

July 23, 2023 – Resources or Resonance: Currency in the Kingdom of God

Matthew 18:1-6; 19:13-14

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Today will be a bit of a different sermon... Sometimes TJ and I will joke with each other about what we're preaching on, and we'll say, "*thoughts from your quiet times and devotions?*" Well, today, I think that's actually true... Today's sermon is coming from a bit of what I've been thinking about and reading about lately. Thoughts and ideas that have been swirling about for me.

We are living in a current moment in history that is bringing many challenges to Christianity, people of faith, and to the church... I say that because it does feel true and I believe IS true... but of course I would venture to guess every Christian who has ever lived at any time, has thought their current moment was challenging their faith and the church. However, what makes our time perhaps unique, particularly in the West (America, Western Europe, Australia, etc....) is the rise of secularism...

Now, when we say secularism... we are not necessarily saying the same thing as a culture in which atheism, (those who do not believe in God), or agnosticism (those who are just not sure about a God)... a culture where atheism and agnosticism exist... We have always had that in America, and in the West...

Today, we're living in a culture where secularism is becoming more and more prevalent... This is what the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor has led the way in helping us consider—Taylor wrote his magnum opus, *A Secular Age*... It's one of those books that I would recommend you NOT read... Much better to read other people writing about Taylor's work... A little easier on the palette.

What Taylor describes about this present culture- is that we are living in a time, where people aren't just not believing in God anymore... but where people are finding it INCONCEIVABLE to believe in God. Unfathomable. It doesn't register... It's impossible to imagine a world for some, where one could believe in God... or in the Divine... Or even more... Inconceivable that some type of divine force or being, could infiltrate or be present in our natural world...

In the more recent past, perhaps 50-100 years ago, most Americans lived in a society in which, faith, church, and the possibility that God could enter our world, all these things were possible for many... even IF they chose not to believe or participate.

Let me give you an example of how this worked itself out for the church in previous times... In the past, when the Church reached out to try and see people become believers... to come into the life of the church, or adopt a life of faith... often the approach was to – set up a tent, hold a revival... invite the crowds to come... large crusades where people were called to believe... OR... send people out... prepared to share the gospel with anyone and everyone... Street corner preachers... passing out of tracts...

For many generations these approaches were effective because in general, the masses of people... lived in a culture in which belief in God was possible. It was part of the cultural fabric. It was an option... they might not all take that option... but there was a belief that there was more to life than just the physical, natural world... A world where faith in God could make sense or bring a sense of fulfillment...

So, the Church responded by engaging culture in those type of familiar ways that we remember... Simply calling people to believe. *Or trying to convince them to make a decision to believe.*

Today... we are increasingly seeing the rise of secularism, chip and chip away at the possibility of faith in God as an option... Do you see what I'm saying? That it's impossible that there is anything divine out there, and that it is impossible... in fact... INCONCEIVABLE that anything DIVINE could break into what Charles Taylor calls, "The immanent frame." _In other words, all there is... is all I see and know in front of me in this natural world...

What does that mean then for the standing of the Church in this moment? What is the state of the Church in an age where belief in God, belonging to His church seems like not just something I don't feel like doing... but inconceivable?

Well, I think if you asked most Christians, church leaders, in America... it feels like, seems like we're struggling... That the standing of the Church in this kind of culture, this secular age is struggling...

I could list studies for you, from Pew Research, Barna. Articles from NPR, or The Guardian... all pointing to the fact that we're losing churches every year at a rate we've never seen before In America. Less people are going to church every week than ever before, etc... There is a problem... I've heard one philosopher define secularism and the modern world as a world of "speed." Speed and innovation... Our lives are filled with more and more devices that facilitate speed... Silicon Valley has become the center of our secular formation.

In response to that... the Church has often tried to MEET speed and innovation... WITH Speed and Innovation. With technology...

If ONLY our services, and congregational life could offer people out there, what Silicon-Valley is offering them... then we will win them back...

If we could be creative enough... then our creativity will win people back to Church and faith... If our sanctuaries and our services could look like Broadway shows and Taylor Swift concerts... then we'll win people back...

OR, if we could be busy enough as a Church....

If we could offer enough to our people to DO... then they won't get bored and wander off to some other thing...

If we only had MORE resources... more money... more space... more ministries... then we could offer more to people... who are always looking for resources... do you have enough resources for my family?

For young adults, and singles... and outreach??

Folks... None of those things are really working... Innovation, creativity, busyness, technology, resources... Instead, what it's leading to... is very tired churches.

Pastors burning out... churches closing... and megachurches that have built themselves on those things, getting bigger... smaller churches closing because they're tired... and they feel, ya know... kind of dead.

OK. I have set the problem... Perhaps taken up too much time to set the problem...

Now, I am not saying I have the only answer... And that what we're now going to look at is the ONLY answer...

But... It's the best answer and way forward I have seen yet... We often say that it seems people today, while they may be closed off to God and the Church... seem to be longing for something... They seem to be reaching for meaning and fulfillment...

The problem is, Silicon Valley and a secular age are not actually meeting that longing... because it's built on speed... it's built on keeping your head down in a closed off, immanent frame where nothing divine, or miraculous, or spiritual... or meaningful can break through... In the end our lives just become about resources... the giving and taking, the buying and selling of resources...

And we'll catch ourselves in this life of speed saying things like... *"I just need to slow down... I wish life would slow down... I wish I could make some changes to slow my life down..."*

Friends, life isn't going to slow down... And I don't even think trying to slow down is really the answer... For example... you could say... *"Maybe I just won't have a cell phone..."* Well... you can't really do that now... the entire world operates on cell phones... you have to have one in order to be a part of society... So, it's not slowing down... BUT what is it.... *I think it's Resonance.*

When the modern/secular world wants to tell us there is nothing divine or spiritual, only the natural, the scientific... *we long for resonance...* We long for meaning and fulfillment that tells us we are not alone, we are not on our own... and that there is something that can fulfill my deepest longings.

I've been really helped by a Lutheran theologian named Andrew Root, who has done a ton of work and research on Youth ministry in particular... He writes this: *"Reading that poem, watching that movie, looking over that mountain vista, laughing and playing with that four-year-old. Such experiences are full. You feel a resonance between yourself and the world, a felt relationship that reverberates at the frequency of the good... In these moments of resonance, you experience your own life teeming with meaning."*

Resonance, is the feeling of fullness. Wholeness... Delight. The Ancient Hebrew, Old Testament word for this would be "shalom..." Fullness. Wholeness. Deep meaning. Delight.

Hartmut Rosa is a German sociologist... he explains resonance as *"a mode of relating to the world in which the subject feels touched, moved, or addressed by the people, places, objects, he or she encounters."* It's feeling a deep connection to something... finding fulfillment...delight.

Busyness is frantic... The fullness of resonance, Andrew Root says... is delight... and peace. *"It is never a race to acquire more (resources)... Delight is an overflowing that never needs more because it never needs anything new. "And for the Christian... Resonance... is Delight in God. It is a connection to God... A relationship with God through him breaking into our world in Jesus Christ.*

Let me read you one more assessment from Andrew Root about the congregation in light of this... and then we'll move on to a possible solution. --- Root writes – *"My argument throughout has been that Silicon-Valley-style innovation is no solution to the problems congregations face. What we need is not innovation (because of all the mis-goods it delivers)... but resonance. Not innovation, but resonance. Innovation is just an energy drink that can get us up and running. Its allure is that it really can get us moving into action. BUT it's formulated with too many chemicals and preservatives- with too*

many goods of accelerated modernity and Silicon-Valley-which eventually promises a crash. Seminaries, consultants, and denominational leaders would be better off focusing on resonance."

In other words, what is going to bring life to our congregations is not keeping up with the ways of the world through innovation... but offering opportunity for people to experience connection to God... moments where they are pulled out of their closed-off world... where they are moved... moved by God in some profound way...

OK... So, If resonance then is what the Church should be inviting people to experience more of through worship... Fellowship... Ministry...

If Resonance and Shalom... is the key to getting people who find it inconceivable to believe in God, to perhaps for the first time be moved by the Spirit... or to see the Church as offering the opportunity for resonance and meaning and fulfillment in their lives. Where do we start or begin?

And the answer I want to offer you today, is Children.... Children... Let's look at our passage today... Matthew 18, vs. 1 – *At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"*

Jesus' disciples have just seen some pretty extraordinary things. The chapter before this in Matthew 17, we read about The Transfiguration of Christ... You can imagine that after witnessing that... they are buzzing with excitement and possibility of where this is all headed... So, Jesus, if you are really from heaven and bringing the kingdom of heaven to earth... *"Whooooo... is the greatest there? IN that kingdom?"* Could... it be me!?

Listen, the disciples were regular men... dealing with all of the infallibilities that we do... And, they knew who the heroes of the faith were. They know how people are remembered... for courage and success... *And, so Jesus... who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?*

In some way or another, Christians have always been preoccupied with this question... For centuries... We come into this relationship with Christ... to follow him... we experience his grace and love... and then... this is the question that quickly rattles around in our minds and hearts not too long afterwards. We begin to think about position and pride... we begin to think about resources, and acquiring more and more...

Jesus though... hears their question... and once again turns the question completely upside down... He immediately calls over a little child, that must have been close by following along... v. ² *And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them³ and*

said, "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. ⁴ Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

Remember, in the ancient world... both in Roman and Jewish cultures had no status at all. They were to truly be seen but not heard. They didn't matter until they were GROWN... Until they could provide a resource to the community or family...

You can imagine, the disciples are really excited about hearing the answer to their question about who is the greatest... and now they've got this little kid in front of them, with the Messiah himself... Unless you can become like this child, Jesus says... you won't even get IN to the kingdom of heaven...

Now, I want to stop just a moment... You know, most of us are adults here. Almost all... And when we hear this idea of being more like a child... I think... most of the time we hear it... and that's it. It doesn't cut to the heart of us... We're passed being a child.

I've got real world, adult level issues here, Phil... I don't have time to think or act like a child... In fact, everyone my whole life has been telling me to grow up and STOP acting like a child...

OK... But... Jesus calls over this little child... shy, vulnerable, unsure... comes over to Jesus... trusting him. Jesus essentially saying... Guys, you think greatness is about doing, and acquiring, and putting yourself forward.... My kingdom, turns the values of the secular world on its head.

And then, as if staring them all straight in the eyes, Jesus gives the sternest of warnings... ⁵ *"Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, ⁶ but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.*

So it's clear now... that it's not ONLY about being LIKE a child... but Jesus is also extremely concerned about how we treat children... and their place among us.... Those who cannot become like a child, can't even enter the kingdom... and those who causes one of these little ones harm... might as well be drowned in the sea...

The disciples hear this... but in the very next chapter, Matthew 19... we read this... v. 13 - *Then children were brought to him that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples rebuked the people,¹⁴ but Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven."¹⁵ And he laid his hands on them and went away.*

Parents and children are coming to Jesus, to seek him out... to have a blessing given to them... And of course, in most people's minds and in the disciples' minds... no, no... Jesus is too important for this... He doesn't have time for this... Noteworthy people don't have to be bothered by children and babies... And so they are shooing people away and Jesus stops them... *"Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven."¹⁵ And he laid his hands on them...*

So, let's recap what Jesus says about children... He brings them close... if you can't be like a child, you can't enter his kingdom... His kingdom belongs to children... and if you cause them to sin... you will be thrown into the sea...

What is it about children, that leads Jesus to say these things?

Why do children matter to Jesus in this way? And what does that have to do with resonance, and what the church should be about in this secular age?

Children mattered to Jesus... And they should matter to us... And I know we all would say, "Of course children matter to us..." *But I want us to really think about it as a focus of ministry and life in the church...*

Children have so much to teach us as adults.... why? Well, they're usually more sensitive to the things of God than we are as adults... They're attitudes of trust and simplicity are so easy to see... They don't parade around their own achievements... They live in constant dependence... Trust. Sensitivity to God. Simplicity. Humility. Dependence.

Friends... these are the qualities of a disciple of Jesus. This is what the kingdom of heaven looks like. Michael Green the Bible commentator says that children are signposts for the kingdom of God...The ancient world said children were irrelevant... *Jesus says, they are actually pointing you to my kingdom.*

In the modern, secular world... children are not irrelevant... But, in our ever-increasing secular age... Children can point us to a life of meaning and resonance that should guide the ministry of the Church today...

Even in the church. Children can be often thought of as a nuisance to many adults... Children often disrupt our very adult-like plans and efforts...

But in the life of the Church children... actually help point us to the fullness and meaning that we are longing for in Christ.

Why do we care about children here at Park Road? Why do we have children's ministry? And... why do we think it's such an important part of our life together?

We might be tempted to think in this way... Well, we want to have a children's ministry, because families, particularly young families are looking for a church that has a good children's ministry... That have a lot of programs for them to be involved in... And this will attract them to come and be a part of our church...

But, no... that's thinking about ministry and the kingdom in a resource and exchange kind of way... We might also say, well... we want children to be a part of our church, because the more kids there are... the more that will bring other families and kids... and people want to be around people in their same age, and so that's why we do it... But... that also rings of seeing children and children's ministry as a resource and exchange program...

Finally, we might also think... and I think this is a particularly prevalent one in the church today... We might think that if we value children and invest in children's ministry here at the church, we will be building the church of tomorrow... Park Road Pres will be in good hands for another generation... It's a legacy we are building...

But viewing Children and Children's ministry as the church of tomorrow and our legacy, again puts the emphasis on us as adults... *and often relegates children from being seen as part of the active church right now...*

The big, take home, point today... is that instead of all those things... and by the way... those things are not entirely wrong... there is a lot of truth to what I've just said... Families attract families, programs help kids learn about Jesus...

But my big point today... *is that Children in the life of the Church, can actually help lead to the breakthrough we are searching for as the church in a secular age... They can actually revitalize and invigorate the Church...*

Because kids get it... Children can model the way of Jesus in ways that we can't... They can live with joy overflowing... They believe in things bigger than themselves... they are not obsessed with the disciple's question, "*Who is the greatest, Jesus?*" I'm not saying Children are pure, or innocent.... *But I am saying that children by necessity have to lean into relationships of love to survive...* And that leads them to experience life with deep meaning and fulfillment.

When the church begins to focus on children... it gets out of the race and pace of the modern secular world... It starts caring less about resources or even legacies... it sees in the face of a child, faith, hope, and love... It reminds us of what it means to live with delight and awe and wonder...

Jesus belongs to children... And the Church, if we are to survive in this secular age... if we are help other people break through to actually find resonance, and meaning, and shalom... *I think is by focusing on those among us who most easily live a life of resonance.* Who help us break out of the immanent frame and open ourselves up to a God who breaks into the world by His Spirit.

There is a reason, that when we invite the kids up here on the stage for a children's sermon, I can see your faces smiling... there is a reason we say to our kids... "don't grow up too fast..." We know that children show us a lot of how we are meant to live our lives with God. Free and full of life and meaning.

To close, just a couple of quick examples of how this can really change a church's standing in the world. Remember, I said that megachurches are growing and small churches are closing in America... And we often think of megachurches having all kinds of programs and investment in children's ministry, etc....

But what about that church of 50 people.... That's barely hanging on... That have no children in it? Where everyone would say... that church just kind of feels dead, you know? What is that church to do??

Why focus on children in that church if there are no children?

I heard of one church in that exact situation... You know what they did? They realized that though they had no children in their church... they were all connected to children... Every congregation has some children they care about- nieces and nephews, grandchildren, neighbors... This congregation began to regularly pray for these children... They began to believe that a child is part of your congregation when he or she is prayed for... They realized all of these children were now a part of their congregation in some way... they're now walking along side all of these families and helping to care for them... *and it has invigorated this seemingly dying church... they are teeming with life because they have found a place of resonance and meaning together.*

And finally, I've included this in the bulletin... one of the great theologians and pastors of the 20th century, Dietrich Bonhoeffer... of course known for standing up to Hitler's regime... but one of his greatest gifts to us was his ministry to children...

Upon leaving a congregation... he wrote these words... *"the congregational prayer has long sent shivers down my spine, and it did so incomparably more when the group of children, with whom I had spent two years, prayed for me."*

There are most likely, many ways in which we can encounter resonance, and shalom... Art, nature, friendship, marriage, and community... No question...

But there is something about children in the life of the Church that reminds us that we were not meant to live in a closed universe... innovating our way into oblivion... We were meant to experience the love of God the Father... meeting our deepest longings... And the smiling faces of babies and children, can lead us all to experience the wonder of being God's child.

And so the call today... is not... how can we grow? How can we be more creative as a church to meet the needs of an unbelieving world... It's how can we care for and carry our children?

Jesus said, *"Unless you turn, and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."*

Friends, child-like faith and wonder is what the watching world is waiting to see and experience.

Let's Pray.

