

October 27, 2019

“Finding Trouble: Hanging With Kids”

Mark 10:13-16, Deuteronomy 6:4-7

If you want to find yourself in over your head – if you want to get in some trouble – try hanging out with kids. If you invest in kids – your own or someone else’s – you’re bound to feel like you’re out there on the waves, in over your head, exposed to troubles you’d rather not have to deal with. At the same time, if you hang with kids you’ll know you are smack-dab-in-the-middle of God’s presence and Kingdom.

“People were bringing little children to Jesus in order that He might touch them.” (Mark 10:13a) Some people GOT IT! They knew what was at the heart of Jesus’ mission and what was best for their children. If they could just get their kids close to Jesus, they knew that God’s blessing would be upon them.

Many of you have heard me talk several times about my former senior pastor, John Williams, and his high school biology teacher, Dennis Ashlock. Dennis was a young, twenty-something teacher who was also a Young Life volunteer leader. Dennis went after students like John – unchurched, far from God, dabbling in the drug culture of the Bay Area in the mid 60’s. Dennis and his wife poured their lives into hurting teenagers. They hung with kids. And it got messy. But over time, Dennis got John and several of his buddies close to Jesus – where they could receive the blessing and touch of the One who knew and loved them. To this day, John continues to go out of his way to notice, love and bless children and young people. Dennis and John got it!

Many of you know how messy it can get when you enter the life of a young person, and you’ve done that here at FPC, in another church/ministry, or some other setting. You know how messy it gets, especially for those who are hurting and wandering and purposeless – drawn to the kingdoms and idols of this world. So “People were bringing their little children to Jesus . . . ” They GOT IT!

Because we live in such a child-centered culture – and have seen so many pictures of Jesus with children all around Him (because we’ve grown up singing “Jesus love the little children”) – it’s hard for us to appreciate how bold and revolutionary it was for these adults to ask Jesus to bless their kids. The prevailing posture toward children in the Greco-Roman world wasn’t just neutral; it was way worse than “kids should be seen and not heard.” Kids weren’t valued at all. They were discounted and discarded regularly. It was even worse in the Ancient Near East surrounding the Israelites in the centuries leading up to the time of Jesus. Children were ritually sacrificed or sold as slaves. They were cared for more as a means of ‘social security’ for aging parents and, in the case of girls, seen as providers of a financial nest egg (dowry) in marriage. They didn’t get it.

Jewish people had the most “Kid-Friendly” culture of anyone in the Ancient Near East. They were commanded by God to bless and build into the next generation. “These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.” (Deuteronomy 6:6-7) In other words, while you’re hanging out with kids, disciple them. The past president of Compassion International, Wess Stafford, calls this a “Along the way, day by day” approach to shaping our children. Children matter to God, and He made sure His people made room for them. Hanging with kids was part of the fabric of their lives.

But even as kid-friendly as Jewish culture was – compared to the surrounding Greco-Roman and ANE cultures – children were still not as welcome as Jesus wanted them to be. We read that when people brought the children to Jesus that “The disciples spoke sternly to them.” (Mark 10:13b) They tried to shoo these kids away. SOME people didn’t GET IT; even those closest to Jesus.

And Jesus is ticked off! “But Jesus was irate and let them know it . . .” (Mark 10:14a from The Message) Jesus is quick to remind His followers – which includes us – that we better not get between any child and Him. “Don’t push these children away. Don’t ever get between them and me. These children are at the very center of life in the kingdom.” (Mark 10:14b-15a from The Message)

Several years ago my friend Johnny Losey was leading an intergenerational workshop here at FPC. We were connecting around tables in Fellowship Hall and breaking down generational barriers. We were talking and laughing about different words, trends and fashions connected to each generation – acknowledging we have to work hard to understand one another; not pass judgment so quickly. And then we moved into the sanctuary for another part of the evening and one of our older members chastised a teenager for wearing his hat into a holy place. I was irate like Jesus. Do you know what the difference was? I didn’t have the guts to call him out like Jesus called out His disciples.

At another place in the Gospel accounts Jesus says, “See that you do not look down on one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of My Father in heaven.” (Matthew 18:10)

Wess Stafford knew what it was like to be looked down upon by the teachers and leaders of the school he attended as a missionary kid in West Africa 9 months out of the year. He also knew the power of being valued from the 3 months he spent in the village his family lived in. The non-Christian, Senufo people his father was translating the Bible for understood blessing children more than the Christian Westerners he was subjected to at the school. Out of the blessings and curses he experienced growing up, Wess became an advocate for under-resourced children everywhere. In his book, *Too Small To Ignore*, he declares, “When adults speak up for

the vulnerable and the weak, working and demanding that safety and respect prevail, God's little lambs are protected and nourished. They know they are not abandoned; they are loved. And the world becomes a little more like heaven as a result." (Wess Stafford in *Too Small To Ignore: Why the Least of These Matters Most*)

We are invited to hang with kids; and experience the brokenness/messiness (trouble) that accompanies journeying with them. But with that messiness and brokenness, there also comes the hope and joy of the Kingdom of God – which children and young people more readily see and embrace.

How are you and I are Hanging With Kids these days?

I'm grateful for all the ways you have hung with kids over the years. But I want to push us a bit in the present. What are we doing currently to Hang With Kids? What could you start doing?

There are so many options. Join us in our Pray for Me Campaign – focusing your daily prayers on one of our kids or teenagers. Volunteer here at the church, or in our schools, or with scouts, or a sports team. Build into young people who love music or the arts. Invest in the kids in your neighborhood or find out how you can mentor students at Colorado Mesa University. There are organizations that work directly with kids like CASA, Partners, Kids Aid and The House.

If you don't fully appreciate how much young people need adults of all ages to come alongside them today, I'm going to encourage you to start by educating yourself about the world they are growing up in. Their lives are so much different than yours and mine were when we grew up. You can start by Googling: Young people and the pressures of social media; Teenage emotional health; depression and suicide in emerging generations.

I'm asking each one of us to make an intentional commitment to Hang With Kids. Hanging With Kids will certainly lead to Finding Trouble.

I'm glad that, more than 20 years ago, a high school graduate made that decision. She started by hanging with kids in the African Children's Choir. That led to her hanging with kids in Uganda at two orphanages. The second orphanage was going to shut down so she convinced her parents to let her take it over and finance it for her. She named it The Amani Baby Cottage, which means "Place of Peace." Danyne then adopted two Ugandan girls as a single woman (who are now almost 20). As Amani grew, young volunteers and interns began showing up to help. Two of those interns, both named Emily, saw a huge need to focus on kids with physical disabilities and started a ministry called Ekisa. Ekisa seeks to resource parents and families to care for children with disabilities. They also educate entire communities to understand these disabilities and reverse the stigma that these children are somehow cursed or possessed by evil spirits. Two other volunteers-turned-interns began a ministry called Abide. Their mission is to work with single parents who are not able to care for their kids and end up bringing them to an orphanage. Abide helps them get back on their feet, learn the biblical principles of parenting, and develop a

business plan that will help them earn a sustainable wage – allowing them to get their children back. After hearing all about the ministry and meeting all the staff at Abide, we went to have lunch with one of Abide’s clients named Fatiya, who had lost her land after her husband died, and could no longer care for her children. Fatiya, now rents a little room for \$8 per month and sells Ugandan dresses in her village. She’s also beginning to get her children back. She made us a wonderful lunch and shared more of her story. Sandra Nasala, who was with us on Freedom Sunday first went to Amani and then ended up at Abide. Her and Brian also served as a link to help us connect with the leaders of International Justice Mission (IJM) in Kampala on our way back to the airport. We were able to be with them for a couple hours and hear about their work to end violence against women and children. We were both troubled by what we heard and filled with hope. Do you see what a difference Danyne’s decision to hang with kids made?

I am so grateful for our Global Partnership with Amani Baby Cottage. We didn’t just build a new building; we built a partnership that helped us hang around and come alongside more kids.

When we hang with kids, we open ourselves up to all kinds of trouble; and troubling realities. But that means we also open ourselves up to a deeper reality of the Kingdom of God and the kind of heart and mind required to experience it more fully. “Let the children come to me. Don’t stop them! For the Kingdom of God belongs to those who are like these children. I tell you the truth, anyone who doesn’t receive the Kingdom of God like a child will never enter it.” (Mark 10:14b-15) It sounds like NOT taking Jesus at His word on this will lead to a not-so-good kind of trouble.

And though you and I WILL find trouble as we hang with kids in the Kingdom of God, we will also find hope and life and faith and joy and purpose and redemption.

Shelly and I – with the help of our adult kids and some of you – are less than one week away from ending our first shot at Foster Parenting. What we thought would be 6-9 months has turned into 14 . . . and we have found ourselves in WAY OVER OUR HEADS time and time again. We have heard and seen things that made us sad and mad and frustrated . . . things that have troubled us deeply.

But we’ve also seen glorious redemption . . . and so many of you step forward to BE THE HANDS AND FEET AND HEART OF JESUS. [Children’s Ministry, Pray for Me partners, KIDSING!, worship] I’m so grateful that FPC isn’t the kind of church that ‘shoos’ children away from the feet/blessing of Jesus. On Saturday, they will be moving in with people who we are praying will become their forever family; into a home where we trust they will be blessed and feel a deep sense of belonging.

May all children and young people feel the blessing of Jesus when they walk in here . . . or we cross paths with them out there. May we GET IT!