

“Who Are You in the Story?”

Sermon by Lisa Crismore

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Matthew 19:13-15

Then little children were being brought to him in order for him to lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples spoke sternly to those who brought them. But Jesus said them, “Let the little children come to me and do not stop them, for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs.” Then he laid his hands on them and went on his way.

Have you ever prayed with scripture using your imagination? In the book, *Simple Shoes*, the spiritual director leads the group through a spiritual exercise of putting yourself into the story of the scripture. It is like what our children do when they put on the tunics and the head gear of the disciples or shepherds. Or, they adorn themselves with angel wings and halos to announce Christ’s birth or his resurrection on Easter morning. For the children, they are acting out the story. As adults, we can use our imaginations to put ourselves in the story.

First, you begin to imagine the scene. What do you see? Hear? Smell? Feel? What is going on around you? Where is the main character? How big is the crowd? Who is there? What do they look like? What’s the mood of the scene? Invite and trust the Spirit to guide you as you watch the movie play out in your mind.

Once you imagine the scene, picture yourself inside the story. Let go of any desire for historical accuracy, and actively enter into the text. Watch what the characters do. Listen to what they say. Where does the Spirit invite you to participate? Which character are you? What do you say? What does Jesus say to you? What do you want? Engage in conversation with the characters in the text. Don’t worry about making things up. Trust the Spirit to speak and reveal God’s truth to you as you pray. What does God want you to know? (*Simple Shoes*; by Sharon Garlough Brown; InterVarsity Press; 2013)

Our text today is pretty familiar to most of us. We see it depicted in paintings. We have this scene of Jesus blessing the children in our corner classroom at John Knox. So, in thinking about using our imaginations for the text, we look to see what the scenery is for our story. We have no idea where this story takes place. It could be in a town square or a temple. It could be in a field next to a road. This is where my imagination takes me.

People have gathered to see Jesus. Word got out that he was to be there in that spot. They have come to be healed. They have come to learn from him. Since it involves small children, I would think it would be early in the day before nap time.

As I hear this story, my ears open up to the fact that the children were brought to Jesus by someone. Was it their parent, grandparent, family member or someone who just really loves them and cares for them? As a parent, I think about the sacrifices that I have made for my children. I think about how many times they were the priority in my life, especially when they were small. If I knew Jesus was going to be there on that day and at that time, I would want my children to be there for him to bless them and pray for them. You better believe it.

Then in my imagination, my thoughts go to the blessing in the story. The people bring the children to Jesus so that he can lay his hands on them and bless them. Have you ever had someone lay their hands on you to bless you? I have and it is powerful. I don't remember when I was baptized which would have been the biggest blessing of all. But I do remember when I was first commissioned to be a lay pastor or now a ruling elder of the church. All my loved ones and supporters came forward and placed their hands on my shoulders and others on their shoulders. The power of God was there. Perhaps, one of you have been blessed in this way when you were ordained as an officer in the church.

And then, have you blessed someone in this way? I have and the giving of a blessing can be even more powerful than the receiving. I have anointed many of you with oil. To put the sign of the cross on your forehead or hand is incredibly humbling. I will be returning to Rockville prison in 2 weeks and I will be washing the hands of these beautiful broken women. This blessing will be received by many with child-like tears for this will be the first time they will have felt God's love. The children of God come so that Jesus can bless and pray for them.

Who are the children in the story? The thing about praying with your imagination it can go in various directions. In the time when this story was written many commentators will tell you that the children were the lowliest people in society. They had no rights. Even though, you are not supposed to think about the historical context that is where my imagination took me.

Who are the children in this story? I was at the Presbytery office a couple of weeks ago for a CPM meeting. When I went to go take a break, I went to the ground floor to see the art exhibit which changes from month to month. This particular exhibit focused on homelessness. It was moving but what caught my eye was what was down the hall from this exhibit.

There were big portraits of children. There were about 15 of them. Most of them were boys. I was drawn to these beautiful faces. And as I looked closely, there were information on postcards next to these pictures. These children had names and it described their personalities. These children were up for adoption.

It also gave a description of what would be a good family match for them. They were children who needed one-on-one attention. Some needed to be in homes with only older siblings. Some could have a single-parent home where others needed a two-parent family. Some had special medical conditions. Some needed special love and attention as they worked through the trauma that they had experienced. Many of them needed stability and patience.

As I read this, it reminded me of going to the Humane Society when looking for a pet. But, these were children! It broke my heart. I could not imagine people not wanting these children. My daughter is a Social Worker and I have a lot of respect for her. She is the one who works daily with these children. These were children of God seeking a blessing and a prayer to be loved.

My imagination also went to an article I read this week in the Cenacle's newsletter. The Cenacle is a convent for retired nuns and a retreat center in Chicago where I stayed a year ago. In this newsletter, Sister Marguerite Gautrees shares about her meeting with a man

who was talking about feeling invisible in his work. He questioned if anyone would miss him if he were sick. Would someone care for him or would they simply just want to replace him with someone else that had the same job skills.

As she left the meeting, this image of the invisible people stayed with her. She shared about her recent walk to the library when she passed a homeless man on the street. She stopped. As she gave him a dollar, she asked him what his name was. His eyes filled with tears. She told him that she would pray for him by name and asked him to pray for her. He thanked her with a hand shake and she knew that this was more than a handout on her part.

Another positive experience was the concerned bus driver who saw her running to catch the bus. He waited on her which she was grateful that she was not "invisible" to him. He told her that she should not run at her age (which I would say that from her picture that she is in her mid-70s)! He would wait on her. Who are the people we walk past or encounter in our daily lives and don't give a second glance much less bless them or pray for them?

I wonder if either one of these instances were like the children that the disciples were turning away. I always wonder why the disciples do this. You would think the disciples know by now that Jesus welcomes everyone. Is the crowd so big that they were trying to weed out people so only the important people could see Jesus? Were they tired and wanted to wrap it up for the day so they could move onto another town? Did they think Jesus had better things to do with his time or were they protecting him from being overworked? Whatever the reason was, it is clear they wanted to dismiss them. They wanted to send them away.

But, Jesus says, "Let the little children come to me and do not stop them! It is these children that the kingdom of heaven belongs." Then he laid his hands on them and blessed them. He prayed for them. Jesus welcomes everyone saying, "Come to me. Everyone is welcome!" I wonder if Jesus was teaching the disciples that one day he will not be there and they will be the ones to open their eyes to the lowliest and see the invisible people?

In this scripture, I wonder who am I in this story. Are their people who I keep from coming to Jesus? Am I the child who needs to be blessed and receive a prayer? Am I Jesus always ready to give or am I the people trying feverishly to get someone to Jesus?

Thanks be to God for Christ who comes into our lives and teaches us how to love each other and in turn loves and blesses all the children of God, even the broken, even the invisible. Amen.