

August 16, 2020 • School Blessing Sunday • Online Worship

## “Blessed to Be a Blessing”

Sermon by Tricia Guerrero



*Matthew 19:13-15*

*Some people brought children to Jesus so that he would place his hands on them and pray. But the disciples scolded them. “Allow the children to come to me,” Jesus said. “Don’t forbid them, because the kingdom of heaven belongs to people like these children.” Then he blessed the children and went away from there.*

Over the past few months, like many of you, I’ve found myself in front of a computer screen constantly - for work, for church, hanging out with friends and family, even for special moments like dance recitals, baby showers, graduations, the list goes on.

A friend of mine had a baby in June. The family is Jewish and so, in similar fashion to our Christian challenges right now with baptisms, they found themselves trying to figure out how to continue their traditions and ceremonies that celebrate a new baby.

One Jewish tradition, a Naming Ceremony, happens in the presence of family and friends, acknowledging God’s covenant of belonging and love for the child. During the ceremony, there is an opportunity for blessings, prayers and hopes to be said for the baby by everyone present.

Due to the pandemic, the Naming Ceremony for my friend’s baby was moved to Zoom. So, family and friends from all over popped up onto the screen, greeting one another, showing off their children, helping family members figure out how to get their audio or camera to work... a beautiful and noisy beginning like most large Zoom sessions.

I have to say, Zoom surprises me at times - I was doubtful going into it, but once the Rabbi got us all settled and we began, it was an incredibly meaningful experience. My heart felt so full of love and I was moved to tears as I listened to the prayers and blessings offered by family and friends for this little baby girl. It was a reminder that even though we have to find new ways, we can still be connected - offering blessings to others and being blessed in return.

Our story from Matthew today is so beautifully human: the good parents wanting a blessing for their little ones, a group of rambunctious kids running around and being noisy in the excitement to see Jesus, and then the disciples - monitoring the chaos and controlling the crowd. In the disciples’ assumptions, they reveal their prejudice and misaligned priorities. So, Jesus reminds them that the kingdom of God offers a great big welcome mat to those who are excluded and left out in our world.

A picture of our church courtyard comes to mind as I picture the kids in this Bible story. During the pandemic, our grass and courtyard area has become a safe haven for families in our neighborhood, a community park for families to safely play or rest or just get outside for a little while.

One Saturday I found a dad and his little girl playing with a soccer ball, another day a mom helping her little one learn to walk. During the weekdays, parents and caregivers sit in separate areas while kids play with their toys or run around, sometimes drawing or writing encouraging notes to the neighbors with chalk on the sidewalk. It’s become a sight of giggles, noise and joy, a place for taking in the fresh air. It’s a place that offers blessing to these families and in turn, their presence blesses us.

Jesus has this great way of reminding us that the people we overlook or dismiss are the ones who actually bring us closer to God, blessing us, opening our eyes and our hearts. In the story from Matthew, these children, in their innocence and messiness, invite the disciples to check their own prejudice about who’s deserving and who should be included.

A few years ago, my brother-in-law, Perry, got married in Japan and Adam and I went to celebrate. It was a special trip with family and friends travelling together, celebrating Perry and his new wife, Yumi, and their love for one another. In the midst of celebrating, Adam and I took a day trip to visit Hee-ro-shi-ma by bullet train. It was one of the most incredible places I’ve ever visited.

After World War 2, Hee-ro-shi-ma created a memorial to peace in the center of the town. The park commemorates the bombing of the city with numerous monuments and facilities that share the history of the people who were killed or impacted. We spent the day walking around and taking in the powerful stories of devastation and resiliency in the face of such tragic loss.

One of the stories we learned while there was about a little girl named Sah-dah-ko Sa-sah-kay. She was exposed to radiation at the age of two and later diagnosed with leukemia. Based on a traditional Japanese belief, Sah-dah-ko believed if she folded a thousand origami cranes, then her wish to recover would come true.

When she sensed that she was not going to get better from the effects of the radiation, she changed her wish and prayed instead for peace between the countries of the world. With every crane that she folded, she whispered, *"I will write peace on your wings and you will fly all over the world."* She spoke blessing for others in the midst of her own pain and loss.

When she died, her classmates were inspired to build a statue for all the children who died as a result of the atomic bombing, and schools around the country began raising money. In 1958, the Children's Peace Monument was completed and to this day, children bring folded cranes with them on trips to this monument, committing themselves to the way of peace.

This year on August 6th, the world observed the 75th anniversary of this tragic bombing. So many years later, this one girl's wish and hope in the midst of terrible tragedy continues to extend blessings to generations of children and people from all over the world.

Children open our eyes and our hearts if we pay attention. They offer us blessings as much as they receive blessings from us.

We all stand in need of receiving a blessing right now - in exile from normal, in exile from places in our community, from people in our families, from our beloved church sanctuary - but Jesus reaches beyond and into our exile to bless us, and to call us forward to bless others in new and creative ways, to offer blessings of care, encouragement and love.

Each year, we have a Blessing of the Backpacks here at church as children and teachers head back to school, a time of blessing and prayer offered with the church community.

This year, we're adapting and giving the blessing for the school year ahead a little different! We have shared blessing tags with the teachers and students in our Church, Preschool and Upward Bound House communities. We invite our teachers and students to have their blessing tag with them for this time of blessing coming up soon. If you haven't yet received one or know someone who would like a blessing tag, you can call the church office this week about extras.

This beginning holds a lot of unknowns this year and will take all of the strength, courage and hope that we have within us. For students and their families, for teachers and school administrators, and for our community as we support one another in this challenging time.

So as we receive a blessing today, whether a student in school or a student of life, I invite you to pray this week and look for ways God is opening your eyes and nudging your heart toward blessing - those blessings being offered to you and those blessings you are called to offer to others. Amen.