



FIRST
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH
SPARTANBURG

HIS NAME WAS JACK

1 John 3:1-3, 16-18; Matthew 18:1-5; Matthew 19:13-15

April 25, 2021

Dr. Lewis F. Galloway

I once saw an exhibition of the works of the artist Matisse. Included in the exhibit was a short video of the painter drawing three sketches of his grandson. Each sketch was different. Yet, with a few simple lines and bold strokes, the artist captured something of the inner character of his grandson.

Jesus has a gift for using simple words and common things to paint holy mysteries. He uses ordinary situations and plain gestures to tell the gospel. He compares the Kingdom of God to a net thrown in the sea, to a pearl of great price, to yeast that causes bread to rise, and to a tiny seed that grows into a great bush. He compares the Kingdom to commonplace activities like a man going on a journey, a woman finding a lost coin, a farmer planting seed, and a shepherd seeking a lost sheep. These images are powerful because they are simple, but they do not oversimplify the truth. Each story or gesture gives us, as it has been said, a window into the world. They paint a picture of the character of the gospel.

One of the most compelling pictures of the Kingdom of God is drawn in the simple words and action of Jesus when he welcomes the children. He says to the

disciples, "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom do heaven." Then, when the little children are brought to him, he places his hand upon them; and he blesses them. Jesus says, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the Kingdom of Heaven belongs."

What does Jesus mean when he says we must become like children? It is certainly a word about receiving the gifts of God as freely as they are given. It is about receiving without guile, pretense, or any sense of merit. An unexpected gift given to an adult may elicit such responses as, "You shouldn't have!" or "It's too much!" Words that sometimes mask a hidden thought, "Well, it's about time!" or "I deserve this considering all I have done!" A child simply reaches out in joy and takes the gift without question. To receive the Kingdom, we become like little children. The Kingdom does not belong to those who argue over greatness or scramble to get ahead of others. The Kingdom belongs to the least of these.

The simple words and ordinary gesture of Jesus mean something more. The clue lies in the action of the disciples to stop the children

from getting to Jesus. The very ones who ought to understand the nature of the Kingdom are the very ones who get in the way of the gospel. The disciples rebuke those who are attempting to bring the children to Jesus. They speak harshly to them. The disciples are the guards and tackles on the offensive line. They think their job is to keep the wrong people from getting to Jesus, a man whom they think does not have time for unimportant people and unimportant things.

What is wrong with letting children come to Jesus? To understand the situation, we must drop our modern western notions about the nature of childhood. Today, children are cherished. They are a source of delight. Childhood extends many more years today than in Biblical times. In our best moments as a culture, we see childhood as a special time of learning, growth, and preparation for adulthood. Children are to be given the time to play and to discover. We delight in the birth of babies, baptisms, and birthday parties. We keep pictures of our children and grandchildren on our cell phones, laptops, and iPads. Children are vulnerable and need to be protected. In the ancient world, children were a blessing, but they did not have the same

status or rights as children today. Many children did not survive childhood. It was an accepted Roman practice to put unwanted children out to die by exposure. Children were property to be used for economic benefit. In ancient times, childhood may have lasted only until marriage or work at 13 or 15. Children were rarely represented in art; when they were, they were often pictured as little adults. Children were considered to be the least in importance – the last and not the first.

When Jesus welcomes the children, he reverses the social order; he upsets the culturally entrenched value system. With a simple gesture and common words, he challenges the way people think about the nature of God and our standing before God. As we heard in the reading from 1st John, we are all God's children. God welcomes the powerless and the vulnerable who are represented by these children. As God's children, we are to love one another and lay down our lives for each other. In Jesus, God does not place the same value we do on social standing, power, and wealth as we do. Our standing before God is not based on who we are or what we have, but who God is – the Lord of infinite mercy and love. When we move beyond our romantic and idealized notions of childhood, we too recognize that children are often the ones who know hurts they cannot express, betrayals they

internalize, and painful experiences they have pushed out of conscious memory. These are the very ones whom God welcomes. In welcoming the children, Jesus is welcoming the lowly, the forgotten, and the outcast. The Kingdom belongs to the hurting, the hungry, and the hopeless.

It is our deep sense of the value of children that leads us to our equally profound anguish when children are abused or neglected. The neglect of children is not some far off problem. It is here. It is now. Forty-six percent of the children in the city of Spartanburg live in poverty, which leads to poor nutrition, hunger, and homelessness. In 2019, there were 1703 confirmed incidents of child abuse and neglect in Spartanburg county. Each one of the 1703 cases has a face and name and an anguished cry. This is why we are engaged as a congregation in ending child poverty in Spartanburg county. Hear again the commitment of our Session, Deacons, and congregation:

We resolve to take sustained bold action to transform Spartanburg fully into God's intentions. No longer will we accept systems and structures that disadvantage people according to race, gender, and economic status. We further resolve to work fervently to transform the structures that perpetuate poverty and racism.

Our commitment to ending child poverty flows out of the challenge of 1st John: "How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and see a sister or brother in need and yet refuses to help." God has blessed us with the world's goods and God's love compels us to share our resources with those in need.

There was a young boy named Jack who was removed from his parents' home. His birth father was deployed in the Navy; his mother would go out to play bingo at night and stay gone most of the night. She would leave Jack in his crib with a TV dinner. Alone in the apartment, he would cry with no one to hear his cry. When the social worker came to check on Jack, she found him in a dirty diaper with roaches eating his dinner in the crib. Jack was removed the home and lived for a number of years with a foster family that loved Jack and wanted to adopt him. When the family took Jack into their home, the parents and older children would take turns holding him, rocking him, and comforting him to ease his cries through the night.

One day, something happened in the home that required DSS to place Jack in another home. He came to live with us for six months. This is how we knew his story. His social workers were dedicated to Jack; they checked on him regularly; they sought the best for Jack. One morning at breakfast, Jack announced with

confidence that he was going to live with us a little while longer and then he was going back to his foster family. We did not know what to say as we did not know what would happen. By the grace of God, Jack was able to go back to the only home he remembered and to be adopted by the foster family that had loved him all those early years. When we took him to his family, there was a bedsheet painted with the words, "Welcome Home, Jack," hanging from an upstairs window. The neighbors had gathered in the yard to share the happy moment. In the house, the Christmas tree with all the presents were there waiting for him. They welcomed Jack home as their beloved child.

When I think about Jack, as I often do, I try to imagine him as a young adult living a blessed and abundant life with meaningful work to do and loving relationships with others. I see him this way all because of the social workers who worked tirelessly for his good and for family that nurtured him and healed him through their persistent love.

Our community is filled with boys and girls just like Jack. It is up to us to see that they live in healthy homes and are nurtured by a loving family and community. We want the wounds of every neglected, hungry, and abused child to be healed. We want every child to come to know the joy of life in this world and blessings of a

gracious God. What are we doing to welcome the children?

Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs." And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.