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First, I'd like to thank Nathan Scalise, Ally Kemp, Isabella Hannigan and Amanda DeOliveira and the Youth Praise Team for helping lead worship this morning.

Our scriptures today point out just how important our young people are to God and also to adults. They can be a great help to us in the area of faith and the Bible says they can teach us about the kingdom of God.

When we talk about the Kingdom of God, what comes to your mind? Do you know where it is? What it's like or how to get there? We pray for it to come every week when we say the Lord's Prayer. But how much time do we spend thinking about it after that? For the disciples the idea of the kingdom was born in their spirits generations earlier. Their journey toward the Kingdom of God really began along time ago when the children of Israel were living in a cruel kingdom as slaves working for pharaoh making bricks in Egypt.

The Children of Israel wanted to leave, they wanted---needed a better life. There are people living in nations around the world who can identify with their desire to in live safet and freedom.

And then one day, God sent them someone to lead them to another place that was better...a place called the promise land. All they had to do to get there was believe. Their trip was long and hard. They faced many challenges.

Yet, some of the hardest times they had was when they faced an enemy that proved to be more dangerous than any they could see, the enemy of doubt and disbelief.

As they walked along, they told each other stories about the new and beautiful land...stories about the gardens they would plant and the food they would grow, a place that was lush and abundant, flowing as it were with milk and honey.

They talked about the kind of houses they would build and how nice it would be to settle down in their own place, to look out the kitchen window while they were doing the dishes and see the kids playing in the yard.

And then one day they finally reached the boarder, but before they went in, Moses sent 12 men to go in and get a closer look at their new home, sort of like a group of realtors and inspectors. Everybody was excited. They eagerly waited for the good news.

But when the men returned they brought bad news. They affirmed that the land was indeed beautiful and full of fruit and everything they needed to plant their gardens and vineyards.

But, they said, we can't go in because the people living there are big and scary, they're so huge they make us look like grasshoppers. Their cities have big walls around them and surely their army will squash us. Their unbelief caused fear that spread through the community.

They focused on the wrong thing. They were more focused on what they were afraid of, rather than on the power of God to help them.

The people were crushed and cried out with anger that they had been dragged through the desert only to get to a place they couldn't go in to.

But, two of the men who went in for a look had another perspective. They said the land was good, and yea the people are big, but hey, we have God on our side and with his help we can surely do it.

Well, their words fell on deaf ears and the people cried and complained. Their faith had failed them. They even talked about stoning Moses.

This didn't sit to well with God, so he told the ten men who scared everyone with the bad news and all the adults that they wouldn't be allowed in, only their children and the two men who believed God could do what he said, would be allowed to enter.

The scripture doesn't tell us what the kids were saying while the adults were complaining, but after a long trip, and perhaps a thousand "are we there yets", I bet they were saying to their parents, come on we can do it, let's go.

The disciples and every other Jew knew that story. And they were living in that land, the land of dreams given to the children of their ancestors. But the "Promise Land" felt less promising.

Living under Roman rule, the disciples were part of many who thought that the Messiah would come, set up his kingdom and overthrow tyranny, bringing renewal and political freedom from centuries of foreign oppression.

"The Roman occupation of Israel (63 BCE.) was the latest in a long line of invasions beginning with the Babylonians (539 BCE), then the Persians and the Greeks.

In Jesus day, there was a two-tiered system government, the Roman overseers and Jewish leaders.

At this time, the family of Herod the Great was very prominent. They were known for their oppressive rule.

One of Herod's sons, Archelaus, wielded his power in Jerusalem with such brutality, that Rome replaced him with one of its own governors, Pontius Pilate, who as you know was the governor under whom Jesus was crucified.

Another son, Herod Antipas, was responsible for killing Jesus cousin, John the Baptist.”<sup>1</sup>

Plus there was a mixture of different social, political and religious systems, including;

- The Zealots, who didn't like the Romans and fought against Roman oppression.
- The Pharisees, sort of a working class who didn't like the Sadducees, and believed in both the Oral Law and Written Law.
- The Sadducees, an elitist class who didn't like the Pharisees, rejected the idea of the Oral Law, and insisted on a literal interpretation of the Written Law;
- And The Essenes, who didn't like anyone and separated themselves in a monastic-like setting. The group most known for this in Jesus time was the Qumran community who lived an ascetic life waiting for God to intervene in human history.

Jesus and the disciples were living in a complicated time with all the various groups in conflict. The Promise Land needed peace. You can see why they would embrace the idea of the coming of God's Kingdom.

One day Jesus and the Disciples were talking about what things would be like in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Jesus words about the kingdom was a message of hope and promise,

- “It's like a mustard seed planted in a field. Although it's the smallest of all seeds, it becomes the largest of garden plants.”<sup>2</sup>
- “The Kingdom of Heaven is like a treasure that a man discovered hidden in a field.”<sup>3</sup>
- “It's like a fishing net that is thrown into the water and gathers fish of every kind.”<sup>4</sup>

But his words were also hard to understand, not following the logic and teaching they were used to.

- Saying “many who are first now will be last then; and those who are last now will be first then.”<sup>5</sup>

***About that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who is greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?” Jesus called a little child to him and put the child among them. Then he said, “I tell you the truth, unless you turn from your sins and***

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<sup>1</sup> Jesus Central.com. Life of Jesus – First Century Context of Palestine (Israel).

<sup>2</sup> *Holy Bible : New Living Translation*. Wheaton, Ill. : Tyndale House, 1997, S. Mt 13:31

<sup>3</sup> *Holy Bible : New Living Translation*. Wheaton, Ill. : Tyndale House, 1997, S. Mt 13:44

<sup>4</sup> *Holy Bible : New Living Translation*. Wheaton, Ill. : Tyndale House, 1997, S. Mt 13:47

<sup>5</sup> *Holy Bible : New Living Translation*. Wheaton, Ill. : Tyndale House, 1997, S. Mt 20:16

***become like little children, you will never get into the Kingdom of Heaven. So anyone who becomes as humble as this little child is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven. "And anyone who welcomes a little child like this on my behalf is welcoming me. (Matthew 18:1-5)***

Jesus just identified the problem. The desire for status and prominence has been an issue since the earliest days of the church. In asking about who would be the greatest in the kingdom, they missed the point.

The point is, unless they turn from their sins, and become like children they won't have to worry about who's the greatest, because they won't even get into the kingdom. Their faith wasn't working.

They, like their ancestors so long ago, needed to be reminded of the promise, it was still being fulfilled, there was more to come, they only had to believe...but they were held back by the miss guided focus that had once kept their fathers from entering the very land they were now standing on. Relying on their own understanding and reasoning, they still hadn't figured it out.

For the most part, the world still hasn't figured it out. What we're doing isn't working. Wars and rumors of wars, fighting and injustice, classes of people and corruption that keep people down, poverty and starvation...people still looking for the wrong thing, they still don't get it.

We all need the hope the kingdom offers. The world needs the hope of the kingdom. Yet, the Gospel of Mark warns that when Jesus was speaking about children, Jesus said, "the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these. *I assure you, anyone who doesn't have their kind of faith will never get into the Kingdom of God.*" (Mark 10:13-16 NLT) So, the way they should turn away from their sin, was to stop believing like adults and start believing like children

A kindergarten teacher gave her class a "show and tell" assignment. Each student was instructed to bring in an object to share with the class that represented their religion.

- The first student got up in front of the class and said, "My name is Benjamin and I am Jewish and this is a Star of David."
- The second student got up in front of the class and said, "My name is Mary. I'm a Catholic and this is a Rosary."
- The third student got in up front of the class and said, "My name is Tommy. I am Baptist, and this is a casserole."

Faith itself is not easy to symbolize, but Jesus said if we are looking for it, we should look to our children.

The children in Matthew's text show us the two main ways we can become like them.

**The first is to be humble:** The expressions, "turning around" and "becoming like children" are both referring to the same thing of letting go of the standards and values of the natural world and submitting to God's standards and values.

In a world left to its own devices people are continually trying to lord it over one another; the rich over the poor, the intelligent over the simple, adults over children, man over woman, whites over blacks – on and on it goes. But it should not be so with believers; rather let the greatest among you be like the youngest and the leader like the one who serves.<sup>6</sup> (Lk 22:26)

Jesus said to humble ourselves as children. He was talking about their humble dependence on others. While children in Jesus day were loved, they had no status. Well aware of his need, the little child doesn't worry about his status; his focus is on his parents who meet his needs.

Philippians 2:3 encourages us to practice humility by considering others better than ourselves.

**The second way we can be like children is to be trusting:** In order to participate in God's kingdom, we must be ready to learn God's ways and live like children totally dependent on their parents.

Little children are receptive and accepting. You don't see toddlers on the playground lamenting about how many bills their parents have or worrying about whether they will have groceries that week. They are trustful.

While most adults stood at a distance, not responding to Jesus when he called them to him, the children came to him immediately, without reservation or pride, but humble and trusting.

In going to Jesus, the little children showed trust. If you think about it little children usually shy away from adults who approach them, they hide behind their mom or dad. We should have the same attitude of trust for God that little children have for their parents, learning all over again what it means to be helplessly dependent, completely surrendered.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Douglas R.A. Hare. "Matthew" Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching. (John Knox Press. Louisville, 1993) Pp 208-210

<sup>7</sup> Douglas R.A. Hare. "Matthew" Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching. (John Knox Press. Louisville, 1993) Pp 208-210.

The children were better kingdom examples than the adults.

ILLUSTRATION: Some of you may have heard me share this story before, but it's a perfect illustration of a child teaching an adult about faith.

Prior to moving to our last church in the country, our kids were attending school in the city. At a high school of more than 4,000 kids, Katie was thriving.

- As an incoming Freshman, she tried out for and made Varsity Cheerleading Squad
- She was in the national honor society
- The foreign language honor society
- The science honor society
- She was a thespian and had top roles in several plays
- She took state with her viola
- She was in the schools top vocal group
- Her picture is still on the wall of the auditorium

Everything was going great. And then we moved at the beginning of her junior year when I accepted a call to a church in a much more rural setting. I learned how rural it was when I called the school to set up a tour and they answered the phone, "high school."

When Dave and I took Katie on the tour of her new high school, there were huge differences.

- Instead of a sprawling campus for thousands, the school was a small one story for a couple hundred.
- Instead of a performing arts theater with stadium style seating, a rotating stage and a drop down orchestra pit, there was a room with a stage and folding chairs.
- There was no orchestra,
- no competitive choir,
- no national honor society,
- Academically, she was already beyond many of the classes the new school had to offer.

Talk about being humbled.

My heart sank as we walked along. Fear began to take hold, I couldn't imagine how competitive she would be in her college standing coming out of this little school I just knew I was ruining her future.

Kelley was off at college, Kerry was in grade school and Kristy was just starting high school. Katie was the one with the most to lose.

When we got back home, I was sitting, worrying, just crushed.

Katie came in and sat down by me and I told her how sorry I was about what we were doing to her, and she said, "Don't worry mom. God loves me! He wouldn't call you here to hurt me; he must have something great in store for me." She knew God loved her and that was enough. Boy did God speak to my heart.

I learned again that day, that we enjoy God's kingdom by faith, when we believe that our Father loves us and will take care of us. In really believing that, there is freedom to relax, we have no fear of the future, because we know we're loved and that's enough. I can just see Jesus, sitting around a wooden table in a courtyard, just outside the door of a house, a child in his lap, other kids leaning on the chair and the table, waiting their turn for him to bless them. They were content and happy to be with Jesus, his blessing was enough.

In contrast to the disciples who were trying to figure out which of them were going to be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

A whole generation of people missed entering the promise land because of faulty faith. Jesus doesn't want anyone else to miss out on the promise of the kingdom.

Adults can make things so complicated and many have made religion so difficult and hard to understand, that people stay away from church.

But faith is not the same thing as religion.

He was saying, religion is not going to get you into the kingdom, your faith is. And faith is all about your relationship with me.

Look at these children how easily they come to me. They don't have great "religion" but they do have great faith, simple, humble, trusting.

Learn from them for they have the kind of faith that works!

#### **LET'S PRAY:**

Dear Lord, you have such a wonderful way of showing you love. Thank you for giving us a constant illustration of the way you want us to believe through our children. May our children retain that sweet trusting faith as they grow. Protect them from the cynicism, doubt and disbelief that so many adults struggle with. Help us to humble ourselves enough to learn from our kids. And help us to reach deep inside and remember what it

was like when we were unafraid, back to a time when we simply enjoyed the day when we went out to play without fearing the world and danger around us, trusting that we would be ok. Help us to grow in our relationship with you looking to you as our parent. Help us to let go of the things that create distance between us and you and just come to you. Help us to hear your voice in our heart calling us your dearly loved children and to let that be enough. And may your kingdom come and end the injustice and fighting between the nations and kingdoms and people sharing this world. That we may all lift our voice together with children all around the world in worshiping you. In Jesus name. Amen.

**BLESSING: (Psalm 8:1-2; 1 John 2:28; James 4:10)**

Psalm 8:1-2 says Our Lord is majestic, his name fills the earth! His glory is higher than the heavens. He has taught children and infants to tell of his strength, silencing his enemies and all who oppose him.

So now, dear children, continue in him, so that when he appears you will be confident and unashamed before him at his coming. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up. Go in peace! Amen.