

Mark 10:13-16, Psalm 71:18
Declaring God's Power to the Next Generation
Sunday September 27th, 2015

I want to start today by introducing you today to an old friend of mine who was a mentor and prayer warrior for me. He watched my back and defended the ministry I was involved in for many years. Jim Lewis was in his early 80s when I met him. All his life he was a blue collar worker. His last job in Mesa Arizona was as a door to door milk delivery man. He went way back. He was about 5 foot 1 inch tall and weighed about 125lbs. In the early 60s he taught a Junior High Sunday School class that had over 100 Junior High students. He was a fierce defender of youth ministry.

He came into the Church office often and I would talk with him about what was going on with the Youth. He loved hearing about them from me and from his daughter and son-in-law who worked with me and the youth program for about 15 years. I would talk to him at times when youth ministry was hard and the criticism stinging.

One day I was talking with him about some parishioners who were complaining bitterly to me about the noisy messy youth. They had done it again, left a room messy. Jim said to me, **“Children are noisy and messy and they break things. It is how they learn.”** Most people forget this or don't know this so they complain. He helped because he often served on the Trustees and Administrative Council.

A story is told about a parishioner who complained to a church deacon about how noisy the youth were. The deacon's reply was, “If you want quiet go to a mausoleum. They are all dead there. This is a living church.” Children and youth are the church of today and tomorrow.

Yes, children and youth are noisy,... they are messy,... and they break things. And also they are expensive. Just go to the store Buy Buy Baby and you will see. My little "Sweat Pea" my first granddaughter will be here in just a few short weeks, and oh boy, what we have already spent.

My friend Jim Lewis was called home to God when he was about 91. And he was a fierce defender of children and youth ministry to the end.

Bill Kerr was the best male youth worker I ever had the privilege to work with. He was 60+ when he started working with the youth. He had retired from the steel mills in Steubenville Ohio. He knew the rough side of life. He was wise and unflappable. I always gave him the boys that were very difficult. Some of them that I could not stand to work with, but Bill did. He was amazing. He worked with the youth, I believe, until he was almost 70.

He was my best and I worked with about 36 volunteers at a time for the last 10 years of the 24 years I did youth ministry.

Our scripture today lifts up a challenge to us. Psalm 71:18 says, "Even when I am old and gray do not forsake me, my God, till I declare your power to the next generation, your mighty acts to all who are to come." This lifts up to us the challenge to pass on our faith to the next generation despite our age. Working with children and youth is not like being a football player. We don't age out.

Most football players are done by their early 30s if they last that long. Jim was in his 80s, Bill was in his 60s and when I retire I might just do that type of ministry again. It keeps you young. About the worst mistake I saw churches do, when I did consulting

for churches and their youth ministry, was to put someone working with children and youth just because they were young. No, working with young people is a gift and it brings joy when you exercise it. And you need some wisdom.

If you look up the stats on church attendance you would see how rare and precious it is to see children in worship. I believe the youngest generation of children/youth, which you see here almost every Sunday, only 2 to 3 % of their generation attends church. So we have an incredible challenge and opportunity. And I believe you as a church have grasped it!!

We had 96 surveys returned which was fantastic!! The first question was, **“What is your dream for Vista Church today and tomorrow?”** We had 67 responses to that question. Of those 67 responses 27 referred to things like: “to have a dynamic youth and children’s program.” “Youth program and youth growth.” “Families with children” “to reach more families” “Grow with new families.”

The motto picked by most people was,

“Our church is a family! Come join us: worshipping, learning, serving, caring.”

And the number one pick to the question, **“What aspect of Vista would you like us most to help grow?”** was

“Children/youth ministries.”

Now let me briefly explain the Gospel Lesson in light of this. I believe by the responses to this survey this congregation has already grasped its meaning, but I like to spell things out a bit. I have found that it is so easy to be misunderstood. One of the questions in the survey was **“Is there something new you would**

like us to plant?” I wrote that question thinking people would respond with new programs and ministries we could do. But if you read it plainly you can see why some answered, “More Saguaros” and “Plants that bloom.”

So, here’s the situation. Jesus was on the way to the cross and was under a lot of stress from his impending death as well as his ongoing teaching and healing ministry. His disciples sensed this and tried to keep the children away from Jesus for two reasons. First, they are noisy!

But also in Jesus’ day most children were seen as having no value at all. If someone had a baby and they didn’t want it they would simply leave it outside to die of exposure. The early Christian Church was known for rescuing and raising such babies.

Anyway, the disciples blocked the children and their parents from Jesus. Jesus found out and indignantly called for the children to come to him. He said, “He said to them, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I tell you,

anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.”

A lot of people read a lot of stuff into our scripture today about the characteristics of a child thinking these are what Jesus had in mind. Things like: **humility, simplicity, honesty, trusting, dependent and receptive.** These are all qualities of a child of God in the Kingdom of God, but the quality Jesus was highlighting that the children he blessed had was that of **receptivity.**

Remember he said, “**you must RECEIVE the Kingdom of God like a little child.**” The children Jesus blessed received his

grace without any achievements on their own. In our scripture they were completely passive and dependent. They were brought to Jesus by “people”. They weren’t directly spoken to by the disciples. They spoke to “the people who brought them...” Jesus spoke to the disciples and then finally gathered the children in his arms who simply received what God in Christ had to offer.

That is what this scripture is telling us we need to do to enter the Kingdom of God. To enter the Kingdom of God is to start a relationship with Jesus for Jesus Christ is the Kingdom of God. We must simply accept the gift that is offered. Not because we earned it. Not because we achieved it. Not because we did some good works. Not because we deserved it.

We enter the Kingdom of God, a relationship with God in Christ by accepting; by receiving the free gift that is offered. This gift is an offer that is given without conditions or dependent on us in any way.

We as Jesus’ disciples today can learn from those first disciples to not only get out of the way of children/youth/adults coming to Jesus, but we need to be the ones ushering them into Jesus’ presence for Jesus’ blessing.

Opportunities for our church abound!! This church is filled with educators, teachers, artists, musicians etc. We have potters, and painters, and singers, drummers, and musical directors.

Coronado school is just across the road from us a road that some describe as like the Mississippi or the Red Sea keeping children and youth away. There are quite a few children and youth in this area.

Think about this for a moment... almost all children today are

brought to church, by someone else; the “people” in our scripture today. Rare is the child anywhere in the US who walks by themselves to church much less anywhere else.

The idea for many successful children and youth ministries is that they target events and programs for the adults as their children/youth participate in a program at the same time. To get the kids you must first get the parent’s interest, because again incredibly rare is the child or youth who walks or bikes to church.

So the children’s area next summer is looking at putting on a “Fine Arts” camp here where all our artists and educators can get involved. It will wrap around a musical on a Biblical theme, which the children will be invited to come here to perform. And what parent will not show up for their child’s performance. It is a new form of VBS; a way to grow the church.

Churches have rhythms of growth and decline like all ministries do. When Jim Lewis worked directly with youth at FUMC of Mesa in the 1960s they had 100+ in just the Jr. High class. When I got there only about 13 youth were active in both the Jr. and Sr. high area combined. And then, after only about 8 years, we had a huge program going. In other words it was no sudden development.

Here is a picture of one of the children’s choirs about that time.



After I left a steady decline set in for many years but here’s a recent picture from that church of a district mission event.



The youth minister at that church is a young woman who was in my youth group as a youth. She now has two children of her own and look what she is doing!!!

Churches follow the rhythms of our wider society. During the “Great Recession” we had one of the lowest birth rates in years in the US. It almost shut down many preschools in the Tucson area, because preschool children had simply were not being born. But great opportunities I believe are coming for the future because I believe we are on an upswing.

Now I don’t believe we will every have huge youth group/children’s ministry in terms of numbers, because of where we are located, but I believe we can have the best one in southern Arizona. I believe the support is here. The Church council voted this summer that a search could start for summer interns to work with children/youth. These interns we as a church would mentor into ministry.

And our current youth, our wonderful youth you learned more about today who are helping as liturgists and ushers and later serving snacks have put their whole heart into seeing their program grow! They are asking to go on a mission trip next summer and they are using it as a recruiting tool to invite their friends to join them.

There will be attendance requirements, and I believe when new youth are recruited to be here at Vista, and go out in our name in mission, they will grow to love Vista Church and stay. Our current youth are modern day missionaries to our local community and I would like you to pray for them!!

Because of where we are located so close to Saddle Brook, Saddle Brook Ranch, Sun City etc we will always be and older church. But with the wisdom that comes with age, the commitment I have already seen, the dreams for the future; because of these and the presence of Jesus who invites the children to come to him we will continue to build a thriving children/youth program.

By the power of the Holy Spirit, **“We will declare God’s power to a new generation”** and just like the people who brought the children to Jesus to be blessed, we will usher children/youth into Jesus’ presence, into the Kingdom of God.

I want to conclude by asking you to pray for these children and youth. Pray for their families their Sunday School teachers and leaders and pray for them as they reach out and bring others in.

In Jesus’ name, amen.