

FIVE FORKS BRETHERN IN CHRIST CHURCH
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SCRIPTURE: Matthew 18:1-10

DATE: November 1, 2020

SUBJECT: Children

Series: For Someone of Your Age

THEME: Children are a Treasure from God

SERMON: "Recovering a Vanishing Childhood"

(credit – Hannah Anderson, Bryan Wilkerson)

Introduction to series

About a year ago I was moving a stack of tables and pinched my hand. One finger swelled up, turned black and blue and hurt like crazy. After a few days and some prodding from my wife, I went to the doctor to get it checked. She examined my hands and compared them and I pointed out where I had some pain in other fingers as well, and that I could not grip very tight like I used to etc. etc.

They took x-rays and then I met with the Dr. and she said, "well, there are no fractures and in fact... **For someone your age...** your hands don't actually look that bad." You just have old farmer hands. I thought, wait a minute, Are you telling me you can't fix these hands? Are you telling me, I will just have to live with them this way and get used to the pain. Are you telling me I shouldn't expect as much out of my hands anymore. What do you mean, For Someone Your Age...?

See I've been used to thinking, "I'm still young and strong and agile."

Shortly after that, I developed a slight cold and cough. And one afternoon as I walked from my shop to the house about 25 yards, and I noticed I was out of breath and wheezing and I sounded like my father when he was in his early 80's. I thought, I'm too young to be this old.

Then Covid hit and my daughter called to remind me to remember that I was in the group they call the 'high risk' group. You know, the elderly members of the population. So I should be extra careful.

I began to wonder, am I getting to an age where I am to lower my expectations for myself, my body and my mind and my activities? That is tough to admit and accept.

I've been thinking about the role and expectations of all the different generations/age groups in the church, as we learn to become a church that follows Jesus. And doing it in a way that includes everyone, from the youngest to the oldest. So we want to wrestle with the question:

What does each generation need from the church, and what can each generation contribute to the church?

I've called this short series: **"For Someone Your Age..."**

The psalmist writes"

Psalm 145:4

One generation commends your works to another; they tell of your mighty acts.

At first glance it might seem that the older ones are to teach the younger ones and the younger ones are to simply learn. That certainly must happen. But, have you ever learned something profound from someone younger – even a little child? Can the youngest among us be our teachers as well? Jesus thinks so.

So for the next four weeks we want to consider **4 different age groups** and how we can learn from each other and teach each other. **Children, Young people, Middle agers and Seniors.** Where you make the breaks in the ages groups is a little bit arbitrary. But today we want to begin with the youngest group, our children.

I've titled **today's** message **"Recovering a Vanishing Childhood."**

Recently there was a rather disturbing movie shown called **"Cuties."** I have not seen it, and do not plan to. But I understand it is about the sexualization of young girls. The show was provocative enough that it received significant publicity. Many, of course, condemned the

creators of the movie. But one writer asked a different question for all of us to consider. **What kind of a culture exploits their young this way?**

To answer this question, we must understand the degree to which our society does not value childhood in the first place. Ultimately, in our society children are threatened by both predators and a culture that does not hear them when they cry out for help.

The recently exposed, but long running scandal in women's gymnastics is a case in point. Many adults, including even some parents, seemed more interested in protecting the powerful organizations and high profile coaches, who might propel their child to fame, than in protecting the young girls and hearing their cries for help. Children were being exploited rather than valued. As one author commented:

We prize efficiency. Children are inefficient. We value wealth creation. Children are costly and can't pay their own way. We honor independence and radical autonomy. Children are dependent and hamper our freedom. We drive hard and fast toward "the objective." Children like to take the long, meandering route home. (Hannah Anderson)

Because of this, we try to shorten childhood. Perhaps without being aware of it, we try to get our children to grow up as quickly as possible. For various reasons. And sadly what gets lost is their precious and important childhood. Anderson continues:

"Instead of making space and time for children to be children, we under-support and undervalue those who care for our children. We ask fifth-graders to map out their career goals. We hire private coaches to improve our child's athletic skills, **not** so they can enjoy playing with their friends, but to prepare them for the "future." And so we rush our kids through childhood.

Now, if you are outraged by the exploitation of children, you're in good company. In Matthew 18, Jesus warns that those who would harm children will face his wrath. Jesus says:

"It would be better for them to have a millstone hung around their neck and be thrown into the sea than cause a little one to stumble."

Today's message is not about how badly others are exploiting children so we can point fingers. Jesus' strong words did not come from a focus on child trafficking or pedophilia. Jesus' words are rooted in an understanding of **the goodness of childhood and the unique role that children play in God's kingdom.** That's what we want to spend the rest of our time considering this morning, so we learn to value our children and their childhood.

Just before Jesus warns us that we must not harm children, he commands us to actively welcome them.

The disciples had asked him, "Who is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven." That seems to be a common curiosity for people, doesn't it? Who is the GOAT – "Greatest Of All Time." In almost every arena of society, we ask this question. Basketball, business, musicians, world leaders, richest person ever, you name it. We want to know – who is the greatest? And behind it, I think is the desire – to be the greatest – pride, one of those fatal sins Pastor Shaun talked to us about recently.

Jesus does not scold for asking the question, he just surprises by how he answers. The disciples ask: Who is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven? Jesus says:

"Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever takes the lowly position of (or becomes as humble as) this child, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me." (Matt. 18:2–5)

Jesus has just elevated some of the **lowest** and **most vulnerable** in society, the children, to the highest place of honor. In first century Judaism children were not important except for how they enhanced the status of the father. They were little more than a piece of property. They could not fight in the army, they had not had time to gain wisdom, they could not lead, they could not pile up riches – they counted for very little – except for how they could enhance the father.

In earthly kingdoms, military might, and earthly wealth is what mattered. It was the ability to overthrow and control others. To outsmart your opponent. To outmaneuver them in

business and assert your superiority over others that mattered. Make others depend on you and submit to you. That is how you became the greatest. The disciples thought this way.

Not much different from the way societies and people think today, is it?

But Jesus' Kingdom is so different. It is the person who becomes like a little child who is great in Jesus' kingdom. Let us not miss this point - Jesus tells his disciples and other adults – **they must change and become like little children.**

Jesus is not saying, "I will take the humble, vulnerable, lowly child and build them up to be great," in ways we typically understand greatness.

We so admire the stories of people who came from nothing. They were poor, uneducated, with no pedigree, but through hard work and perseverance they became rich, powerful, a champion, famous. Those stories impress us, but not Jesus.

Jesus tells his disciples they must "**change, and become like little children.**"

In Jesus' kingdom it is the truly humble, dependent, servants who are already great. Not that they start out lowly and God makes them great and famous achievers. They remain great if they remain humble, dependent, faithful followers of Jesus.

This is so hard for us to grasp and accept because we are so prone to desiring greatness and status. So what can we, the older generations in church, learn from the children and childhood? Let's consider several things that make childhood good. Things that we should value and try to recover and even imitate so we are fit for the kingdom of heaven.

The goodness of childhood is that

a. Children remind us of our own dependence on God. This is one of our core values at Five Forks – unabashedly recognizing that we must rely on God.

We were reminded earlier that our society values **independence** and **radical autonomy**. We quickly say things like, "You can't tell me what to do. What I choose to do, I

can do myself. I don't need your help or your interference. Thank you very much." This characteristic has become all the more evident as we have tried to navigate and control Covid, hasn't it. But it has been there all the time. It's not a new attitude.

Children, by being children, are among the most vulnerable, limited, and wholly reliant on others to provide for them, help them and protect them. If we take the time to observe the children we quickly see this. In many ways they are so small, weak, and helpless. Sometimes we long for the day when they will be able to take care of themselves. And yes there is a part of growing up and maturing where that is important.

Children remind us **how we** must come to the kingdom of God. We must come to the kingdom of God totally dependent on God. Pastor Shaun, just two weeks ago, shared with us how the Israelites were to gather just enough food for one day at a time. So they would remember their dependence on God, just for staying alive. Jesus said, Pray like this: "Give us our **daily** bread." Again a reminder of total daily dependence on God.

In Matthew 18 Jesus said: "**Unless you become like little children, you shall never enter the kingdom of Heaven.**"

This is a pretty strong indictment against our view of independence and autonomy.

Children show us the only way we can come to and live in, the kingdom. Totally dependent on God. The very things that our culture disdains about childhood are the very things that God honors.

So, for just a moment, right now, think back as far as you can in your life – when you were a young child. Think about whom you depended on, and for what? **(Pause)**

I can remember a few things back as far as about 3 or 4 years old in Africa. One vivid memory I have as a 4 or 5 year old was trying to push over an old mud and brick wall my dad was taking down so he could build a new building. I remember pushing and pushing on that wall that looked like it was ready to fall on its own. It didn't budge. Then a number of workmen stepped up to the wall and easily pushed it over. I had to depend on their strength.

Now, shift your thinking to God, and ask God to help you learn to depend on God that way. Children remind us to depend on God.

b. Children know their needs, and they recognize their limitations and often express them. “I’m hungry. I’m thirsty. Can you fix my dinner please?”

When we were out in Michigan recently visiting with family, my granddaughter, **Hadley** wanted to play spies, a game we have made up. Here we are in our disguises. And it was her idea to use the back of my pick up as a hideout. She knew she needed to get in the hideout. One problem, the pickup tailgate is head high on her. How does she get in to hide? “Pappy, would you pick me up please? It’s too high.” Oh I love it. I love it when my children and grandchildren still need me.

She knew her need and her own limitations. (She did not seem to know mine that well because she asked me to crawl in with her. But I persevered and made it in the hideout as well.)

In a similar way we need to know our needs and limitations. Sometimes if I need to have an uncomfortable conversation with someone about something, or if I am going to the Dr. to get a report on a test, I need to have the support and prayers of others. I may not be able to control my tongue or temper in the difficult conversation. I may struggle deal with my worry if the report from the Dr. is not good. So I want to learn to recognize my needs and limitations and learn to express them to God and to others.

In the same way that I delight in the requests for help from my children and grandchildren, and even other people, God delights in our requests for God’s help. Children teach us this.

c. Children are quite ready to relate to God on a personal basis – another one of our core values – experiencing God’s love and grace personally.

Another pastor shared this illustration:

Psychologist, David Heller set out to study children's attitudes toward God. He interviewed hundreds of 4 to 12-year-olds, asking them to draw pictures and write letters and

answer questions about God. Some of them were a bit off-the-wall. Like the 12-year-old who wrote a letter to God saying: "Dear God, how is it up there in heaven? How is it being the Big Cheese?"

Heller found a common thread running through them all. A 7-year-old drew a picture of himself sitting on the floor with God playing a board game. When Heller asked him what game they were playing, the kid said, "Life." A 9-year-old girl said: "I love God so much it's hard to put in words. I'd like to be in a palace with him in heaven—but not yet." As the children got older, they got a little more sophisticated, but still honest. A 12-year-old wrote: "Dear God, I had exams this week and I'm nervous about what I got on them. I know you can't help me since they're all done, or could you? Tell Mary I said hi. I'll talk to you later."

As varied as those responses were from child to child and age to age, the common thread was the children's readiness to relate to God on a personal basis—to include him in their daily life and experience. An 8-year-old boy said, "I don't know if this is what you're asking, but I feel closest to God when I'm rounding second base after hitting a double."

How do you relate to God? What are your prayers or conversations with God like? Are you worried that God won't approve of your questions, or your fears? Learn from the children. Children are most likely to enter into a personal relationship with God. Listen to their prayers. Listen to their questions. Notice their meandering and yet also direct way of interacting with God.

I believe children can teach us much about how to relate to God. How can you learn these things from children? Find a way to get around them and listen to them? Maybe you could work with them occasionally.

d. Children teach us to wonder in Awe

Another illustration with my granddaughter, Hadley, in Michigan. She started asking questions about the moon and the stars and the planets that would shine at night. And she wanted to show them to me. So she persuaded me that we just had to stay up till it got dark. That's almost 10:00 PM in western Michigan in the summer. We went out and stayed outside

for almost ½ and hour. Just looking up at the stars till my neck hurt: identifying the planets we could see and the phase of the moon, the constellations. She was just enthralled by it. I gained a renewed awe for the heaven's that declare the Glory of God. Just watching a little child exclaim over and over again how wonderful it was. Priceless lesson for me.

e. When we welcome Children we welcome Jesus

In a **George Barna** study: it was determined the most effective churches almost always were the most intentional about reaching and discipling children.

And it wasn't just because when you serve children well, you get the rest of their families. Based on Jesus conversation with his disciples where he said:

“Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.”

It follows that:

“When a church makes room for children, who are so important to God, that church is also making room for God to move in fresh and powerful ways.”

How do we welcome kids? Several suggestions. You have to be:

1. Relevant That is we have to relate to children concerning the things that **matter to them**. Some of those things may seem small and unimportant compared to the ‘big’ issues adults consider. Their cat is sick. Their classmate was mean to them. They lost their lunch box.

But these are big issues to a child and if we treat those issues as if they are not important, it will not be long before our children will go elsewhere to have their questions answered.

We learn from the children that God cares about every issue that is relevant to you and me – no matter how trivial it may seem to some.

2. If you're going to reach kids, you have to be honest,

When you don't have an answer, and just make something up; or if you avoid an answer because it is a hard answer – kids will soon catch on and begin to not trust what you say. We want to teach our children at Five Forks to ask questions. And we want to be honest with them. We want this to be a place where it is safe to ask any question even hard ones.

Again as adults, we must learn we can ask God, and hopefully each other, any question, even hard questions and get honesty, or people will not trust us.

3. If you're going to reach kids, you've got to be **friendly**, because kids won't hang around when they feel like they're not wanted. What does it mean to be friendly? Simple things: smile, greet them by name. Pay attention to what they tell you and ask follow up questions. Get down on their level – literally. It may mean getting down on all fours sometime and looking them in the eye.

4. If you're going to reach kids, you've got to **relax**, because they're going to knock over the furniture once in a while. Yes, we teach respect for property and valuing other people's creations, we must allow for accidents and mishaps. After all, doesn't God give us such grace?

These are all part of welcoming children. We do it because Jesus did it and because he says when we do, we welcome him.

How seriously must we take all of this? Well, Jesus issues a stark warning to his disciples. **A Warning not to neglect our responsibility** to nurture the faith of children.

6 If you cause one of these little ones who trusts in me to fall into sin, it would be better for you to have a large millstone tied around your neck and be drowned in the depths of the sea.

10 “Beware that you don't look down on any of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels are always in the presence of my heavenly Father.”

So, as a church, how can we continue **Making Children our highest priority?**

If we are to truly protect children, teach children and learn from children it will take a considerable amount of time, energy and resources by all of us being with children. We want to put a stake in the ground on this one.

It will require aligning our hearts with the heart of God who delights to care for children in their weakness, who celebrates them despite their inefficiencies, and who honors them as image-bearers of God, as little children.

It will require a willingness to disturb our own plans and preferences. We may need to give up some times when we want to sit and enjoy a worship service or a bible study, without being “interrupted by kids,” and instead, assist with children’s ministry by taking our turn being with them.

One of the most challenging things for Pastor Chris as we have attempted to re-open Children’s ministries at Five Forks since Covid, is finding volunteers to help. We have had to limit the number of children we accept in some activities because we don’t have enough adult volunteers. We can change that. We must change that. We want to change that.

To make it easier for you, someone is waiting out in the foyer at the connect station for you to indicate your willingness to be contacted to help. To give an hour or two here or there to be with the children God brings to us. I just signed up to teach AWANA children for 25 minutes once a month or so. Another couple just signed up to do phone listening with AWANA children. They are not able to meet with the children in person but can speak with them on the phone, or skype.

If Five Forks is going to be passionate about reaching people who are far from God and developing them into lifelong followers of Christ, we have to be passionate about reaching and developing children.

That's why we're committed to raising up enough volunteers that you'll have to get on a waiting list if you want to serve in children's ministry. We are creating opportunities for families to worship and grow together in community. Because reaching lost people, including children, is God's top priority. How can it be anything less for us?

PRAY