

Just four verses - a seemingly simple story – a story that that some of us have heard many, many times. A dramatic, emotional, heartrending story involving rejection and welcome, exclusion and inclusion, pain and joy. A very human story, a very divine story, an ancient story, a very contemporary story. Not cute, but cutting, not tidy but untidy, not an “aw shucks” experience but a “now what?” examination.

The children had been brought by their parents to Jesus not because the local “Stay and Play” was closed for renovation, not because the parents were determined to take their children everywhere, not as an afterthought, not just for fun. These children were being brought to Jesus with the specific purpose that they would know and experience the embrace of this Rabbi and Teacher who was ready to welcome and bless all sorts and kinds of people normally excluded by the religion of the day.

As we allow this passage to get inside of us we must not inject any romantic or modern ideas of childhood into the New Testament times. Back then, children were not regarded as innocent or even as individuals— they were pretty much “non-entities,” kept out of the way of adults until they arrived at an age of understanding. Children were among those excluded and neglected by society. Census records of the time show that younger children were often not recorded or listed since due to high rates of infant mortality the truth was that only some would make it into adulthood. Children were closed out by the norms of society in the same ways as women, tax collectors, sinners, lepers, and Gentiles. And so it was that Jesus reached out to the children in the same way as Jesus reached out to all who were rejected.

The contrast in the attitudes and reactions and behavior between the disciples and Jesus could not be greater.

The disciples spoke sternly to the people bringing their children to Jesus – Jesus spoke gently and warmly.

The disciples sent the children packing – Jesus invited the children in.

The disciples built a fence, a barrier to exclude - Jesus took the children in his arms in a loving embrace.

The disciples rejected the children – Jesus rejected rejection and lovingly embraced the children.

In our English Bibles we hear that Jesus “took them in his arms” – a phrase that translates a compound Greek word that literally means to “bend the arm” as in the act of cradling or enfolding. In “bending His arm” Jesus became one with the children, rejecting their rejection and enfolding them in the love that God has for all God’s children.

To be the Church of Jesus Christ, to be the Body of Christ means to welcome the little ones and the vulnerable ones not merely because it is permitted, but because it is the just and right thing to do. Rejecting rejection is the way of Jesus, rejecting rejection is the calling of the Church, rejecting rejection is the work of God!

In caring for and eagerly embracing these children and sharing with them the blessing of God, Jesus reveals the nature of the Love of God that filled and poured out of Jesus. Elsewhere in the Gospels we

Sermon: Rejecting Rejection

see Jesus choose a strikingly maternal image to describe the nature of this love of God, “How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing.” This image of a hen protecting her chicks appears several times in the Hebrew Scriptures in Deuteronomy, Ruth, in Psalms and Isaiah. Jesus, of course, knew these Scriptures well, so it is no surprise that Jesus uses such tender words to describe His attitude towards and welcome of the “little ones.” By comparing Himself to a mother hen, Jesus knows very clearly just how far a hen would go to protect and gather the children she has nurtured into life. Jesus knows that this is how far He will go for the sake of all the “little ones”.

This truth about the caring love of God expressed in the words and actions of Jesus, declared in Jesus’ life and death and sealed in Jesus’ resurrection is truth with a capital “T”! The caring love of God in Jesus Christ is a Truth that we need to allow to permeate our entire existence. It boggles my mind that, over and against such a clear and obvious witness of Scripture, that there are still Christians who are motivated by the desire to categorize, to divide and to exclude!

To express the fierce, tender love of God, rejecting rejection, Jesus overrules the disciples who had sent these little ones away. Today, Jesus still overrules any and all who would imagine that they represent Jesus by preventing any from coming close to be welcomed and blessed and changed by Jesus.

To express the fierce, tender love of God, rejecting rejection, Jesus gathers the children in His arms and welcomes, embraces and blesses them. Today, Jesus continues to share friendship, fellowship and love with all the children of God.

To express the fierce, tender love of God, rejecting rejection, is both the center and the circumference of our lives as friends and followers of Jesus.

To express the fierce, tender love of God, rejecting rejection, is both the sum and substance of our life as a church.

To express the fierce, tender love of God, rejecting rejection, is what it means to be the Body of Christ, the Christ whose arms and heart were and are always open in welcome to all who come seeking God’s blessing upon their lives.

To express the fierce, tender love of God, rejecting rejection, is the inspiration and motivation, and needs to be the result and the outcome of our Stewardship focus this fall. “Stepping Up and Reaching Out” means being ready to together express the fierce, tender love of God, rejecting rejection, by devoting our lives, by committing our time, by using our talents and by giving our money. While it is certainly true that with God, all things are possible, from a human level, our church can only be as strong as we allow it to be. As we Step Up in the giving and sharing of all our resources, as we Reach Out in faith and love and welcome, we will fulfill our calling to be the Body of Christ.

TODAY, right here in Rock Hill, there are plenty of God’s little ones who need to receive, through us, a welcome, an embrace, a blessing from God.

TODAY, right here in Rock Hill, there are needs and opportunities where we have a clear sense that God is asking us to step into as we give faithfully and fully.

TODAY, right here in Rock Hill, God still desires to be rejecting rejection, as we include and involve, as we share care and concern.

TODAY, right here in Rock Hill, right here in Oakland Avenue Church, God has blessed our lives with the resources that God needs TODAY, for God's work beginning right here in Rock Hill and extending to every corner of the world!

TODAY, this year, is the time for each and all of us to be generous as we make our personal response.

TODAY, this year, is the time for some of us to make special and particular gifts and contributions, out of all that we have received we are all able to pledge and give beyond what we have been able to do in the past.

TODAY, when we combine the generous gifts from the entire congregation with some special gifts and graces, our church will be able to Step Up and Reach Out in compassionate love and faithful service, rejecting rejection as we share God's love with all. In such a community, in this community – Rejecting Rejection - we will continue to receive and share the Kingdom of God, as little children. Amen.