

**The Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd**  
The Rev. Morgan S. Allen  
August 21, 2016  
*Back-To-School & Blessings Sunday: Luke 18:15-17*

Come Holy Spirit, and enkindle in the hearts of your faithful, the fire of your Love. *Amen.*

Good morning!

And welcome to our Back-to-School and Blessings Sunday, when we celebrate another... school... year's... beginning: *the first day of school*, yall! How many of you are excited about the first day of school? Raise your hand...I'm seeing a few grown-up hands, and it's okay, parents: yall can love your children and still be excited for "the return of the routine," as we'll euphemistically call it. It takes a village, people.

Among my earliest memories is *my* very first day of school, when I headed off to Kindergarten at Lexington Elementary, in Monroe, Louisiana. I remember being *so* excited that morning, shouldering my own new backpack stuffed with a cigar box of sharpened, #2 pencils. I remember meeting outside my backdoor my next-door-neighbor, Anna, who was the same age as I; and her older brother, John; meeting them well before the sun had risen above the carport of our house on Frances Place. In the strange synchronicities and intersections of life in The Episcopal Church, John and his family now live in Austin and attend Good Shepherd (I don't know how these things come to pass! It seems impossible).

On that morning those years ago, we waited and we waited and we waited for our parents to grant permission for us to walk the short block to school. I do *not* remember if I ran once we reached the small, concrete bridge that crossed the ditch surrounding the Lexington schoolyard like a moat, but I hope that I did. I can recall walking into Mrs. Miller's classroom...Mrs. Miller who, later that year, would not allow me to play drums on the *one day* that was my turn because I said, "Uh-oh, Spaghetti-O's," when she dropped the milk crate full of triangles. Eighteen years later sweet Mrs. Miller made the trip to Shreveport for mine and Missy's wedding, and, with my several decades of therapy, I have nearly summited this terrible unfairness.

The details of that day from that point are lost to time (or wherever such details go) but I still, *clearly*, remember the feeling – do you remember that first-day feeling? – that peculiar amalgam of emotion: excitement and anxiety and joy and grief and all the rest.

Today's Gospel lesson is a familiar one, an account present in all three of the Synoptic Gospels, that is, Matthew, Mark, and Luke. As we have been reading from Luke this liturgical year, this morning's example is from the eighteenth chapter of that third Gospel, and begins, "People were bringing even infants to him"...*even infants* to him (Luke 18:15a). This language is slightly different from the stories in Matthew and Mark, in which the people were bringing "*little children*" to Jesus. Anthropologically-minded exegetes Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh propose this slight shift may witness the impact of child mortality rates that "ran as

high as 30%” at the time of Jesus’ ministry. Further, through “the terrors of disease, famine, and war, 30% of those who survived infancy would die by the age of six, and fully 60 percent would die by the age of sixteen” (Culpepper 344). If I have calculated correctly, these statistics adduce only 28 of every 100 children born in Jesus’ day lived to celebrate their seventeenth birthday.

In a setting so filled with suffering children, I can imagine a community would steel their hearts against that agony by marginalizing sick children and those who loved them, not out of simple coldness and cruelty, but working actively (even if not entirely consciously) to avoid sharing the pain of those vulnerable families. And while I want to believe that *we* live in an age in which we have successfully turned these tides – not only against the mortality of children, but restoring our capacity to empathize with those families who *do* suffer the death of a child – this week’s images of the dusty and bloody, Syrian five-year-old, or one of the many images of children suffering the Louisiana floods, should give us humble pause on both fronts.

With this change from “little children” to “even infants,” Luke shifts the power of the story from the dearness of Jesus receiving chubby-cheeked toddlers, to the desperation of parents bringing the Lord their sick babies. With this altered emphasis, the disciples’ “stern” rebuke of these parents sounds a note all the more contrary to the Good News. In response, Jesus *calls* for the children and speaks forcefully to his friends: “*Let* the little children come to me, and do *not* stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs” (18:16).

See, *now* Luke’s Jesus picks up that language of “little children,” which has the effect of making precious *even these* suffering families; announcing as beloved *especially* these families whose community had not the heart to bear their pain...*these* are the children to whom his promised kingdom belongs.

Seven years ago next week, I stood in the pulpit across the construction site, and I told the story of walking my now-Seventh-Grade son, Michael – Seventh Grade! – to *his* first day of Kindergarten. Truly, that Sunday seems like yesterday, and last night I received his permission to tell some of that story again (if I promised to stick strictly to the approved script I spoke seven years ago), and, so, “At bedtime the night before his first day of school, Michael shared with his mother that he had written five jokes that he was memorizing in order to help him break the ice with his classmates and ‘make new friends.’ His sense of humor [remained in those days] a work in progress. His first joke: ‘Why did the ballplayers go to the baseball field?...To play a game of baseball!’

“So the next morning, with parents and children descending on Casis’ side streets like speeders piling up around the Mos Eisley Cantina on nickel beer night, we parked somewhere near Cedar Park and began the trek to his classroom. I looked down at Michael holding my hand, and wondered what, thirty years from now, he would remember about that morning, and I wondered what he felt...his heart becoming, increasingly, a mystery to me.

“As it turned out, Missy and I were not nearly the effective guides John had been for Anna and me back in Monroe. Though we successfully scaled the Casis hill through the playground, we found ourselves far away from Room 123, where Mrs. Robertson was waiting for her new students to arrive. Negotiating the crowds to our appointed class, Casis’ hallways were the same slick interior brick and painted cinder blocks familiar to me from the schoolhouses of my childhood, further drenching the whole occasion in *déjà vu*. I was, however – decidedly – through the looking glass now: standing outside the classroom instead of sitting in it; leaving as the bell rang, instead of scurrying to my desk.

“As inevitable and even wonderful as change is when watching one’s children grow up, that day was a new tangle of emotion: love and guilt, pride and fear and helplessness. That new situation charged me to change on so many levels *it hurt*: feeling not only my own heart, but his and all those with whom we were sharing that moment.”

Jesus’ unexpected priority catches his friends off-guard, and the shift of heart that their teacher requires of them, *hurts*: not only must they have felt embarrassed – even ashamed for their behavior and the stubbornness of their revealed prejudices – Jesus invites them to recognize, to acknowledge, and to receive these suffering children with the same welcome they would receive their own beloved. The disciples’ hearts, therefore, which had been so carefully walled, are now exposed...and such openness, *hurts*.

Significantly, Luke does not include the closing detail of Matthew’s and Mark’s accounts of this scene, that Jesus “takes the [children] up in his arms, [lays] his hands on them, and [blesses] them” (Mark 10:16). Rather, this morning’s text ends more ambivalently: Could they do it? *Did* they do it? This more open-ended narrative strategy likewise challenges us readers, as well: Can *we* tear down the barriers surrounding our hearts? Can *we* recognize, acknowledge, and receive the joys and sorrows of our many communities, from the desperation of far-flung, war-torn places, to the bittersweet first days of Kindergarten just across that hall and only down this street? *Can* we? *Will* we?

Loving as Jesus loves *hurts*...of course it does. Time and innocence pass so fast, from our own experience of childhood, to our witness of those we love navigating their own complicated journeys to adulthood...I mean, sweet, Lord: do you realize that there are children in this room today who are allowed to drive – drive cars – right here in this state of Texas! They were babies yesterday! It’s all so beautiful and holy and terrible and wonderful – our hearts fill instantly and completely – and every day that we love like this, we set ourselves and our hearts at risk of breaking. The *only* way we can survive a life of such love is to trust that as God calls us to love, so God loves us... *as God calls us to love, so God loves us*. From our guileless years now passed, to the reluctant (and even antagonistic) seasons that follow, God calls *to us* as Jesus called the little children – even infants – to his knee...loving us who we are and where we are...fully loved and fully known...*beloved*.

“...it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.”

*Amen.*