

Scripture: Matthew 19:13-15  
Message: These Hands Bless  
March 17, 2019; Bethel CRC, Brockville, ON  
Pastor Jack Van de Hoef

This past week, Jane and I had the privilege of having our granddaughters over for Spring Break. We had great fun together. As I was preparing this message, it got me thinking about how Jesus might have interacted with the children who were brought to him.

In the gospel of Matthew we read that little children were brought to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and pray for them. The gospel of Mark says that “People were bringing little children (Luke says “babies”) to Jesus to have him touch them.” The people who brought these little children knew and believed that Jesus was a special person. For them it was important that their children come in contact with Jesus and receive his blessing. For Jesus to place his hands on them was a sign of that blessing.

The description of placing hands on them and praying sounds so formal. I can't imagine Jesus being that formal. I think he smiled and maybe bounced these children on his knee. He may have asked them about what they saw on their way to Jesus and talked about how his Father had made the birds and flowers and took care of them. He would have talked to these children at their level of understanding, as he placed hands on them and prayed for them.

The parents came to Jesus for a good reason. They were not being superstitious as if the touch of Jesus would have some magical effect on the children. They did not believe that by the touch of Jesus the children would never get sick or never have an accident. Nor did they think that the touch of Jesus would guarantee that their children would be better behaved and more obedient. Jesus would not tolerate or promote such superstition.

The parents came with a simple faith. They had probably heard about Jesus or maybe they had heard his teaching themselves. They knew he was a great person because of the miracles he performed. They may have recognized that he had some special relationship with God. They knew it was a good and important thing for Jesus to bless their children and pray for them.

We must not fault these people for a simple or insufficient or incomplete faith. Who of us has a better or perfect faith? Everyone who comes to Jesus must trust him in that simple, even childlike way. Yes, we have a greater revelation available to us. We can know more about who Jesus is from the New Testament. Yet we still come to Jesus believing that it is

important to be blessed by him and to have him pray for us.

This is so much more important because we know Jesus as Saviour. We know that he washes away our sins. That's the promise Jesus makes to us when we are baptized. As we grow older, we learn more about this and accept it to be true. That's true for everyone, of every age. It's not that someone has to have a certain number of classes and other teaching *before* they can believe in Jesus. They can believe him at any age. Kids Club and other classes or studies are to help us to learn more about who God is, what he does and to better understand what it means to be his child and how to live to thank God for all that he has done.

With that simple faith these parents came to Jesus with their children. The disciples rebuked them. This is a strong word that implies the parents are doing something very wrong. This word is used when Jesus "rebukes the wind and the waves" in the calming of the storm (Mark 4:39). Jesus rebukes Peter, after Peter rebuked Jesus for talking about suffering and dying and rising after three days (Mark 8:32-33). To rebuke someone is to express very strong disagreement with their actions.

The disciples rebuked the parents. Their hands pushed them away. They told the parents off. Perhaps they told the parents to go away because Jesus was not to be bothered. He had more important things to do than bless babies. Keep those noisy little kids out of here.

The disciples think they are helping Jesus. He has an important message for important people like grown-ups, for big people. He has to spend his time and energy on them, not on children. Big people also show more evidence of results. They can do things as Jesus' followers. Children can't. They can't understand Jesus. They can't know all that he is saying. Just keep them out of Jesus' way.

No! says Jesus to his disciples. You are wrong. Don't stop them. Let the children come. Don't hinder them. Don't get in their way. It's not wrong for the parents to bring them to me. Then he says why: "for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these."

Jesus is not saying that the kingdom of heaven is *only* for children. It belongs to *such* as these. It belongs to these children and to all those who in humble trust are like these children.

Jesus had recently made a similar statement in Matthew 18:3,4. When asked who was greatest in the kingdom of heaven, Jesus took a little child and stood that child in the middle of all those grown-ups. Then he said, "Unless you change and become like little children, you

will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." And now in 19:14 Jesus says, "for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these."

Little children have a simple trust and humility. They will believe whatever you say. They will trust you to take care of them. To anyone of any age who reflects that total trust in Jesus Christ; to anyone who has that humble attitude where they bow before Jesus as Lord, trusting him, believing him, to such belongs the kingdom of heaven. To such are the promises and blessings of the kingdom given.

After making that statement, Jesus placed his hands on the children. Hands that bless are hands that extend kindness, that express a desire for good things. He then went on from there. Jesus answered the parents' request for a blessing and a prayer. Jesus welcomed the children. He responded to the faith of the parents. He proclaimed the kingdom of heaven for all people who believe and trust in him.

Jesus then went on from there. The parents also left and probably went to their homes. What would they do now? Was this a minor incident of meeting a friendly popular man who was nice to children? It was much more important to them than that. They had come looking for Jesus, desiring his blessing. They would not shrug off this event as meaningless.

The parents would continue to tell their children about Jesus, about who he was and what he had done. They would tell their children about what Jesus said. They would explain as much as they knew about the kingdom of heaven and what it meant. They would share their faith, as simple as it was, with their children. In doing so, they would challenge their children to also believe.

Children are an important part of the family of God. Children are welcome here. Come with your children, Jesus says. All the promises and blessings of the kingdom are for them too. Bring them to me, says Jesus, that I may lay my hands on them, that they may receive the sign of those promises and blessings.

It's possible to focus on parental responsibility in reading these verses. Parents are to bring children to Jesus. Parents are to teach children about Jesus.

But the hands that bless are the hands of Jesus. The hands of Jesus are now the hands of the Christian community. The hands that bless are now the disciples of Jesus who learn not to rebuke children from coming.

What message, what blessing, do we give to children in this community of disciples of Jesus? Do we think the children's message in our worship service just a nice thing to do to make the kids feel good (or to make ourselves feel good, like we're doing something for the kids)? How many of us are involved in helping our children grow in faith, whether in our church programs or in relationships or in conversations with the children? Or do we easily leave that to the parents to take care of; after all, we've done our time. How often do we complain about children being in the way, compared to how often we talk with them and learn their names and their interests and share our love for Jesus with them?

Are we disciples who rebuke, either directly or indirectly? Or are we disciples who lay hands of blessing on our children?

How do we extend that hand of blessing to children outside of our immediate church family? This blessing is for all to know about Jesus and his kindness and love. So many children receive a hurtful or deceptive message. For example, young girls are lured into sex-trafficking rings with the promises of good things, but they end up being used for the pleasure of others. How can we give them a message of value for who they are? We might consider supporting or getting involved with the work of Big Brothers/Big Sisters or Crosstown Impact or Girls Inc. as ways to extend the hand of blessing to children in our community.

To each of us, including children, belongs the kingdom of heaven. It is important for each of us remember the promises of God, the relationship God has entered with us in Jesus Christ, the hand of blessing that Jesus has placed on us. As we remember, we remind each other of that blessing. We share that blessing with one another, of all ages.

Church, the family of God, is not just for grownups. Children belong just as much. Let us be sure that they find their place. Children are not the future church, they are the church of today, as much as the adults. We must not treat them as *potential* members. They are present members, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to them. We can learn from them. We do not just smile at their simplicity and cuteness. We learn from their child-like trust in Jesus and sincere love for him. That we would be as free as our children to express our own faith!

These hands bless. The blessing is for children, youth adults, seniors, everyone.

Let each of us surrender to Jesus with that childlike trust. For to such belongs the kingdom of heaven. Let us reach out with hands that bless.

Amen.