

**Centre Congregational Church, U.C.C.
Sunday, September 16, 2018**

“A Welcome Investment”

Christian Scripture: Mark 9:33-37

I hope you don't mind. This morning I am going to sit down. Not because I am tired, but because in our scripture today it says that Jesus sat down to teach the disciples. In first-century Palestine, that is how religious leaders often taught. My preaching in the pulpit makes me to be rather exulted, doesn't it? Even when I stand and preach from the chancel area, I am still above you. This morning just as Jesus' words inspire my words, so Jesus' sitting down inspires my sitting down.

Let's see, what else was the norm in first-century Palestine? Well, first of all, children were not highly regarded in society. Children, along with women, old men, the disabled and widows were viewed as physically weak. Those who are physically weak cannot contribute much, especially financially. Children were in large part considered burdens to society.

Despite the fact that we have many child protection laws and we have wonderful servants of God, like Lisa Keller, who protect children from harm, I wonder to what degree our society cherishes

children. Even children are taught that children are burdens: One little girl once said to her friend, “I’m never having kids. I heard they take nine months to download”. Children themselves seem to recognize that they are burdens. Once a boy was talking to his friend and he said, “I’m really worried. My Dad works twelve hours a day to give me a nice home and great food. My Mom spends the whole day at work too, and in addition to that she spends the whole evening cooking and cleaning for me. I’m worried sick!” “What do you mean”, said the friend. “It sounds like you really have it made”. To which the boy responded, “Yes, I do. But what happens if they escape?”

So, I wonder, even today, in 2018, do we still see children as burdens as they did in first-century Palestine?



I read an article in this week’s *So Vermont: Arts and Living*.

Therein, a man wrote an editorial indicating that he was unlikely to retire in Vermont.¹ Now, without delving into the merits or demerits of his case, the issue is primarily over taxes. I am also aware from

¹ Ken Johnson, “We Are Unlikely to Retire in Vermont”, *So Vermont: Arts and Living*, Fall 2018, p. 7.

the campaign trail that there is an outcry in Vermont over the transfer of schools and programs from rural to more consolidated locations, primarily in an effort to save money. My only point in mentioning this editorial is to say that kids are not cheap and as a society, we seem to be saying to them, ‘You are *too expensive*’.

I recently travelled to the Netherlands with my son and I was amazed at how the society catered to children; fathers and mothers received paternity and maternity leave.²



U.S. News & World Report ranked the five best countries in the world in which to raise children based on a number of criteria: cares about human rights, family friendly, gender equality, happy, income equality, safe, well-developed public education system and well-developed health care system. These are the top five countries: Canada (5), Finland, Norway, Sweden and Denmark (1).³

² Taking your maternity leave in the Netherlands can be done at any moment from six weeks before due date (34 weeks of pregnancy). ... In addition, fathers/partners are entitled to two days of paternity leave (*kraamverloof*) and, as per 1 January 2017, three extra days of (unpaid) leave. “Maternity Leave in The Netherlands”, *Dutch Review* <https://dutchreview.com/expat/health/maternity-leave-in-the-netherlands/>, March 16, 2018.

³ Kevin Drew, “These Are the Best Five Countries to Raise Kids: Nordic Nations May Be the Best Place to Raise Children”, *U.S. News & World Report*, January 23, 2018.

Out of the world's 196 countries, the U.S. is one of only four that has no federally mandated policy to give new parents paid time off to care for children.⁴



In this morning's scripture, Jesus took a child and put him in the midst of them and taking him in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever receives this child in my name, receives me".

It is important to note here that nowhere in the gospels does it record that Jesus had children himself. And there is no indication that the child that Jesus took in his arms belonged to any of the disciples. Jesus received a child and placed that child in the midst of the disciples, almost displaying him, and said, "He is yours. Take care of him".



⁴ Chris Weller, "These Ten Countries Have the Best Parental Leave Policies in the World", *Business Week*, 22 August, 2016.
<https://www.businessinsider.com/countries-with-best-parental-leave-2016-8>

Next Jesus takes the child in his arms, almost embracing him in a caring and affectionate manner, and Jesus says, “He is yours. Love him”.

By speaking of taxes and maternity leave, if I have strayed too far from that ‘Old Time Religion’. You will forgive me. I repent. In so doing, I will speak closer to home, and explore with you our church and how we treat, how we welcome, children.

One of the reasons I felt called to Centre Congregational Church was the ‘Faith in Action’ program. ‘Faith and Action’ attracted me to this church. I told this to the Search Committee in our very first interview. I will also never forget the day and the moment when Priscilla walked be to the door in the parlour and showed me the Faith in Action sign-up sheet. I said, “This church has its priorities straight. This is a ministry in which I want to be a part!” If there is one ministry that should be one of our highest priorities it is Faith and Action. I think the founder(s) of this program should be applauded.

Yet, let me ask some tough questions. What percentage of our budget goes to children’s ministry? What percentage is allocated to Faith and Action? What percentage to youth and confirmation? I

don't know the answers to these questions. And I am not assigning blame.



We have the proverbial argument, 'What came first the chicken or the egg - a lack of funds invested or a decrease of children attending? Who is to say what caused what? May I propose that neither the chicken nor the egg came first? I say, rather, the rooster, the rooster came first. May I suggest that it is a spirit and an ethic that sees children as a priority that comes first and thereafter funds and children follow? So, it is not a lack of funds per se, it is not a lack of children per se that has caused a weakening of the children's ministry, it is perhaps a forgetting of a biblical mandate to welcome and invest in children.

So, this morning, I want to raise-up and pray for the leaders of Faith and Action, Hailey and Kate. And I want to thank the parents of children in our congregation for journeying with us. Who is a parent with a child in this church? Please raise your hands. I want to ask you to be patient with us, but at the same time to hold our feet to fire. I want you to hold me and Council accountable to Jesus

Christ's call to welcome the children into our midst. We must all realize that if we lose these families because we are unwilling to invest in their children, then we will have only ourselves to blame.



A scripture that scares me, one of the few that does, is Jesus' warning that if we lead any of his sheep astray, it will be as good if a millstone is hung around our necks and we are thrown into the depth (Luke 17:2). The Stewardship Campaign Committee has already begun to meet to plan for our autumn drive. It is one thing to wish to avoid taxes at the expense of the societal wellbeing of our nation's children, but it is another for Christians and members of Centre Congregational Church, myself included, to avoid pledging a tithe thus disinvesting in our own children here.

Yes. Children are expensive. But my children are my greatest joy. And so to me are your children. And so to me are so many children who are not here. They are worthy of our investment. I am going to jump the gun and pre-empt the Stewardship Committee, and I am going to ask members of our congregation to, today, make

a special designated donation to Faith in Action, so that we can equip and empower and affirm those who are leading this program. I want to pray for them today. I would like you to invest in them and thus our children today.

This was the word of God, and it was preached to the people of God, and the people of God responded: “Amen”!