

Listen, child, and I will tell you a story sad, but true – a tale about something that happened at a Wendy’s Restaurant one morning. The author is John Ore:

READ excerpt from “Breakfast at Wendy’s”

(from May 1989 PITTSBURGH MAGAZINE with permission of the author)

I put my tray down on the table. Across from me a young, black man is sitting with an older woman, probably his mother. He’s wearing inexpensive, but carefully chosen clothes and his sweater vest is neatly repaired with the right colored thread where it is torn between the shoulder blades. They are eating breakfast and talking quietly.

It’s another February morning in Pittsburgh. I’m having breakfast at Wendy’s on Fifth Avenue... I sip my hot coffee. Wendy’s starts to fill up. Two women and a small boy take the table in front of me. One of the women, the mother, takes off her trench coat and settles down. She’s wearing a navy suit. Her friend, who is very fat and wearing a green sweater, helps the little boy get settled and then sits down on the other side of the table.

The boy...has obviously been crying. He stares out the window, ignoring everyone. The woman, his mother, speaks to him. Her voice is calm and soft and without malice.

“No one wants you anymore, Brian,” she says.

I startle and think I’ve heard wrong.

“No one wants to see you, no one wants to take care of you. No one likes you, Brian,” she says in the same soft, level, penetrating voice. “Brian? Do you hear me? No one likes you. Do you know why? Brian, listen to me.” She doesn’t touch the boy, but he turns away from the window and looks at her.

“Do you know why?”

Brian looks at her. he says, “No.” His voice quavers. “Because you cry,” Brian’s mother says. “When I leave you at Granmum’s, all you do is cry.”

She turns to her friend, who is sitting across from her and vigorously cramming a breakfast sandwich into her mouth with both hands.

“God,” she says, “Mom said that he cried for an hour and a half yesterday. She said she can’t take it any more.”

The other woman, her mouth full, says nothing, but shakes her head in commiseration.

The black woman sitting across from me is listening in on this conversation too. She shushes the young man sitting with her with a palm held up, and then she tucks her head down, inclines it slightly, and nods, like a doctor taking a pulse.

The woman in the navy suit has turned her attention back to her son. “What am I gonna do with you, Brian, huh? Brian, listen to me. What am I gonna do with you? Huh, Brian, huh?”

Brian is crying softly and staring out the window. “Jesus,” the woman says. “Brian, eat your breakfast now. Sit up straight. I said eat your breakfast. Right now. She yanks the boy around and forces a sandwich into his hands.

The black woman nods to herself and then, putting both hands flat on the table, stands up. The young man does too. I can't see his face, but she looks stern and angry. She's a large woman with a wildness of crinkly graying hair tied back in a loose bun, and a pleasant, mobile face. Earlier, I had heard her soft whoop of laughter and seen her slap her son lightly on the hand. Now, as she buttons the top of her shapeless coat, she looks magisterial and her eyes are flashing.

She steps quickly over to the table, her body stiff with anger, and bends down low between the mother and Brian.

"What a lovely little boy you have," she says to the woman without looking at her. "What a good little boy you are, Brian. I like you just fine, Brian. Just fine."

She chuckles and straightens up. Neither of the other women say anything. The mother gives her a strained smile, looking pale and mean. The black woman drops her smile, looks deadpan at her for one brief, eloquent second, and then turns and walks away. Her son follows, opens the door for her, and they walk out onto 5th Avenue.

The women go on eating. One of them says something trivial to the other and a conversation picks up. Brian, for the time being, is ignored.

It is sad, but true.

The world can be a hard place, a dangerous place for many children, even as they sit eating breakfast at Wendy's.

Yet it is not completely hopeless,
for even in this sad story there was someone with an eye on Brian,
someone whose love reached out to him.

Listen now, children, and I will tell you another story sad, but true.
In this one, the hope is stronger...

READ TEXT
Mark 10:13-16

That large, kind black woman at Wendy's Restaurant knew it.
And our Lord Jesus spelled it out in unmistakable terms – a hopeful message
in a hostile world:

CHILDREN ARE IMPORTANT TO GOD!

How important?

Consider this – that the Bible says God Himself is the one who "knits"
a baby together in its mother's womb.

And this – that He knows the exact number of hair's on a baby's tiny head.

And this – that when God Himself came into the world, He did not pop into view as an adult. He came as a BABY...a baby nursed at His mother's breast and adored by shepherds and given gifts by Wise Men.

Children are so important to God that He became a child Himself once, and when that Child grew up to be a man, He took special interest in children.

Spoke to them.

Held them in His arms.

Blessed them.

“To such belongs the Kingdom of God,” He said.

We in the church agree with that, don't we?

CHILDREN ARE IMPORTANT TO GOD...AND TO US!

Think of all the ways we try to say so.

We baptize babies.

We provide a nursery.

We staff a Sunday School, a Vacation Bible School, and a Christian Day School.

We have a Children's Choir. We have children's sermons.

But I wonder, sometimes, how it feels to the children. Do you?

I wonder as I watch children squirm and make noise in church...and as I watch some adults fidget in response to those children, or make disapproving faces.

I wonder as I watch some older children sit in a corner playing computer games or congregating in the nursery or roaming the narthex during church.

I puzzle over why, in their HS years, so many stop coming to class or even to church.

Across these United States, so the pollsters tell us, 8 out of 10 children who started in a church will drop out by their senior year in HS. We do better than that here at Trinity, but not much better!

When you were a kid in church, how did it feel to you?

Did you ever want to get away from it?

A boy named Dale Milligan did.

A few months ago, I told you his story very briefly. I want to tell you his story again this morning, with some added detail.

Dale was from a large family that attended a Presbyterian Church. The family was faithful there several times a week. But as the years passed, Dale was more and more unhappy.

Why? Because no one seemed to know his name. At least no one used it. Adults rarely spoke to him as if they cared. Worst of all, the pastor never spoke to him. He only called him “that fourth Milligan boy” when he got into trouble.

He wanted to quit, but his parents forced him to go. Inside, he rebelled.

He turned 17. He was a senior in HS now. He made plans to join the Navy. “In a few months,” he says, “I would have been away and on my own. I don’t think I would ever have gone back to church...”

But that spring, something changed.

A new pastor came, and on one of the first Sundays he was there, he did something that startled “that fourth Milligan boy”...

he came up to him, put an arm around his shoulder, and said, “You’re Dale Milligan, aren’t you?”

Does that sound like a small thing?

It wasn’t. For Dale Milligan, it was a ray of sunshine, a cup of cold water for a boy thirsty to be known and loved. Somebody besides his parents had finally said, “YOU ARE IMPORTANT TO GOD...AND TO ME!”

Dale Milligan heard, and finally believed, what Jesus says here in Mark 10: “LET THE CHILDREN COME TO ME. THEY ARE IMPORTANT!”

And do you see how he learned it?

Through a relationship – a hand on the shoulder, his name on the pastor’s lips, eyes looking at his.

For the heart of the Christian faith is, in fact, a RELATIONSHIP – a loving, lasting bond with Jesus Christ.

CHILDREN ARE IMPORTANT TO GOD!

That's the first truth in this story. Now for a second one.

GOD IS IMPORTANT TO CHILDREN! They need Him!

“Let the children come **TO ME**” Jesus said.

Did you hear what He said.

Jesus did not say merely, “Let them come to church”
or “Let them come to confirmation class,” but rather,
“**LET THEM COME TO ME!**”

I am sorry to say that we can do **ONE** without doing the **OTHER!**

We have all known children who have come to church and to classes,
whose heads fairly swim with knowledge.

They can recite the 10 Commandments and the Apostles' Creed.
They know the books of the Bible in order.

Yet they have little faith in God and little love for anyone but themselves.

Don't misunderstand!

I love the Bible, and I think children should learn as much as possible what's in it.
I believe church attendance is vital, and I urge parents to enroll their kids
in Sunday School and confirmation.

We in the Lutheran Church have stressed those things, perhaps more than
any other church body!

But the words of Jesus should give us pause.

“**LET THE CHILDREN COME TO ME.**”

Faith is more than knowledge.

Christian nurture is more than education.

Children need to know the facts about Jesus –

His birth, baptism, parables, miracles, crucifixion, and all the rest.

Yes, they need to know **ABOUT** Jesus,

but even more they need to **COME TO HIM**, to **KNOW HIM** personally,
to place their hands in His, and to follow Him wherever He leads.

How can that happen?

Ah, that's where the rest of you come in, for we are in this story too.

It says in verse 13,

“and they were bringing children to Him, that He might touch them.”

Children, especially the very young, need HELP to come to Jesus.

Someone must bring them. Someone like YOU.

How many ways there are to do that!

We bring children closer to Jesus when we sit down with them to read a Bible story or kneel beside them to pray.

We do it whenever we listen to their questions and their thoughts about God and patiently explain our faith.

We do it when we show them by our example that Jesus matters, that we are willing to admit when we are wrong and forgive those who hurt us.

Just now on Sunday mornings, Sue and I are teaching a class that equips parents to do that – to have FAMILY NIGHTS with their children – to eat together, play together, and pray together.

It isn't just the PARENTS who are to bring children to Jesus.

Nor just the Sunday School Teachers and the Pastor.

It is ALL OF US who see the children here at church or brush past them in the parking lot.

For what good will it do if the pastor had a fine children's message, but the rest of the congregation ignores little Brian or Becky and the ladies serving punch give them the evil eye for taking another cookie?

What good will it do for John and the youth staffers to go rafting with them if the rest of us ignore them as if they were invisible?

The frightening thing in this Gospel story

is that while some were busy trying to bring their children closer to Jesus, there were others just as busy trying to prevent it...

Just listen to the disciples, who thought they were “protecting” Jesus:

“Can't you see that the Master is busy?

He doesn't have time for these little brats of yours!”

Is it I, Lord?

I, the preoccupied pastor who was so busy with my schedule of meetings and my pressing conversations with ADULTS, that I didn't pay attention to the little one tugging on my robe?

Is it I, Lord?

I, the busy PARENT who programmed my child to imitate me
and be so busy with Scouts and sports and dance class and going on
on camping trips
that instead of bringing my child to you, I wound up
shutting you out of their lives?

Is it I, Lord?

I, the retiree, whose parenting days are over and whose energy is ebbing
and whose patience runs thin, who find myself resenting their noisiness
and wishing they would just go outside...or anywhere else but here?

“Let the children come to me!” He said, “and don't hinder them.”

Ah, it IS I! Forgive me, Lord. Mustn't we all say it?

And if we must make such a confession,
then it is WE who need to hear the grace in this story,
for the same Jesus who loves the CHILDREN loves us ADULTS.

He knows our burdens and heartaches,
He understands the killing pace that elevates our blood pressure,
and He hears the hearts that cry with a sense of failure.

This morning He calls us back,
invites us to become children again,
to run to Him and climb into His great arms
and shed our tears of grief
and look into His face.

“Whoever does not receive the kingdom as a little child shall never enter it.”

Come, child.

Come close to your Savior,
to Him who died to set you free
to Him who looks at you and says,

“I like you...I like you just fine!”