

March 15, 2026

Paul Purdue preaching

Last week, our benediction came from Ephesians 3:  
*Now to the one who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to the power that is at work within us, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.*

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all trace our ancestry back to a moment when Abraham and Sarah couldn't imagine what God could do. Abraham was 100, and laughed at the prospect of children in their old age. Abraham fell on his face *and laughed saying to himself, "Can a child be born to a ninety year old couple?"* Sarah chuckled as well. Right now, something like 4.6 billion people around the world remember the imperfect faith of Abraham and Sarah, who like many of us have thought "Good Lord, I don't see that happening".

The Hebrew and Christian Bible is filled with transcendent holy moments and everyday missteps. I think this week's "Tell Me Something Good" Lenten guide misses the mark as it shares "*In Jesus' time, in the company of adults, particularly adults with a sacred agenda, children were an invasive distraction.*" Amy Jill Levine and Ben Witherington III address this fairly common exegetical trope, "*Commentators frequently insist that ...children were seen as having little value. The opposite is the case. Children were highly valued in Jewish culture, as the very act of people bringing infants (Greek: brephe) to Jesus (vs. 15a) demonstrates. ... To read the disciples as indicating a normative Jewish view that discounted children or saw them as marginal... mischaracterizes Judaism. By affirming children, Jesus is confirming what the parents and caregivers are already doing.*" (Levine and Witherington Luke Commentary) Perhaps, we can become so infatuated with our own beliefs, that we fail to see the beauty in other expressions of faith?

Children are central to Jewish and Christian religious life and practice. The Passover liturgy in Exodus 12 includes children's questions, "*And when your children ask you, 'What does this observance mean to you?' you shall say, 'It is the Passover to the Lord.'*" Moses writes a 20 verse outline guiding those who steward the stories. Moses answers the children's "whys" like why unleavened bread, why bitter herbs, or why did we leave Egypt? Moses' guide ends with a lesson in the law "*there shall be one law for the native-born and for the immigrant*". Unafraid to talk about slavery Moses invited us

to engage our children's moral reasoning: we must not forget what oppression felt and therefore we must never mistreat immigrants..

After Moses shares the Ten Commandments in Deuteronomy 5 Moses sums up the Law into one great commandment: *You shall Love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength.* (Duet 6) Jesus will add Leviticus 19:18 to Moses' One Commandment "*you shall love your neighbor as yourself*". With the law encapsulated in a mantra, Moses tells why the law matters, "*so that you and your children and your children's children may have reverence for the Lord your God ... and (thrive)*" Moses then tells us how to apply the law to our lives "*Keep these words in your heart. Recite them to your children: talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise.*" First, hold the creed close to your heart and second teach them to your children.

There were no phones or TV in Moses' Day, books had not been invented, only animal skin scrolls. Parents were the custodians of faith. Even today, parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts, neighbors are the custodians of faith. Do you remember our vow to every child we baptize? We pledge "*to surround them with a community of Love and Forgiveness*". Our spiritual ancestors told the story of Ruth as they harvested wheat, talked about Elijah and the widow as they baked bread, and shared the need for honest weights and measures as their children learned a trade in their carpenter shop. And when they walked for 3 days to get to the Temple, teach them to welcome the immigrant. Weave faith into everyday life. Retell the story of the Good Samaritan as you drive home from Soccer practice. Remind them, Jesus taught us, "*blessed are the peacemakers*" and to "*welcome the stranger*" as you process the news together. (Matt 5) Welcome your children's questions. Remember, it is okay to answer "I do not know that", or "what do you think about that?" or "let's ask one of our pastors"? When I read the stories of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, they seem to get it wrong more than right. Maybe that is because even though we will make mistakes once in a while, "*the steadfast love of the Lord never fails us*". Friends, God is able to more than we ask or imagine.

The Jewish Culture surrounding Jesus and the disciples embraced children. Do you remember the story of Jesus getting lost in the temple? How "*every year Jesus' parents took Jesus to Jerusalem for the Passover festival*", a three day hike each way. The year Jesus turned twelve they went up as usual and when the festival ended and headed home, but middle school Jesus stayed in Jerusalem. Mary and Joseph assumed Jesus was in the group of travelers. If you feel bad about your parenting, remember that Mary and Joseph lost Jesus for 3 days. However, please also notice the deep trust in the community- everyone took care of every child. Jesus was fine, Mary and Joseph not so

much. *“They found him in the temple, sitting among the elders and teachers, listening to them and asking them questions... “Child, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously looking for you.”* Imagine that, a middle schooler sitting among the nation's leading religious scholars reflecting on the Scriptures. Imagine how the rabbis and scribes deeply welcomed Middle School Jesus. Three days, that is nine meals the scholars cooked for a stray middle schooler. Someone offered Jesus a room. They listened, laughed and pointed things out: Jesus grew in wisdom as he hung out with the old rabbis. Jesus, like all children, was deeply welcomed into the heart of religious life. Indeed, ancient Jewish culture may have collectively valued children more than we do, as we have lost some of the communal commitment and responsibility to all children, often privatizing our collective responsibility.

So what do we make of the disciples forgetting that the infants are welcome, beloved, and essential to all we do as people of faith? Do our vows “to surround each other with a community of love and forgiveness” guide the welcome we extend to crying babies or fidgeting children? Do we remember we are the custodians of the faith of every child in our community? Do we welcome our middle schoolers' tough questions? Are we guided by a deep responsibility for the world's children? Do Jesus' words guide our words and deeds: “Truly I say to you just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me!” (Matthew 25) Do we strive to make church a safe place for all people?

Maybe the disciples thought Jesus' time was better spent on more serious matters. Wouldn't Jesus' time be better spent teaching, healing the sick, feeding the hungry, calling out the empire, or flipping over unjust tables? It is easy to get caught up in big issues and forget our sacred responsibility to nurture little people. With all the evil, injustice and oppression in the world, it is easy to forget Jesus taught us, *“Let the children come to me, and do not stop them, for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs.”*

In our transactional, highly competitive, deeply selective world it is easy to forget that our belovedness as God's children defines us. It is easy to forget that everyone has a place at God's always open table. It is easy to forget that nurturing a deep sense of community is foundational to our spiritual and mental health.

Perhaps, Jesus is just simply reminding us of what really matters: children matter, immigrants matter, welcome matters, people matter. Indeed, God's kin-dom arrives when we embrace children, welcome immigrants, love our neighbors, and do justice. So let us remove every stumbling block so that every child, every person, every stranger, may come to God unhindered, unburdened, and unashamed. (Matthew

18) May God use us imperfect people to achieve far more than we might ever ask or imagine. Amen.