

Hey SOCC! Welcome to everyone worshiping together here and online. I'm excited to be here with you guys this morning! My name is Grant Gardner, and I am the middle school minister here at SOCC. I love getting to work with youth and just the next generation which I will get to share more about today, and I got to say that I love being a part of a church that values the importance of youth ministry. I have received so much love and encouragement from many of you in my four years here and I truly could not be doing what I do without all your prayers, love, and support. So seriously thank you so much!

Now, all that being said, let's address the elephant in the room. Yes, I'm the guy that in my last sermon here, I shared the story of how I drove to Cincinnati instead of Chicago. And I was reminded of just how much God wired our brains for stories because apparently the only thing people remembered from that sermon was that story...I even had a gentleman come up to me after service and ask "seriously, did that actually happen?" Yes...it is indeed a true story, I didn't make it up. But it's so true isn't it? We love and remember stories. I believe that's why Jesus often illustrated his points through parables or stories. Jesus was the greatest minister of all time, but He was also the greatest storyteller of all time. That's why I enjoy this series "At the Movies." J.R.R. Tolkien, writer of the "Lord of the Rings," argued in his many conversations with a skeptical C.S. Lewis that the gospel story of Jesus is NOT simply one more great story, pointing to the underlying reality. Rather, the gospel story of Jesus IS the underlying Reality to which ALL stories point. Every good story points to THE one true story.

So today we're going to be using the movie "The Polar Express" to point to the one true story. Which, I found out recently, there's apparently a book? I can't believe someone wrote a book based on the movie, so wild! Kidding, apparently the book came first or so I'm told. But in the story we follow the main character who is never actually named in the story, literally the credits label him as hero boy. And this hero boy is very skeptical of the magic of Santa Claus and Christmas. He is set on giving up his childish beliefs and disproving that Santa Claus exists. That is until he jumps aboard the polar express that night and experiences the journey of a lifetime. Through the story he will encounter: new friends, a friendly ghost, elves, the North Pole, and most importantly hot chocolate. It's a wild ride. Through this journey the nagging question Hero Boy is presented with is do you truly have to see Santa Claus in person before you believe? The silver bells in the story are the plot device in which this theme is played out. Those who believe can hear the ringing of the bells and those who can't, don't truly believe. So let's watch how this plays out.

(Show Clip)

Maybe you've felt like Hero Boy in your life. You've felt like you need to grow up and stop believing in myths. Maybe you're on a journey to deconstruct your faith and find out what you truly believe, and you're skeptical about all of this Jesus stuff. If that is you, I'm glad you're here today. This story found in "The Polar Express" reminds me of an account given in the gospels, specifically we're going to look at the account given in Mark chapter 10. So if you have your Bible or Bible app turn to Mark 10:13-16.

“And they were bringing children to him that he might touch them, and the disciples rebuked them. But when Jesus saw it, he was indignant and said to them, “Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.” And he took them in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands on them.”

Mark 10:13-16 ESV

“Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.” Now what does Jesus mean by this? Children can be convinced of a lot. I remember when I was in middle school, I attended a YFC camp and during one of the more powerful and emotional nights a group of us middle school boys sat around in a circle and shared hard things going on in our lives. And at one point this boy in our group speaks up and says with the most serious of faces and tones, “for the longest time...I thought the moon was made out of cheese.” And at this point in my life I wouldn’t have considered myself the most emotionally intelligent boy, but even immature me knew this was not a great time to laugh. But I can tell you guys now, years later, that is only by the power of the Holy Spirit that I did not. I mean this kid said this like it was a betrayal on levels he had never seen before. So is that what Jesus is telling us here? Is Jesus telling us to think like children and just blindly follow Him? Of course not! Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians:

”Brothers, do not be children in your thinking. Be infants in evil, but in your thinking be mature.” -1 Corinthians 14:20 ESV

So if Jesus is not telling us to be children in our thinking what is He telling us? Well, the first thing is that little children at this time were not considered old enough to understand or obey the law, so Jesus is implying that entry into the Kingdom of Heaven doesn’t depend on our own works or righteousness, but it depends on humility and trust in Him. After all, children were the lowest on the totem pole politically and culturally. They had zero say into how society functioned, little children were totally dependent on their family. Jesus is calling out the pride of the people saying unless you acknowledge that you are least before God, and rely with total dependence on His grace, you cannot be saved. This passage lies in contrast to the very next section in which a rich, young ruler comes before Jesus. In contrast to the little children this man would’ve been seen as someone with great righteousness and standing with God. He asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. And Jesus tells him to obey the commandments, the man replies I have kept all of these since I was a boy. Then in verse 21 Jesus challenges this man of great standing.

“And Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, “You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.” Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions. And Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!””

Mark 10:21-23 ESV

This man believed the same myth many of us believe. He believed he could earn his way into heaven. He relied on his great wealth and possessions rather than a trust and dependence on God. He trusted in earthly possessions and what he could see and touch. He lacked a childlike faith. In my own story, volunteering in youth ministry for 8 years, and now being a youth minister for the last 4 years I've realized just how true this is. I might have not put children in the best light earlier with the moon story, so I have some more stories because children have so much to teach us about faith. Children have so many great qualities and things they can teach us, but in my experience these 3 qualities are the qualities that stick out to me most.

Number one, children are honest. If anyone has ever sat next to a small child on an airplane (which the Lord always seems to bless me with by the way) you would know that they are not afraid to make it known that they are uncomfortable. There's a reason there's the saying "don't cry over spilled milk," because kids will literally cry over spilled milk. But in the same way are you honest with God in your prayers? Do you cry out to Him when you're hurt and in need of healing? Do you seek His comfort even in the little things in life? Children are not afraid to share their emotions when they're in the presence of those they know care about them. In the month of October student ministry went through a series devoted to talking about doubt. And for the final two weeks of this series we had students write down questions and things they were struggling with in their faith. And one of our middle schoolers wrote this question:

Am I saying the right prayers? I want to pray purely, and not treat God like a genie.

What a beautiful and honest question! It's a question that I think all of us in this room could stand to ask ourselves every day. Am I saying the right prayers? Children are honest and vulnerable.

Number two, children are dependent. They know who to run to for help. Everyone who has ever attempted the peak of comedy, funny faces, or dare I say it, the legendary peek-a-boo gambit with a child would know that someday you just don't got it. The child inevitably runs and hides behind their parents legs, and if this hasn't happened to you then I don't believe you. But children know who to run to. In our culture today, the word independence gets thrown around a lot as this great thing, and while there are some good ways to be independent: financially and so on. None of us are fully independent. Most of us in this room probably don't farm their own food. Most of us in this room probably didn't install or create every aspect of their house, apartment, or car. We are dependent on others, and if we can acknowledge that (which you should), then we can also acknowledge that we are spiritually dependent. There are times in our lives in which we are left broken, or have created a mess too big for ourselves to clean up. In those cases, we must learn from children and run to our Father.

Number three, children believe with their whole hearts. Years ago, when I was away at college my mom decided that she wanted to clean the kitchen windows. Which was great except for the fact that she can't reach the windows in the kitchen over the kitchen counter. So she climbs up on our granite counter and cleans the kitchen window, but as

she is getting down, she slips from about 4 feet up and as she's coming down her head hits against the edge of the granite island in our kitchen. This knocks her unconscious and creates a puddle of blood. My dad coming to investigate the large crashing noise finds my mom, unconscious on the floor with a puddle of blood coming from her head. To make matters worse, my mom at this point had recently gotten hair extensions. So when my dad grabbed the back of her head, pieces of hair fell out covered in goo. My dad like most men out there, did not know anything about hair extensions, so he believes he is holding parts of my moms brain. It's safe to say, he was completely and utterly terrified at this moment. My sister who was about 8 at this time had been with my dad this whole time. And my dad, not knowing what else to do or say tells my little sister to pray. And in that moment my dad says my 8 year old sister taught him how to pray. She prayed with no fear and with a childlike faith. And before they left for the hospital my sister wrote this note for my brothers who lived at home during this time.

(Show picture)

I still look at this and think how amazing it is that my sister wrote "she is going to be okay." She had childlike faith and believed with her whole heart that God was in control. What an example of faith. And God answered her prayers as my mom went home later that night with a pretty hefty concussion, but no serious damage. It's safe to say she is not allowed to clean the windows anymore in our house.

Children can teach us so much about faith, and what it means to follow Jesus. Jesus calls all of us to a childlike faith. One that humbles ourselves before Him and acknowledges that we are dependent on His love and grace. Maybe you've heard the saying before "you can't teach an old dog new tricks." Jesus put it this way, you wouldn't put new wine into old wine skins because it will tear through the seams. There's some truth to that saying, but blessed are we because there's still hope. Jesus tells us in John chapter 3 that we can be born again. In 2 Corinthians Paul tells us this:

"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away;
behold, the new has come."
2 Corinthians 5:17 ESV

As we end here today, the Christmas story reminds me of another rich ruler named Herod. King Herod captured the throne of Jerusalem sometime around 37 BC with largely the help of the Romans, and he was instituted as a puppet king under their rule. But his status as a puppet king did not prevent him from becoming one of Rome's most loyal leaders and obtaining a wealth that rivaled that of Solomon. King Herod was filthy rich and had almost everything he could ever want. But his lust for power and maintaining his kingdom drove him mad. Historical accounts tell us that Herod killed three of his own sons, as well as his wife, and her mother and grandfather for suspicion of conspiring against him. So it's no surprise that we learn in Matthew chapter 2, that when Herod learns of the birth of a new king (Jesus) from the Magi, he gives orders to kill all male children 2 years old or younger in Bethlehem. King Herod was an evil man consumed by his own wealth and power. But I think if we're honest that evil exists within

all of us. Our desire to hold onto our own kingdom by any means necessary, to trust in the things that we can see and touch. Our desire to be in control. I see that evil within myself as I cling to my own kingdom. God I don't want to give these things in my life up! I don't want to go where I'm uncomfortable. I want to do things my way. And in the wake of these desires I always end up leaving a trail of destruction hurting myself, and the people closest to me. It's the original sin. The serpent tells Eve that God doesn't want her to eat of the fruit because she will become like Him. And Adam and Eve desiring to rule over themselves and no longer submit to God eat of the fruit. Desiring to establish their own kingdoms. And the problem is that this is the greatest lie that was ever told. In desiring to give up God as the Lord of their lives, they only pushed Him aside to serve a new master, sin. Since then our story has been a power struggle of us trying to establish our own kingdoms, only to discover time and time again that we are ruled by our own sin. But like I said earlier, there is hope! Jesus gives us the opportunity to be set free, to no longer be captive to our sin. But it didn't come without a price, Jesus gave His life on the cross, dying a horrible death so that you could be free. And just like how this act of grace didn't come without a price, neither does following Jesus. Those who are in Christ Jesus become new creations, but for us to be born again we must die.

"And he said to all, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me."

Luke 9:23 ESV

Whatever you've done, whatever baggage you carry today, I can tell you that there is redemption in the name of Jesus. Maybe you've felt like Hero Boy in that as you've grown up, you've learned that this world is a cold and broken place. The "magic" and joy of your youth has quickly turned to sour cynicism. Things are not what you had imagined them to be, and you're desperately looking for a way to find the joy of your youth again, wishing you could hear the bell ring one more time. I don't know what you carry, but I do know my God saves and restores. Your slate can be washed clean and you can become a new creation. A fresh start as you can find a joy greater than that of your youth. But first you must stop clinging to our own kingdom, and give yourself up to the only true Kingdom that will last. I'm not here to lie to you and tell you it's going to be easy. The path of a Christian is to walk the road Jesus walked. There will be costs to following Jesus. You must die to yourself, but when you do, you will be made alive and free in Christ Jesus experiencing a transcending joy like no other. One that can't be squashed or burnt out by the worries and troubles of this world. Because at the end of the day you know that this world does not have the final say. So who will you choose to be today? Will you continue to hold onto your treasures and the things of this world like the rich, young ruler and King Herod. Will you continue to be a slave to your own sin, putting your hope in a kingdom that will not last? Or will you approach the Kingdom of God like a child? Totally and utterly dependent on his grace, surrendering your kingdom to Him. As we close here today, I urge you to run to the father, and be wrapped up in His arms. If you want to know more about what it means to experience freedom in Jesus and give your life to Him, come on down to the front we'd love to talk to you more about what that means. But don't wait, and don't keep something that amazing to yourself. Tell someone and make that decision today.