaming, and rancorous partisanship, just to name a few.

If we share in the hope of the children we dedicate; if we share in the grief of the children we've lost, then maybe, we ought to work on creating communities where children can be children again. In communities of privilege, a culture of achievement robs our children of their youth. In marginalized communities, a culture of shame does even more. Gang violence, the industrial prison complex, economic impoverishment, micro-aggressions all create a culture of survival, that robs youth, and too often dreams, and even life itself.

Our children are born with curiosity, and energy, and kindness, and potential, and intellect, and wonder. They are a gift. They are created. They are children of God. Their substance is no different than us adults. And yet somehow, we have allowed culture to rob grown-ups of the same curiosity, and energy, and kindness, and potential, and intellect, and wonder.

We teach our children that God made each one of us very good. And somehow, we devolve into asking the question, "Who is the greatest among us?"

Jesus gently reminds us to go back to Kindergarten.

So...let's put it all together.

How do we welcome others in the name of Jesus?

It starts with the communities we model in our households and extended households. We must cultivate a love and appreciation for the created, child-like gifts and qualities God equips us with. When we employ such gifts, we begin to know and experience one another.

And why does such welcome matter?

When we know one another, we demand God's abundance for one another, and spend our lives in service of that mutual abundance. The radical welcome of Jesus breeds transformation.

We open our arms. We welcome children of every age. We delight in their curiosity, and energy, and kindness, and potential, and intellect, and wonder.

And yes, sometimes, there will be a few administrative elements to this process. But our welcome is not rooted in administrative polish; it is rooted in the service and love of one another. And such a welcome, friends, is the kind of community that will ultimately bring about God's world.

May it be so, and may it be soon! Amen.