

I want to start off with a little bit of a “game” – and yes, I use quotation marks around game because a game is supposed to be fun – and this might bring to mind some interesting childhood memories.

I am going to say a few phrases that many of us might recognize - whether they were said directly to us growing up, or whether we simply knew them as things adults said to children. I'll say the first half, and I'd love for you to finish the sentence. Ready?

“Children are meant to be seen and... not heard.”

“If you don’t stop crying, I’ll give you... something to cry about.”

“I brought you into this world, and I... can take you out.”

Most of us know these lines. We might even laugh at them now.

But the fact that they're so familiar and easy to recite - hopefully years after the last time you heard them said towards you - tells us something important: these sayings reflect ideas that were once widely accepted.

“Children are meant to be seen and not heard.” Children should observe, but not contribute.

“If you don’t stop crying, I’ll give you something to cry about.” Corporal punishment as the only means to discipline.

“I brought you into this world, and I can take you out.” Children are understood as property rather than people.

These ideas shaped generations, and they have created patterns that have existed in many cultures for centuries.

But Jesus has a habit of flipping our assumptions.

In the ancient world, including among the Israelites, children were generally viewed as low-level dependents. Some scholars even suggest children weren't considered full “persons,” but gradually become people as they aged. What my education degree would have called *Tabula Rasa* – meaning a blank slate, meaning that kids were born with no innate knowledge and in need of being filled up.

So, it's not surprising that we find a story in Matthew where people are bringing their children to Jesus to be blessed – to be filled up. It's also not surprising that the disciples tried to send them away - surely this wasn't a good use of a rabbi's time.

What is surprising is Jesus' response:

“Then people brought little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and pray for them. But the disciples rebuked them. Jesus said, ‘Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.’ When he had placed his hands on them, he went on from there.” (Matthew 19:13–15)

This passage often becomes a rallying cry for children’s ministry – and rightly so – it’s a beautiful quote from Jesus that looks beautiful painted on the walls in a kid’s ministry hallway.

But if we just stop there, and only ever see it in nice script on the walls, we would miss its deeper theological weight.

Jesus isn’t only affirming the worth of children. He’s revealing something radical about God’s kingdom. The kingdom belongs to “*such as these*”. The small. The overlooked. The ones with no social leverage.

If we think to the spiritual practice, we all just experienced, maybe we can recognize that idea of social leverage in a new view? Those who have experienced barriers to life, where they are starting their race multiple steps back from the people around them.

If Jesus says, “Let the children come to me,” then we have to ask: **Where is Jesus found today?**

At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus answers that question clearly. In Luke 4, quoting Isaiah, he says:

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the captives and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” (Luke 4:18–19)

Jesus doesn’t describe his mission on earth as a time to influence the already powerful leaders behind closed doors. He describes a mission toward the poor, the imprisoned, the oppressed those who have experience and continue to experience barriers.

Around Southridge, we often talk about people on the “margins” - those outside the spaces where power, influence, and comfort tend to gather. People we are not usually looking to for advice or aspiration. People whose lives have been shaped by hardship.

Jesus doesn’t treat people on the margins as a side project. He makes it even more clear during the Sermon on the Mount, he blesses those who are: poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, the merciful, the peacemakers, the persecuted - not as the people to recognize when you have spare time or when its convenient, but as those at the very centre of God’s vision.

This is where Jesus spends his life – among the marginalized. And if the children are called to “come to Jesus”- THIS is where we should also be heading.

The question goes from – **Where can Jesus be found? - TO: How do we accompany our children there?**

If you have been around here for a while you have probably heard us use the phrase, “Friendship makes the difference”.

We believe the church is meant to be an intentional continuation of the way of Jesus, experiencing and expressing His love - not as a service provider of things we consume, but a community shaped by mutual, relational love.

When we are in proximity to, and in friendship with, those on the margins of society, we begin to be opened up to the truths and needs of those we are doing life with. When we are in these relationships, we see the work of God breaking cycles of poverty, isolation and fear.

We believe AND we have experienced, that when we are in these types of relationships, our hearts are ever changing and becoming more like Jesus.

We continue to learn this core sentiment as we understand that God is Love. He isn't a message about love, not a truth that you should love and not just a commandment to love. Although these statements are true in a sense - God in his full being IS love.

Even Jesus' own disciples needed to learn this.

Despite experiencing the life and miracles and teachings of Jesus day after day, when Jesus' disciples are in a boat and a massive storm rolls in and Jesus calms the storm with a single word, they ask “Who is this?”. They don't understand Jesus' power and connection to God.

After the best of the best experience of discipleship with Jesus, where they have spent every single day with him, where they have followed him everywhere, where they have watched him heal, eaten with him, heard him speak, watched him pray and had deep connection and relationship with him - the disciples were still at a “Who is this” level of faith.

It isn't until Jesus invites them into ministry WITH him, that they begin to really see His true character. In Luke 9:

“Jesus summoned the Twelve and gave them power and authority... and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal the sick.” (Luke 9:1-2)

We see here that Jesus calls the 12 - not to just see and hear as they were in chapter 8.

But he calls them to DO - to experience and express love.

He calls them to walk in faith. Jesus' discipleship approach went from the disciples being students, to giving them the opportunity to be teachers in a sense, even if they felt they didn't know everything they needed to yet – they stepped into experiential discipleship – they became Love with skin on.

And only then, after being part of Jesus mission tangibly, when asked again who Jesus is, Peter answers: "God's Messiah."

The reason we believe we are called to be missional, to live in relationships across societal boundaries and barriers, is because - THAT is when we get to both experience and express Jesus' true character of Love!

So, we answered the question – where is Jesus found – with the marginalized, how can we accompany our kids there – through friendship and relationships with those on the margins – now we ask – **how can kids fit into this way of following Jesus?**

I concede that we haven't always thought about missional living with families in mind. But what we are learning and growing towards is recognizing that this is actually a gift that we can give our kids. A way of raising them that allows them to grow up experiencing and expressing Jesus' love, instead of just hearing about it or talking about it like a concept.

Being part of a missional community, or being in relationships with those who are different than each other can sometimes feel scary or uncomfortable.

If you're feeling that right now, that's valid. Being in these spaces is not easy, but I want to push you to see their importance.

My mom always told me – growth never happens when you're comfortable. She was more referring the intense growing pains in my legs when I was about 11 years old, but I think that rings true in a life of faith as well.

When we are uncomfortable, we have to lean on Jesus to bring us through the discomfort and to help us untie those knots.

At Southridge, we're learning to frame this journey through three movements: **Educate, Expose, Equip.**

EDUCATING kids, parents and adults about God's love and the framework of love that Jesus displays.

Sometimes through a message like this and for our kids through some related teaching happening in our Sr. Kids and Jr Youth spaces right now.

Education also is happening through our annual Impact Report showing the work of our church and anchor causes, which can be shared with our children to help them understand some of what we do as a church and why we do it.

Or through our mission-minded day camp, **Activate**, or through our youth experiences like our 'Yes Chef!' cooking evening learning about food insecurity, or our recent 'Downtown Dash' walking through the spaces in downtown St. Catharines that many of our friends experiencing homelessness are familiar with, and youth missional experiences

EXPOSING them to spaces where we share space and laughter with those who are experiencing marginalization in our communities.

In our Welland location, in response to the food insecurity that many in our community face, we hold a community dinner every Friday of the year. These meals are opportunities to share out of our abundance – being able to provide a safe warm place to eat for many. And it is also a chance to model for our children how to share a table, ask questions, share a laugh with people who are experiencing life from a different angle than our own.

A beautiful experience of that second move in our paradigm “exposure” in a safe, uninhibited way.

In our Vineland location, we began dreaming about how the Sunday ‘Caribbean Centre’ evenings where we offer healthcare, legal support, and a free thrift shop for migrant farmworkers in our community, could be a place for our children and families to connect with the Caribbean community as well.

So, we started opening up our gym for soccer, floor hockey and mini cricket on what we now call our ‘Caribbean-Canadian Centre’ nights. This has transformed into a place where kids and their caregivers alongside migrant farmworkers can all enjoy games together. Sometimes, a Jamaican farmworker friend teaching a child how to hold a cricket bat; or a child teaching a Trinidadian friend how to play hockey.

Again, a beautiful experience of exposure that feels inviting, fresh and exciting for our kids.

In our St. Catharines location, we hold Christmas and Thanksgiving dinners or crokinol tournaments and trivia nights. These serve as opportunities for families and community members of different experiences to share a meal around a common celebration, or share stories around a game board - creating opportunities for us to get to know each other.

This past Christmas we had about 350 people gather in one room, with current residents, past residents, kids, families, churchgoers and community members. And even beyond that with our Youth serving the food and engaging our kids in different activities, it created a room packed with energy.

It was a beautiful picture of God's kingdom in one place. We often say, that if Jesus was in town on Christmas, we bet that he would be at this dinner party!

Our BBQs in the summer, the meals that we prepare daily, are all opportunities for kids to participate to be alongside and serve our friends.

Similarly, the opportunities we have with our **Becoming Good Relatives** team to share meals with Indigenous communities here in Niagara and out at 6 Nations, all serve to EXPOSE our children to the lives of our Indigenous neighbours.

And then the third step in this journey EQUIPPING. Equipping our children to better understand how this changes the way we live each day, how we can learn to behave more like Jesus and grow closer to him. Some of this happens as we respond to the EXPOSURE experiences.

We're able to ask our children questions on the drive home from a Harvest Kitchen night in Welland, a BBQ in St. Catharines, a Caribbean-Canadian Centre night, or an Indigenous Thanksgiving celebration, about what they experienced, why we ate a meal away from our own table, and how this teaches us about Jesus.

And as our Welland location pastor Tom Loewen has described his monthly Harvest Kitchen attendance with his wife and two young kids – he continually says being a part of those meals is “some of the best parenting that we do.”

We invite you to lean into this opportunity for your children as well, equipping you with resources to equip them with an incarnated experience of following Jesus, just like the disciples needed in order to really know Jesus.

Taking our kids AND ourselves from a “who is this” level faith - based in reading and singing alone, to an experiential faith where when asked who Jesus is - we will be able to say without a shadow of a doubt “God’s Messiah”.

We are also learning to more deeply EQUIP our children in this way through Activate day camp, youth missional opportunities and other experiences that come full circle from EDUCATION through to EQUIPPING.

And through it all we are learning that each of our anchor causes are not barriers to families and kids being able to be well-supported in our community, but opportunities for this EDUCATION, EXPOSURE, and EQUIPPING to be experienced.

A chance for us to all tangibly experience that there are realities that some in our midst face that are unbelievably difficult, and our children should know these things. But beyond that, that even in our different experiences, we are all children of God, made in the image of Jesus, with love to share with each other.

We believe that these are the spaces that Jesus spent his time. And if Jesus invites His children to be with him – then we should probably go to where he can be found.

As one of our pastors, Carrie Jones, has said, THIS *IS* THE GIFT that we uniquely offer the children and youth in our Southridge community! This is what we have here for your kids – or how I like to say it “Our Kids” – “our people”.

Research shows that for many who have grown up in the Church, faith deconstruction begins around post-secondary when they become aware of social challenges that don’t align with the things they know about Jesus and the church.

When there is a misalignment of the way of Jesus who is among those who mourn, and are persecuted, and the Church who puts up walls, there is often a faith breakdown for our young people.

This is sometimes known as the ‘Gandhi Gap’, since Gandhi famously said “I like your Christ! I do not like your Christians. They are so unlike your Christ.” Studies show that, for many, the hypocrisy of the Church (followed by the judgmentalism of the Church) is the impression the church holds to non- church goers.

As a missional church we hope to expose our kids to social challenges in the world and we do that in the context of Jesus, addressing those challenges through and with Jesus so that there isn’t a moment where disentanglement needs to happen, because their orientation of Christ is towards the other rather than away from these social challenges.

So, the last question we must answer is – **is it worth it?** Of course it is worth it.

Our kids’ faiths mean so much to us, and if we can help them build a faith that sticks, we want to be a part of that. These opportunities are definitely worth the challenges.

There was actually a trend going around last year where parents would say those old phrases that I had you finish the sentence to – at the beginning of my time with you and people filmed their kids finishing those same phrases based on their own experiences.

Take a look at the screen to see one kids’ answers.

Other answers that were shared among the thousands recorded were:

“I brought you into this world, and I can... *keep you safe.*”

“Kids are meant to be... *loved.*”

“If you don’t stop crying, I’ll... *hug you.*”

We GET to establish new patterns. We GET to change the narrative, and it is already starting here.

To Jesus, “church” was never a building. It was the embodied love of God—people of all ages bringing his love to life together.

Our hope is that this is the vision our children grow up with.

A church where they share meals across difference, learn about injustice without fear, and experience Jesus among those he loves.

So, let’s raise the next generation not just *in* church, but *as* the church. And help our kids finish the sentences about church in a way that sounds way more like the little boy described in the video than how we described it in our little “game.”

And let’s define “church” as a community that embodies Jesus, brings his love to life, and invites our children to know him—and to be his love—in the world.

And now to close I want to put my kid’s ministry brain on – I want to give you a moment because in all the lessons that I get to teach our kids, it always begins and ends with a big idea.

That phrase that I hope a kid can say when a parent inevitably asks “what did you learn at church today” and I pray every day that their answer is not “nothing”.

Something like “peacemakers reflect God’s peace to the world” – what our kids learned last week. Or for this morning our kids might be able to say “We can build peace when we are in relationship with others”.

But I don’t think today for our adults there is a single Big Idea.

I think it’s more of a spark, a spark of transformation, depending on where we find ourselves. For some of us, I hope today is a spark that lights something within you to make a new decision, to see people differently, to love others differently, or maybe it is a spark as small as recognizing that maybe you could sit somewhere different in church next Sunday or come out to an event that you normally wouldn’t attend.

For some of us, I’m hoping the spark is, for ourselves, to “come to Jesus”, and move closer to experiencing and expressing His love in the way He did.

And yes, today we also talked about kids specifically, wanting to let kids come to Jesus and experience and express His love in the same way we’re invited into. But I think the things we talked about, the spiritual practice we experienced is for all of us – even if we don’t have kids.

The goal today is for us to let the children of our community come to Jesus, together with all of us as we're coming to Jesus, experiencing and expressing His love with people on the margins, together as a church.

I truly believe that this message has a small spark, no matter where you are on that journey, you just have to take time to recognize it. So, before Annie and a few friends come up to share some encouragement and real-life experience with just this, I want to give you a silent moment to identify your takeaway for today – your spark.

Where is God leading you on your journey towards Love today?