

“Some Bad News and the Good News”

Acton Congregational Church (UCC)

26 September 2021

Rev. Paulo Gustavo França

Texts: Psalm 8:1-9

Mark 10:13-16

*“People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them;
and the disciples spoke sternly to them.”*

- Mark 10:13

Prayer

Holy God,

We give thanks for this sacred time of meditation.

Give us spiritual curiosity

That can make room in our hearts and minds for your creative Word.

Speak to us this morning

And inspire your people gathered in-person and virtually

To use our brains, our hands, our voices, our faith and our love

To mend and heal our broken world.

In the name of our “cross-dead-but-risen Christ,” we pray. Amen.

There is one question that has been on the mind of parents, educators and social scientists alike since the onset of the pandemic: “will the kids be alright?” If you do a Google search, the results for this question generate a copious supply of blogs, news sites, and scholarly articles that detail not only parents’ ongoing concern for the well-being of their children but that also provide a host of metrics researchers are compiling to assess the impact of the last 18 months on kids. So far, scientific data shows us that young children, thanks to their still-developing immune system and naïve cells that fight off the coronavirus more readily, are much less likely to develop severe COVID-19 illnesses than adults. Although new variants of the virus do pose a greater threat to kids, especially to school-age children who cannot be vaccinated yet, what children advocate groups and researchers in the social sciences field have been noticing with great alarm is how the choices adults make to handle the pandemic continue to affect young people negatively and may have lasting consequences on them long after COVID has become a more manageable, hopefully, seasonal infection.

The Editorial Board of the New York Times said in an Opinion Essay published last month what many of us are reluctant to voice out loud – that the kids are not alright.^a Children are by nature extremely resilient. They can and often do live through tough times. They experience losses. Kids get seriously ill. They go through the ups and downs of life, including pandemics, but if they have a caring and supportive environment around them, children bounce back and grow up to live full, healthy and productive lives. But the pandemic has revealed that parents, politicians, religious leaders and

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society as whole have allowed our kids and their future to get entangled in our culture wars, in our conflicts over individual rights, in our struggles to define reality in America, in the divide we've created between progressives and conservatives, and in our inability to face a critical public health issue like the COVID pandemic together as grownups. For 18 months, we have been fighting over face-mask mandates and even now, with the highly contagious Delta variant putting more school-age kids in ICU's, politicians in several states are voting for bills that bar schools from requiring students and teachers to wear face coverings. The vaccines, which are safe and effective against severe COVID and hospitalizations, have become as divisive of an issue as abortion, gay rights or the 2020 presidential election. The Editorial Board of the New York Times accused our elected officials of being "**more concerned about reopening bars and restaurants than safely reopening schools that hold the futures of more than 50 million children in their hands.**"^b Our childish handling of the pandemic has become the major stressor in our children's lives. They have been the ones without power or a say who have had to face remote learning, isolation from their peers, school closures, outbreaks of the virus in their classrooms and communities, the possibility of getting sick in districts where vaccination is low, more school closures, in-home stress, gaps in their academic progress, and an uncertain future. Our adult culture is addicted to the junk food of toxic hyper-partisanship that sickens our society with acute divisions and our addiction is having an impact on our children's physical and mental health. Clinical psychologists noted that the generation COVID and their older peers have seen their childhood and youth redefined and many school-age kids are experiencing higher levels of stress, depression and anxiety.

I think we all know it, but it's worth saying it again: we could have fared so much better if, early on, instead of giving in to our childish tendencies and over-reacting to the pandemic and to our national politics, we had kept our focus on how to implement the mitigating strategies to contain the virus without letting our own anxious and uncompromising ideologies take over our kids' lives.

The unforgettable American cartoonist Charles Schulz put in the mouth of Snoopy one of the best tips I have ever come across on how to face our adult childish inclinations. In the classic Peanuts comic strip, Snoopy appears perched on top of his doghouse early in the morning, thinking: "**Sometimes when I get up in the morning, I feel very peculiar. I feel like I've just got to bite a cat! I feel like if I don't bite a cat before sundown, I'll go crazy! But then I just take a deep breath and forget about it. That's what is known as real maturity.**"^c

Real maturity is what our kids are asking us to show, practice and develop because they understand perhaps better than you and I do that they will not be alright, their future will not be ok, human civilization will not do well, and our planet will not support human life as we know it, if the adults in their lives don't take a very deep breath, forget about our peculiar impulse to keep living as we have always lived and begin to pay more attention to the voices, concerns, worries, hopes and dreams of young people.

A recent landmark survey revealed that the unsettling disruptions of the pandemic are not the only global issue weighing heavily on the hearts and minds of our children, especially of our youth. Climate change is also causing psychological and emotional distress in kids around the world. Carolina Hickman who specializes in climate psychology at the University of Bath in the UK even has a non-clinical diagnosis for the kind of negative feelings children experience when they talk about climate change – “*climate anxiety*.”^d

Anger, fear, anxiety, sadness, helplessness and powerlessness are the most common emotions shared by all the 10,000 kids who were surveyed in 10 different countries on the topic of global warming. Eight out of 10 young participants told the researchers that adults, including their own parents, have failed to do what is needed to preserve life on Earth. Half voiced a lack of hope for human civilization. Four out of 10 said that they do not plan to have children because they fear more frequent extreme weather, natural disasters, food scarcity, water shortages and loss of biodiversity will make parts of the globe uninhabitable. Two-thirds believe that governments are not taking climate change seriously enough to slow down the destructive effect of human activities on the planet. Most alarming and disquieting, all 10,000 kids around the world feel betrayed by us, the adults in their lives. They feel “*othered*” by us. They said that most adults in their lives make them feel as if their fears, worries and anxieties are not real or justifiable. They are afraid that their future may not be alright because we are just pretending to be listening while, in truth, adults are still conforming to the predominant narrative of the powerbrokers of the world who want all of us to believe that we are already doing everything that is realistically doable and possible to protect the environment.

Jesus said to his disciples, “***Let the little children come to me; do not stop them.***” Churches love to hear these words. We love to imagine Jesus opening his arms wide to welcome and bless bundles of smiling cuteness and adorableness. We like to think of ourselves not as the disciples who wanted to keep the kids out of Jesus’ way, but as Jesus himself so we tell each other that children and youth programs are our congregation’s priority because kids are the future of the church. Every church that interviewed me before I came to ACC asked if I had innovative and creative strategies to attract families with children. Our own church has not hesitated to put our money where our mouth is to show how much we care for our children and youth. We hired Charlotte as our part-time Director of Family Ministries to infuse our Sunday school program with new energy and called Andrew to nurture the faith of the kids in our Confirmation Class and in the youth group. No one can question that we welcome children with open hearts and open arms! It doesn’t matter if we hardly see the youth in our morning services or if the kids, in pre-pandemic days, were quickly ushered away from the sanctuary to go to Sunday school because, let’s be honest, little children do get fidgety and they make distracting noises and they do not always appreciate the structure and length of our services, so, yes, they get restless.

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The Gospel of Mark says that Jesus was indignant when he realized that his own followers, the same disciples who saw him place a child in their midst and say, ***“Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me...and... the One who sent me,”***^e those same people were turning kids away. In the original Greek, the verb the evangelist used to describe the disciples’ action is the same that appears in occasions when Jesus is rebuking or silencing evil forces and powers. It is as if the disciples assumed that children would take Jesus’ mind off the serious business of proclaiming the Kingdom of God and not in a good way. They thought that what Jesus meant by “welcoming children” was to keep them around, but at arm’s length, silent, almost invisible.

Jesus is extremely displeased with his friends’ childish behavior and he makes a point to give them a visual lesson on what God’s Kingdom looks like. He embraces the children his followers thought to be nothing more than bothersome nuisance. Jesus makes space for young people in his life and in his community. Once again, he reminds his disciples that he was willing to stoop down to pick up a child because their vulnerability, their openness to receive God’s blessings, their innate curiosity, their unfiltered love for life and their natural idealism help the faith community understand what is needed to live in the Kingdom of God. Jesus tells his disciples to let the little children come to him because they are not yet cynical about humanity or skeptical about faith. They still have hope. They still believe. They still want to do what is good and right. They are not yet satisfied with the world as it is but can still imagine a different world for everyone.

And it wasn’t enough for Jesus to welcome the children, he was looking for a more meaningful relationship with these human beings that were completely dependent on their parents and their community of faith to feel loved, accepted, valued, and empowered. In a beautiful moment of tenderness, Jesus takes the children into his arms and blesses them. He refuses to look at the kids around him in the same way his disciples had judged them. He does not see any of those children as insignificant and powerless; Jesus believes in their potential and appreciates their child-like wonder still unspoiled by adult childishness.

I was talking to a clergy friend recently about the absence of children and young adults in our pews and he made an intriguing observation. He said that mainline Christians for the last 50 years have been gradually making young people’s presence less noticeable in the church. While they are little, we offer children’s sermons every Sunday to carve out a brief space in our midst for children before they leave for Sunday School. In Confirmation class, kids are expected to show up in the services occasionally to fulfill the requirements for membership. Then they join the youth group and we only see them when there is a fundraiser for mission trips or on youth Sunday. We do not get to know the young people in our churches unless we are directly involved with youth ministry and we seldom worship side by side with them. And if young people do come to worship, we welcome them with arms wide open as long as they like the music we love, enjoy the hymns we sing, and do not try to change our cherished traditions or question

our doctrines. My friend believes that we lack the conviction that Jesus had about kids; that they are an integral and vital part of the church's present.

And if that's true; if we really believe that our children's and youth's voices matter and they do have a place in our church, we have to be real mature about it. We have to forget about our own strongly held adult opinions for a bit and be more intentional about creating a welcoming space where our kids feel safe to tell us their stories and what's in their hearts. Kids will not hang around the church if we do not take seriously their anxiety about the future. They will not come back to worship if they suspect that our faith has nothing to say about the reality of climate change or the pandemic. If we care about our young people, then we have to appreciate their idealism and passion for a world that may well be quite different from the one we created for them. Young adults will stop coming to church as soon as they can, if we do not show them that we do want to understand their concerns, their fears and their hopes and are willing to seek out tangible ways to support them emotionally and spiritually. Like Jesus, we too have to be willing to bless our children and the best way we can do it today is by showing them that Christianity and the church are not indifferent to their concern for the natural world, which we know is God's gift to all of us. As the psalmist says so eloquently, ***"O Lord... When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?"***

God does care about us. God does care for our children and about our future on this planet. As one theologian said so beautifully, the Earth is the fruit of God's womb.^f Young adults are right to question the way we have used our knowledge and technology to tame, dominate and exploit nature rather than seeking to relate to the environment in a way that is life-sustaining. Even our traditional theologies have taken this idea that we are above the natural world too far and have justified our destructive and exploitative relationship with the work of God's fingers. Our kids' voices are calling us to accept our God-given responsibility and privilege to care for the Earth. Rather than gradually letting the kids vanish from our pews, we need to invite and welcome them to join us so we do not stay stuck in our own childish divisions, ideologies and theologies. We have to practice real maturity and dare to let young people challenge us to live with a child-like hope for the possibility that the adults and governments of the world will also see that the time is now to put the well-being of our children and our planet ahead of our peculiar impulses to keep doing what causes the virus to spread and the climate to change.

We cannot deny the bad news about how the pandemic and climate change have affected our children negatively. We cannot dismiss climate anxiety as some kind of symptom of the emotional fragility of a younger generation. Young people all over the world are deeply distressed about what the future may look like for them and they are rightly blaming us for our inertia and complacency. The Good News is that Jesus showed us what to do. Let the children, the youth and the young adults come. Let their voices inspire us to take action. Rather than turning them away, let's bless their idealism and show real maturity by not leaving them alone in their anger, fear, anxiety, confusion

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and sense of hopelessness. Let's be the church that like Christ sees the potential in our kids and that will take seriously our responsibility to ensure that the world's children will indeed be alright.

“People were bringing children to Jesus so he could touch and bless them; and the disciples rebuked them. When Jesus saw what was happening, he was indignant and he said to his followers, ‘Let the children come to me, do not hinder them; for to those who are childlike belongs the Kingdom of God.’”

Let the whole church say: amen.

^a By the Editorial Board of the New York Times in The Kids Are Not Alright, Opinion, The New York Times, published on 21 August 2021 [<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/21/opinion/covid-education-schools.html>].

^b Ibid.

^c Charles M. Schulz in Snoopy Come Home, 1972.

^d Lulu Garcia-Navarro in Study Shows Young People Have A Lot Of Anxiety Around Climate Change, aired on Weekend Edition Sunday, NPR, 19 September 2021.

^e Mark 9:37.

^f Quoted by Tripp Fuller in The Homebrewed Christianity Guide to Jesus: Lord, Liar, Lunatic or... Awesome, p. 166 [Kindle Edition].