

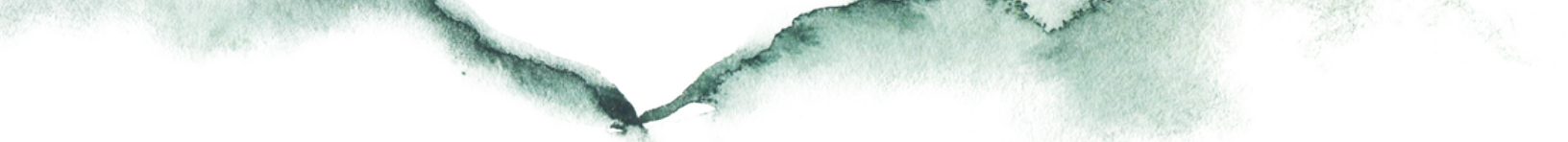
A LETTER FROM ZACH

“People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, ‘Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.’ And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.” Mark 10:13-16 NRSV

One of my favorite passages in the Gospels is this simple story of Jesus welcoming the children. When I read it, I imagine mothers and fathers nervously walking toward Jesus not quite sure why they were drawn to him but confident that their children needed to meet him. I also imagine their sadness when Jesus’ friends pushed them away. Perhaps the disciples were just trying to do their job of helping their rabbi teach the people. But in their enthusiastic crowd management they missed the most important thing: Jesus’ primary pedagogy was to offer his presence freely to anyone who sought him. I think it makes sense, then, that Jesus was so upset that the people who knew him best thought he needed guarding from the curious children. Maybe to everyone’s surprise, except maybe the women who followed him and recognized his gentle and caring nature, he scooped up the children in his arms and placed them at the center of life with God. Jesus’ blessing for these children is inseparable from his claim that the kingdom of God can only be received “as a little child.”

Readers across the centuries have found different meanings in this short story. Some read it to mean that we should have a simple, trusting spirit in our relationship with God. One of my favorite readings says that to receive God as a child is like the outstretched arms of a child asking for a hug from a parent who just got home at the end of the day, fully open to receiving and giving love. But I want to offer a different reading that I dream for the people of God to claim: that we are missing out on the richness of the Kingdom of God if we are not welcoming and embracing the children in our lives. This then is not just about the personal temperaments of adults but about believing that our authentic inclusion of the least powerful and most easily overlooked among us actually helps the church know God in God’s fullness. When mutual welcome flourishes between children and adults, adults and children, the congregation embodies the diversity of the Divine that includes joy, laughter, play, tears, and many questions.

How can a church like ours be known as a place where children are welcomed by adults, and children invite parents to see God with fresh eyes? There are three simple things we can all practice personally that can help make that hope a reality. Lacy Finn Borgo, a spiritual director for children, has an acronym that helps us make spaces for God to be noticed when we are with children—BOW. Body, Openness, Wonder.



When we are with people, and especially children, our bodies matter. If we are able, it helps to get on a child's level so that we are eye to eye and heart to heart. This removes the power dynamic of an adult standing over a child and communicates that both people are equal participants in the conversation. When children feel they are being respected and invited to share their input, we are embodying the welcome that God is offering them all the time to discover who they are and how they will change the world through their presence in it.

Openness is a gift that all children give freely but also something we as adults can foster in our community. Adults can encourage an environment of openness when we are curious about a child's life and interests. We might invite them to share their perspective, ask open ended questions, or even focus on the process of asking a question rather than sharing our answers. We believe God is honored by our search for beauty, goodness, and truth. When we create spaces for children to have the freedom to ask and explore these same topics, we are forming their faith in a very different way than worrying if they are getting the "correct" answers of doctrine. When we invite children into the infinitely knowable mystery of God, they often guide us to fresh places we have not yet explored for ourselves.

Lastly, we can invite children into the beautiful mystery of God's love when we nurture their awe and wonder. As adults with full and often busy lives, we sometimes forget that the world is an astonishing creation. But children can help us see the glory in a tiny caterpillar, the whimsy of the Spirit in blowing bubbles, or the existential questions present in a slowly melting ice cream cone. If we embrace the wonder that fills all children, we receive their gift of reawakening us to the beauty present in all things. And we are encouraging them to maintain that spark of awe for as long as they possibly can.

My goal in ministry here at Williamsburg UMC is to connect our congregation—young and old—in relationship and service so that through our presence with each other we may continue to glimpse more of the fullness of God. I pray for each of you that as we enter the summer months when children are out of school and more visible in the community that you will give and receive the gift of welcome that God is always extending to each of us. I pray that through spending time with the children in your lives you will encounter the overflowing joy and abundance of God's Kingdom, and that they might know God through your presence with them.

~ Zach, Family Ministries Coordinator

