

## **Vision Series: Children and Youth**

August 16, 2009

Good Morning. Over the last couple of weeks, I have taken advantage of the summer Sundays to remind us of some of our vision as a congregation...and as individual Christians. From the book of James, We talked about our need to be in service to Christ as individuals and as a congregation...that we are to not only be hearers of the Word, but “do-ers” as well. That we need to put our faith into action through acts of love and compassion. This is especially true of our congregation, being that we are in the urban core. Being a downtown church has it’s unique challenges. A suburban church can participate in a variety of outreach ministries in a variety of ways, an urban church must have its own ministries that serve the needs of the poor with compassion and generosity. People expect an urban church to be engaged in the community it serves, because the needs are often obvious and can’t be ignored! Our church has a long history of being a leader in the downtown in caring for the poor and needy and serving those in need on many levels. And even though we do not own our own church building, which puts a crimp on our ability to do a large number of outreach ministries, we still dedicate a large portion of our time and resources to serving Christ and community with compassion. We think it is important how we serve, as well as what we do to serve...we must be Christ like in how we provide the service as well in what we do for others. One of our biggest ongoing ministries is the Vintage Tower housing project with is a low and very low income housing project that the church bought from the City of San Jose, renovated and converted to 100% low income housing...and now operates as affordable housing.

We also explored the vision of our being a place of welcome for all peoples. Also from the book of James, we learned that as Christians and as a church we are forbidden to show favoritism based on how much a person might earn or how wealthy they might be. We can’t give special treatment to a large donor, while saying to a poor person

“you sit over there on the floor” or “sit here by my feet”. In Christ we are all the same, Rich or Poor, black or white, Man or Woman, young or old...all are one in Christ. The church must be a place of equality and a place of special welcome for all God’s children. At First Church Downtown we have taken special care to make room for the poor and the homeless in our worship services...opening the doors early, providing coffee and snacks early, and making the atmosphere welcoming and inviting for all. We also make clear that we expect everyone to behave and certain behaviors are not allowed. You may not pan handled in church...this is a place of worship, not a fund raising opportunity. We want everyone to feel comfortable....

And so we come today to another of our key elements of Church vision...our commitment to children and youth. There are two passages in Matthew’s Gospel that speak of the importance of children. One tells us that we must become like a child to enter the kingdom of heaven.

The disciples were having their favorite argument, you know the one...who was going to be the greatest of them in the kingdom of heaven. When Jesus came into his earthly kingdom and established himself as ruler of Palestine and Rome, which of them was going to have the best job and be the Vice President, the Secretary of State, etc. A lot of bragging, puffing up of their chests, and such. What a bunch of roosters they were! Cock a duddle do! We are told about this same argument at least 4 times in the Gospels...it was a common debate among them.

Last time Jesus said anyone who seeks to save his life will lose it, and anyone who loses his life for his sake and the Gospels sake will find it...but obviously that did not sink in! So now Jesus takes a young child, probably one of the children of the women who was one of his followers. One of Jesus’ friends! And he stands him or her up in front of them all...this is my friend Solomon or Marie or whomever...

And Jesus says that anyone who humbles themselves like a little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven!

Jesus goes on, anyone who welcomes a little child like this one in my name welcomes me! But anyone who causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for them if they had a large millstone hung around their neck and they were thrown into the sea...

The Disciples were always aiming in the wrong direction. They were looking for the kingdom of heaven to include prestige, power and dominance. They wanted to exert strength over Rome and take over Jerusalem and Palestine. Jesus took the child and stood him/her before them to show a different kind of power...the child has the power to discovery and wonder, the power to forgive and forget, and an innocence ...so the child has only to learn, not to unlearn.

And the child has four great qualities which make them a symbol of those who are citizens of the Kingdom of God....

1. They are Humble. A Child is humble...they are not like the disciples who are always arguing about who is going to be the greatest in the coming kingdom. Now kids do compete and they do argue, but it is playing...all in fun. But especially when they are young, they tend to see each other as they are...and accept themselves and others as they see them. There is a humility about children, a self acceptance and an acceptance of others that is wonderful and humbling. Children can be honest and forthright, sometimes brutally but without malice. They do not intend to hurt, they are just telling the truth.
2. Children live lives that are dependent...to a child, living in a state of utter dependence is completely natural. They never think that they should stand alone or be independent. If we would accept our dependence upon God, we would find a new strength and a

new peace would enter our lives and world! We are not truly independent, even if we think we are or try to be, we are always dependent upon God...always. God is the source of every good gift the bible says, every one. God is the source of our life and our strength. God is the source of our salvation and our hope, and God is our peace... We live dependent upon Jesus...who can be trusted and will never fail us or desert us. We are never alone, for he is with us always, even to the end of the age.

3. A Child Trusts. A Child is instinctively dependent, and just as instinctively, a child trusts their parents to provide for them and care for them. When we are children, we trust our parents, we believe in them...we revere them and idolize them...we trust them. We don't know how but we expect them to provide for us and they do. We trust them to care, to have our best interest at heart and to provide for us. This trust continues until and unless our parents violate or abuse that trust and become un-trustworthy. God is never untrustworthy.
4. Finally, children love unconditionally. They love their parents unconditionally, even when the parents are deeply flawed and undeserving. The child loves them anyway. The child loves the parent with a love that is deep and abiding and that last and overcomes even the harshest of treatment and conditions. Imagine what it does when treated well and nurtured properly?

We are to become like a child in our following Christ...we are to become humble...to live in dependence upon Him, to Trust Him with our life and our problems, and to love him regardless of our life's circumstances with a love that is beyond the moment but deeper than the circumstances but flows from the well of the heart. We are to become childlike in our faith. This is, of course, different than becoming childish in our faith or demands. There is a big difference. Being childlike is a quality of faith and trust, being childlike is being immature. We are

given no license to be immature Christians, but are all to grow up into Christ.

And so we are to not only become like a child, we are to make children a priority for ministry. To not hinder the children, but let them come unto him...for to such is the kingdom of Heaven.

That is a priority for ministry at First Church. One of our stated Priorities for ministry is Children and youth and their families. From Sunday School and youth group to Friday night program to activities for kids, youth and families...including things like the family camp out this weekend.

Our commitment is to all the kids in our neighborhood. That is why we commit ourselves to Horace Mann and do programs like the backpacks yesterday or the Christmas giving tree and others...where we help the neighborhood children and their families...for we know that we can make a real difference in the lives of these kids. Here is where we can make our biggest impact.

And kids are the most receptive to the message. Our Friday night program is an great example. Most of the kids who come are from the neighborhood or street. Their parents don't come, and wouldn't come. The kids are at risk to say the least. One girl's father just received a sentence of 65 years to life for murder. But she comes ever week...to hear the word, to be among people who listen to her, who care about her, who challenge her and believe in her, believe she can go to college and can make something of herself...and she will, you wait!

We are committed to kids for the long haul. Our general motto is that we want them to know that God loves them, and we love them too. We are with them through the strange teenage years, with the baggy pants and strange hair. It is all a test to see who they are, and a test to see if we are real, if what we say is really true, and sadly some churches have failed the test. Remember, it is only hair and clothes. It will change in a week or month or year...just wait around long enough.

Who knows, next they may shave it! Kids young and old are really asking if you care enough to love me when my hair is spiked and orange...when others stare will you still love me? Our answer is yes...more than love you, we will be proud of you.

To you belongs the kingdom of God. They are not the church of the future, they are the church of today...they are an integral part of God's kingdom now. And we learn from them...if we watch and listen and interact.

To these is the Kingdom of Heaven.