

**Bringing Even Infants**  
Luke 18:15–17, 1 John 2:7–14  
Wake Forest Baptist Church  
Rev. Susan Parker  
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During a recent vacation break, I decided to do something I had long said I would do, and that was to read all seven of the Harry Potter books. Knowing what an impact it has had on children of all ages, and the words and phrases it has added to our common language, it seemed important to have more than a passing acquaintance with Harry and his long story.

Friends had told me that the books were addictive, which is one reason why I waited so long to start reading them. I know how I am with good fiction; once I get started, I don't want to put down the book. Given that we've had a few things going on here in our congregation, I thought it best to keep myself away from the books till I was in a safe place.

Now, having read all but about half of the seventh and final book (a total of around 4000 pages), I understand why people have found these stories about Harry's life so compelling. The reader follows Harry from his pre-teen years through early adulthood. The story is a familiar one, a classical monomyth – a hero's journey. I imagine most of you, even if you have not read the books, know the basic story; Harry, an orphan living with an unfriendly aunt and uncle, learns at the age of 11 that there is another world of which he had been unaware, a world of magic that had been known to his parents. Because of their deaths in his infancy, Harry is left with non-magical relatives – muggles – for the early part of his life, and it's only as he draws close to his 11<sup>th</sup> birthday that he is visited by representatives from the magical world, where he learns about a special school of witchcraft and wizardry called Hogwarts, and is told that he has been accepted to attend there.

What we learn about Harry is that he is a special child, a child who survived his parents' death at the hands of the most evil Lord Voldemort; for some reason, Voldemort could not kill him, even as an infant, the reminder of this episode being that Harry is left with a scar on his forehead. It would not surprise you I'm sure that in each of the books Harry must face a new threat from Voldemort or his accomplices, accompanied by his friends Ron and Hermione, and aided by his adult mentors and teachers, particularly headmaster Albus Dumbledore. Voldemort represents the worst of the magical world, a wizard who had once been a young student like Harry, but who had chosen to turn to dark magic. Harry, our hero, is the protector of good magic. It is a classic battle of good and evil, of the anti-hero's successes tempting the hero to cross over. Through it all, Harry is facing not only the ultimate life or death battle with Voldemort, but he's also dealing with all the other challenges faced by children and youth as they struggle to reach adulthood.

For young people, these books speak to what they are experiencing as they struggle toward maturity; the sense of feeling different, concerns about finding and

making friends, questions of loyalty, issues of interactions between students and teachers, children and parents, and the pain of discrimination that exists even in the wizarding world.

But several things become clear very early on. Harry, though a good student, is not the most talented one with a wand or with a book. That distinction belongs to his friend, Hermione. Throughout his trials, he leans on his friends, and takes seriously the advice of his trusted teachers, all of which accrues to make it possible for him to be successful in his various quests. He is not a standalone hero, but an uncertain and sometimes scared individual who knows he needs the help of others to succeed, indeed, to survive. He is not all-knowing, and he makes very human mistakes while displaying very human emotions.

When I look around this congregation, I see the great diversity of our life experiences. Some of us grew up in small towns, others in large cities. Some grew up on farms and others in urban settings. Some of us had no siblings, others had many. Some spent most of our early lives here in the US while others did not. All of these experiences have shaped us and left us all somewhat different from each other. In fact, one of the few life experiences we have all shared is that of having been born as helpless infants who proceeded to childhood. Some of us have made it much farther along the journey, while some are still in the early stages. But we were all once children.

I am fortunate to be part of a local gathering of female clergy, all of whom were also graduates of the Wake Forest Divinity School. Female clergy share unique experiences, and it has been very helpful to have this group of friends. We are able to confide the kinds of things to each other that we cannot confide to spouses or certainly to congregation members, and I feel blessed to have these women in my life.

Because of the conversations I've shared with them, and as a result of continuing to keep up with readings on congregational development, I know that if a consultant walks into any congregation of any denomination or faith, in any city or suburb of this country, that there are things you can count on every one of those communities saying when asked about their hopes for the future of their institution. They will all say: "We need more families with young children, and better outreach to young people." I'm so clear about this that I'll make a bet with you; if you can find me minutes of any church meeting where a congregation said they did not want more families with young children, and better outreach to young people, bring me a copy and I'll split my next paycheck with you!

In last week's congregational meeting, when the Transition Team presented some of its thoughts on the information the congregation has shared with it over these last few months, one of the things the team noted was that a large percentage, 47% to be exact, of our annual giving comes from folks who are 70 and older. The largest group of givers, representing 24% of our annual giving, comes from those in the 80-89 age range. As Phil Batten wryly noted, one could argue that our next stewardship campaign should be directed at 80-89 year old persons!

Yet this congregation, like every other, noted early in the transition process that it hoped for more young families with children, and better outreach to young people – including college students given our particular setting. We know, regardless of which age group we are in, that we ain't gonna live forever, and if we want Wake Forest Baptist Church to continue, we need to have new people joining to offset those who have gone to see Jesus. No, they don't have to all be young families with children, but we know that if people join as young adults, and have children they'd like to have raised in the faith, that they might hang around for a while.

And while we may not be able to articulate it explicitly, we probably also know somewhere down in our souls that we need all ranges of ages in our community because of what we can learn from each other. Just this morning, we experienced one of our young ones offering her talent in worship. What you may not know is how much encouragement Sophie has gotten from Lucille Harris, who, for those of you who may not know, was a piano teacher here for many years. Lucille would downplay her role, but she was very instrumental – pardon the pun – in getting Sophie started. Children need adult interactions that can help shape them and provide opportunities for them to grow in healthy ways.

But adults need interactions with children, too. Children come into the world with innocence and trust that we adults lose as we are tumbled by the stones life lobbs at us. We think we've reached maturity when we lose our naïveté about the world, when we develop a bit of a crust to shield us from possible hurts. But the loss of innocence scars us. It causes us to pull back from interactions with others unless we are pretty sure of the outcome. It makes us suspicious of motives, and untrusting of offers of care. "Maturity" may cause us to be slower to ask questions, become more careful in reaching out to others for help, or less likely to give of ourselves without calculating costs.

Jesus said in our passage from Luke: "Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." There is something integral to being a child that we, as adults, need to hold on to if we wish to be part of the kingdom of God. We need their sense of wonder, their eagerness to experience the world around them and learn from it, their willingness to suspend belief, to approach the world as though anything is possible. They show us flexibility of thought and action, at least until the world tries to beat those notions out of them! We become part of God's kingdom when we, like children, lay down our masks, and drop our defenses, when we stop judging others – or ourselves – harshly. Being part of God's kingdom means that we come to God just as we are, looking for healing for the wounds we have received, asking for forgiveness for the wounds we have inflicted on others, and recognizing that God, like any loving parent, is never going to forsake us.

Is it any wonder, then, that Luke dropped these few verses about children in the middle of stories about adults who were not understanding what it meant to experience God's kingdom? Prior to our text, we have the story of the Pharisee who points at the tax collector, saying, "Thank you, God, that I am not like that one! I am so special, and do everything so well; I'm sure you must love me best." We are reminded that all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted. Just after

our text is the story of the rich ruler, who while he had always followed the letter of the law, was unable to give up his wealth in service to the poor. Adults in both of these stories missed the mark. They were focused on their own self-importance, their own lives. Both the rich ruler and the Pharisee were certain that they were capable of doing everything they needed to do to gain God's blessing.

By contrast, parents following Jesus as he taught were bringing even infants, babies unable to walk, talk, feed themselves, etc. These children could not come to Jesus by themselves, there was nothing they could create or do or say in order to gain God's blessing, yet Jesus says: "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."

The author of 1 John often refers to children, but here, they may not actually be children, but rather those who are young in their spiritual journey. But the author wants to be sure that everyone in that community knows the messages being given are meant for all. So in our text, there are specific notices to children, to parents, to young people, about their importance to the community. He writes to the children because they know God, and their sins have been forgiven by God. He writes to the parents because they have known God from the beginning. And he writes to young people who are strong, and who have overcome evil.

Every segment of the community mattered. Each group had its special gifts based on experience, or innocence, strength or knowledge.

This morning, when we dedicated Jillian Fowler, we asked Katie and Brad to make promises to Jillian, but we were also asked to make promises to their family. We need them, but they need us, too. In that way, we are all like infants in that we need others if we are to be our healthiest selves.

I was reviewing some old documents this week, and found my notes from a deacon's retreat in January of 2006. One of the things I had noted to the deacons then was that we currently had 6 children coming for Sunday school, but that two of them may not be able to continue with us; we weren't sure if the Mayers were going to remain here in Winston-Salem, or not. Now, a little over three years later, we might have as many as 25 children show up on a given Sunday. That rapid increase is why we are struggling for space, and why we need more people volunteering to help out as Sunday school teachers and child-care helpers.

Every congregation says they want more families with young children. Talk is cheap. It's one thing to want them, and another to support them once they are here. After worship today, our children are going to come around with clipboards and ask adults to sign up to help them. We're starting out just asking about child-care help during worship, but from those lists we will also be starting to recruit people to teach. These children need the experience and talent and wisdom of this congregation as they grow and learn, and their Sunday School classes continue year-round.

Now some will say, “Well, I just wouldn’t know how to teach a class of children; it’s been too long since mine were little.” I ain’t buying that line. You don’t have to have an MDiv or PhD to teach our children; you only have to care about their development, and want to get to know them – and learn from them. Are they going to ask you questions about God that you cannot answer? You bet. Are they going to ask you about things that never crossed your mind when you were there age? You bet. And it’s OK that you don’t have answers to everything. But they need you. You said you wanted them; show that you really meant it by being with them. Are you all physically able to chase down a child who runs away from you on the quad, or able to kneel down to tie a shoelace? No, but that’s still no reason not to be present to these children; we have younger bodies who can handle physical needs alongside you.

Congregational life is a two-way street, though, so I have a challenge for our young parents. We have a wealth of amazing seasoned citizens in our congregation, but many are not well enough to attend church. Having a visit from your family would be a wonderful gift to them, and allow them the opportunity to share their life experiences with you, even as you enrich their lives with yours. Will it be hard to cram another date into your planners? You bet. But they need you. And without the time, talent and treasure they gave to this congregation over the decades, you would not have this congregation as your spiritual home.

And as I’ve said to all of you before, each and every one of us can do a better job of getting to know others in the congregation. We aren’t a mega church, so there’s no excuse for us not to know each other well. Time is a factor for each of us, but over these summer months, I’d encourage everyone to find one person, one couple or one family that you do not know well, and make it your business to get to know them. No excuses.

When children come together in a room, there may be some initial wariness, or some checking around to see where the parents are, etc., but before long, children are treating each other as though they have known each other forever. There’s a zest for life, and an ability to live in the moment, that every one of us could learn from; I guess that’s why Jesus spoke so forcefully about children and the Kingdom of God.

May God help us love the children surrounding us. May God help us find the child within us. In Jesus’ name. Amen.