



Established in 1854  
Downtown Lawrence  
925 Vermont Street  
Lawrence Kansas 66044  
785 843 3220 fax 785 843 4613  
email: [plymouth@sunflower.com](mailto:plymouth@sunflower.com)  
[www.plymouthlawrence.com](http://www.plymouthlawrence.com)

## God of All the Little Things

A sermon given by  
Rev. Josh Longbottom  
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At this point in the Gospel narrative Jesus is well on his way on the long, but not long enough, and most certainly lonely path to the cross. Most assuredly at this point he is living in its shadow. And it's at times like these that we have a way of getting sucked into the limitations that we face. And just as you would expect from all the other stories in the Bible, in this story the disciples represent our lower human nature while Jesus represents our higher side. At this point, Jesus is about to foretell his death and resurrection for the third time. The last time that he foretold it, the disciples responded in fear and then quickly turned the conversation to how and which one of them was the greatest.

All along this road to the cross, Jesus has been struggling with the impulses of the disciples, and here, too, in today's story they respond so wrongly. Children are streaming out to meet the Messiah. Mothers are carrying infants in their arms that they might be blessed by him. This would be common in that day, especially if you might be lucky enough to get the blessing of a great rabbi traveling through your area on your child's first birthday.

But the disciples, feeling the constraint of the end of the time that Jesus will be spending with them, respond like any one of us would, by pushing away all that doesn't seem important to them. This is not the first time that the disciples have to be corrected. It's not the first time that they are taught that they are judging by the normal social mores, and yet Jesus values things in a way very alien to them.

In the ancient Near Eastern society the values of that culture were more different from ours than they were similar. Here, in this day and this time and this context, we practically worship children. We say that our lives are lived for them. If you want to get anything passed through Congress, in order for people to rally behind it, you say it's for the sake of the children and no one will stand in your way. But you can remember your parents' parents and how they used to say that children should be seen but not heard. Things change over time.

In Jesus' time children were considered non-persons. Now I don't know about you, but I've already heard a thousand sermons in my life and a hundred of them have been on this particular passage and its potential for expanding certain qualities that we all should have. I've heard it said that children are essentially trusting and that this story teaches us that we should be trusting, for Jesus says, "Whoever does not receive me as a child will not enter the kingdom of God." And I've heard it said that children are humble and therefore this passage means that we should be humble like children. In fact, I believe that the scripture passage has been used as a tackboard for whatever modern virtue people say we should have; we ascribe it to children and then say the story is about you acquiring that virtue.

There was a time period when the church was very much into obedience. And in that time period it was even said that children's fundamental nature is that they are obedient, and therefore that we should be obedient if we are to inherit the kingdom of God. Now I don't know what distant planet you've bent space and time from in order to transport yourself to here, but from where I come from, children are not obedient.

What strikes me in this scripture is that we know that in the time of Jesus, in that culture, children were considered non-persons and the property of their father. The disciples in this story enacted those social mores; supposing that children are unimportant, they tried to keep them out of Jesus' hair. But what happened? Jesus opened the gap to let the little children through.

As a goal for myself at this church, I have set about to show you all the passages of the gospel that work together in a subtle way to reveal the message of inclusion, not as one act of Jesus' beneficence, but as the truth of him.

Even this story, which has been taught to mean that we should be humble or trusting or obedient, appears to me as another story in the web of stories telling us that those who are on the outside of society will, by the spirit of God, be brought to the center and be honored. And that any norms of society that would exclude will be absolutely turned upside-down by the spirit of liberation so that freedom and joy can be expanded and enjoyed by all.

Now, if you would indulge me for a moment and allow me the artistic license to play the role of Jesus myself, then I would have you imagine this. In order to further liberate, in order to expand further the boundaries of where we think God calls us to care, where Jesus placed in front of you a child to show the need to broaden the concept of the sacredness of life, I would place in front of you my beautiful and unruly dog, Jack. Now since I don't have quite the courage of Jesus, when I was told not to bring my rather unruly, untrained dog, I just decided I'd talk about him.

For too long now, we have justified the rampant extinction of species, the mistreatment of animals, the absolute plunder of our green earth, by saying these very scriptures that we hold to be sacred justify our mistreatment of anything not human. Well, my friends, they do not say that. That is an interpretation that has been put on the scriptures to expedite, through the most convenient way possible, the accumulation of capital. The word in Hebrew that we translate as 'dominion' is the word that we use to talk about what our relationship to this earth is. It is the same word that is used to describe God's relationship to us, and if God treated us any way like we treat this earth we would be in trouble. During seminary I did some of this translation work myself on those passages that deal with how we are to relate to this earth, and a better translation would be 'to serve and preserve'.

To think that we don't need to value non-human life flies in the face of Isaiah's prophecy that the kingdom of God would look like the bear grazing with the ox. In Genesis, Chapter 9, God said to Noah that God established a covenant "with you and with your descendants, and with every living creature that is with you"---the birds, the domestic animals and every kind of animal on earth. It said that God was going to establish a new covenant that would never flood the earth again for the sake of you and every living creature of all flesh. And then God hung in the sky the rainbow to

remind us of this covenant. But somehow, somewhere along the way, we reduced the covenant to only how it applies to us.

My friends, we must graduate from our anthropomorphic views. We must move beyond the idea that a thing is valuable if, and only if, a human life. If not we will miss out on so much beauty and prevent too much life.

I remember the first time I started thinking this way. I was meditating in my backyard some years ago, feeling the love of God in my heart and loving all the world. I was so proud. And then a mosquito landed right on my forehead and I cracked it. I was shocked at how amazingly symbolic that was. The 'duh' state. I realized that even though it was very, very, very, very tiny, what I did was totally an act of violence. And ever since that moment, I have grown more and more confused about how to live in this world.

Something like this happened to me just the other day at the Land Institute. I was walking through a pasture and I saw a dairy cow. It seemed just about as smart as my dog. It walked up to me and clearly wanted me to pet it. And when I did it licked my face---all sloppy and gross. Funny enough, when it licked me, I thought of the last time I ate cow tongue.

I also remember recently looking at the cover of National Geographic and seeing a tree frog that rather resembled my brother. And last night, watching the series Planet Earth on HDTV, I saw a Bird of Paradise, which creates a beautiful little nest to entice its lover and then puffs up its chest and does this dance reminiscent of how I met my fiance. The same thing that dwells in me and in you dwells in everything that has breath.

If you were following where this story is going, it leads to a very difficult question. How do we live in a world where everything is sacred, when every move we make seems to break something? That, my friends, is a million-dollar question. And no, it is not irrelevant just because we continue to have problems with poverty and famine and other situations of human life. Obviously those are problems. Yet still the question remains, how do we live in this world when everything is sacred?

Well, good luck with it. It's a tough question. You could spend your whole life wondering about it and I will give you no answer. You wouldn't believe me, anyway, until you found your own. But I will say this: whether it is convenient or not, hard to swallow or not, it is the truth, my friends, that everything in this world is sacred. And thank God! Because once you realize that even a mosquito is sacred then it becomes pretty easy to recognize that you are too.

George Macdonald once said he didn't believe in a person's Christianity if children never played around their front door. And Abraham Lincoln took it a little further when he said he didn't care for anyone's religion whose dog and cat were not the better for it. I believe our scriptures call us even further to recognize not just the children and the dogs and the cats, but all the living, breathing, crawling, flying, living and dying things that pass across our path. All of the little things are precious in God's eye. Amen.