

Luke 18:15-17

Preached for Stone Church of Willow Glen via Zoom by Rev. Sharon LeClaire

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## **Come as a Child**

There's a new phenomenon at restaurants these days. I'm not talking about fast food or drive-throughs. I mean places where the tables have tablecloths, there's a wine list separate from the menu, most everything on the menu is al la carte, and therefore for expensive! Families get dressed up. Dad wears a tie, son wears khakis – not jeans, daughter wears a lacy dress and mom gets out her pearls.

The server approaches wearing black vest and bowtie and recommends the wine that will go with the prime rib or leg of lamb. Then he leaves and what happens next? Father takes out his phone to check his meetings schedule, son takes out a tablet for Minecraft creating, daughter starts texting her girlfriend over the new boy at school and mom is playing international Scrabble on her phone.

They are spending well over \$100 to eat great food but what's important is that any of them could be sitting with any other three people and it wouldn't matter. There is no communication. There is not even any conversation. When the food comes, they eat with one hand and keep the other free to run their electronics...they are all very talented in doing that.

I wish I could say this is a fairytale. I wish I could say "Wouldn't it be awful if this ever happened?" But the fact is, it does happen ... often.

What is the family missing in their closed off little worlds away from each other? What is it that they are not doing by, not being really together around a table? They may be sharing food and space and even blood...but they aren't sharing themselves.

I was blessed in my lifetime to know four of my great grandparents, one on my father's side and three on my mother's side. On my mother's mother's side there were the Moldestads from Norway who loved us kids and played games with us and took us swimming and were very generous with their time. My great grandpa Moldestad called each of us "My right hand man," which we loved even though he would then beat us in canasta. On my mother's father's side was Grandpa Great who spoke very good English, but had such a thick accent, he was difficult to understand as he was from Sweden. He was a master carpenter and every day at noon in his later years, he watched reruns of Perry Mason – not sure how much he understood but he never missed a day.

These families were used to hard work and just getting by. Yet, the children and grandchildren never realized that. They didn't know that some people would call them poor. The family was happy and all the families around them in their neighborhood were about the same so no one really thought about being in need.

My father's mother was a very different story. She was very wealthy and lived the life of the 1%. She never wanted for anything and had all the luxury one could have. But her mother, my great grandmother was very different. She worked hard as a young widow with four kids to raise, then married into money but she was comfortable in it, and it didn't change her. She felt no need to wave it around as her daughter did. The neatest thing about her, my great-grandmother, Luella, was that she always preferred to talk to us kids. The grown-ups would be talking about the stock market, but she wanted to talk what we were studying in history — sometimes she could remember for real what a 20<sup>th</sup> century event was like. She wanted to know if we liked our teachers, did we have any friends, what's the best thing about school every day?

The point is, she made us feel important in a family that would rather we go away and read a book or watch TV just be quiet and out of the way.

So here are examples of 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century families. I'm sure you can identify with some of this. Now let's go back to First Century Palestine.

In Jesus' time, 2000-plus years ago, the society was based on an honor/shame system in which children had no honor or status. Let me explain.

Keeping your honor intact by following the law and having the right job and having a good family name meant everything.

Even Paul writes in Romans 12:10 "Love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor."

If you were born in an honorable family, you had ascribed honor. This would be like my Father's mother. They were not vulnerable to the ups and downs of financial changes as long as they lived within their means, which could be extravagant.

If you worked your way up the ladder and became part of the honorable group, you had acquired honor.

People with acquired honor were always being watched and evaluated by society to see if they were slipping from their status and into shame. They were not what we would call "old money."

They were much more vulnerable than those with ascribed honor because they didn't have years of honor and family pride to fall back on.

Jesus was raised in that system of Honor and Shame and the fact that children had no honor at all, no status at all.

When the parents brought their children to Jesus. At first the disciples tell the adults to take their babies away. Maybe they thought they were interrupting the important work they had to do. But Jesus said "No let me hold them and bless them."

Now if we think about what we see now on TV when the Pope goes through a crowd and people hold up their children for a blessing we might think it is almost superstitious. But in First Century Palestine, children's lives were anything but secure.

As I said before, children had no honor just because they were children. They were completely vulnerable to the elements, no stature in the community nor to any place in the family:

- Infant mortality was 30%
- Of those remaining, death before 6 was 30%
- And then of those, death before 16 was 60%
- By puberty 70% had lost one or both parent

Children were the first to suffer disease, war, famine. They held the same level in society as slaves. Orphans were the lowest of all

So with this information, you can see how important it was for these parents to come to Jesus with their children, for probably many of them were sick or would be sick in the coming year.

But that's not all Jesus says is it? He also says in verse 17: "Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it."

When Jesus says "as a little child" what does he mean?

Like the children he was blessing, we are loved without exception through the grace Christ offers. Think of a little child. What are the needs of a small child? Totally dependent for every need, cannot even walk without help, cannot provide food. A child is without words, and cries out for help when in need

The child grows, starts to learn in baby steps each part of the world and his/her own abilities. Does this little one do this alone? No, he or she needs parents as guides.

Those of you who are parents know you are responsible for helping that child meet the benchmarks for his or her age, keep them safe and most of all to guide that child unto adulthood.

Mark Twain is known for this quote: "Before I left for college my parents knew nothing. By the time I returned, it was amazing how much they had learned."

We have earthly parents, the ones who tried to guide us. But who is the parent of all of us? We call God to be father and mother to us. We are brothers and sisters of Jesus himself. Jesus offers us grace, the free gift of his love and compassion.

This blessing of Grace enters in and helps us connect so we naturally want to share our faith. We may open our hearts to serve others expecting nothing in payment. We may love even if we aren't sure if we will be loved back. We may work hard even if no one notices. We may share our treasure freely.

These examples are all coming from a self-less heart sharing God's love freely.

It is my opinion that we still live in an honor/shame society. Violence, poverty, political unrest, racism and even more cast a shadow of shame on our neighborhoods.

How many of us today still carry around shame? Those who lived through abuse and those who still do. Those who are shunned because of their sexual orientation. Women and also minorities who still make less than men for the same job.

What does that do to our ability to be vulnerable and share in meaningful conversations with each other.? Doesn't it keep us closed up into ourselves?

How many of us have opened up and been vulnerable with someone we thought we could trust and found out that was not a good choice? How painful is that?

But when we find the right person, the person God has placed on our path, being vulnerable, expressing those hard-to-show feelings, sharing those hurtful circumstances become like a shower washing us clean. We've made a connection. Our brains are wired for connection. Just as there are places for speech and sight and hearing there are places for love and fellowship and the desire to be with someone who understands us.

In a way, this same kind of conversation may have gone on a thousand years ago, 500 years ago, 100 years ago, last week. We are blessed by the grace of God in the same way Jesus blessed each child. They care for one another. They pray together

they talk WITH each other, not AT each other. They are alive with the spirit and vulnerable with each other.

This last verse tells us we must ALL come to God being vulnerable, like a child. Totally dependent on God for EVERYTHING we need: God promises to provide our physical needs, our ability to help others with love in our hearts only is found in God. Our protection and ability to withstand trouble is promised in the person of Jesus.

Let us go forward today with the attitude of a child: curious, spontaneous, eager to learn, willing to engage with others and feeling God's grace as close as our next breath.

Jesus calls us into life in the same way he welcomed children to come to him. Jesus calls us to love each other with kindness and compassion just as he loved the children. Jesus' grace is free, no money, no proving ourselves. Jesus calls us to share all of ourselves – with those we know and love, and those we just met -- and sometimes uses words.

Amen