

Let the children come to me, says Jesus. A Gospel message in of itself. Let the children come even if they cannot master the 4.0 or the modern 4.5 GPA in school. Let the children come even if they cannot thrive in academic life. Let the children come even if they cannot make first-team all-conference in every extra curricular activity imaginable. Let the children come even if they don't like sports or they're not so sure they have what it takes for band or choir. Let the children come if they're struggling to find where they fit in not just with school, but in the world. Let the children come so that they can experience the One who will insist they fit in just perfectly in the space of God's everlasting embrace of them. Let the children come to me, says Jesus.

Let the children come to me if they had to grow up far too fast because of family dynamics at home. Let the children come to me if they had to get a job early to help support their siblings or other relatives. Let the children come to me if they have absolutely no idea what life has in store for them. Let the children come if they feel the most immense pressure imaginable on so many fronts and they're not so sure how they can possibly make it all work.

Let the children come, so that they can experience the grace that quite simply does not make sense with everything else they've experienced in their developmental years. Let the children come to me, so that they know the Gospel is just as much for them as when they turn 21 or older.

But also, be sure to let the children come in the moments of joy and happiness, because their laughter and smiles are not just contagious for the surrounding parents and grandparents and other friends and family, but for the Lord who also yearns for their delight as well. Let the children come so that they know that this is not just the God of the depths and valleys, but of the heights and mountaintops as well. Let the children come in the best of times and the worst of times and everything else in between. Let the children come to know that this God has been with them from the beginning and that nothing can happen to kick God out of their life.

And as much as we deeply appreciate the youth in our midst today, including those who came forward for a blessing of the backpacks, we also need to make something abundantly clear. That we do not believe a specifically worded blessing somehow convinced God to all of a sudden

start being part of the children's academic life for the upcoming school year. God already made that decision from the beginning in Jesus Christ. The blessing spoken today did not sway God into compassionate and loving action. God is already wired that way more than enough for all of us. But sometimes *we* need to hear it. We need to hear that Gospel, and the children need to hear it, too.

The children who sometimes face their own seemingly insurmountable pressure from various adults in their life to excel in the classroom and out on the playing field and in the music rehearsals and at the home front and soon enough in the work place and whatever else lies ahead in their journey of life: the children need to hear a blessing specific for them. To hear of God's love that is not reserved for adulthood, but from their very beginning and to last for their entirety. But also to be assured in no uncertain terms, that they do not need a perfectly worded blessing or prayer to convince God to show up in their every moment, because God cherishes them far too much to ever leave their side anyway. They don't need the 4.0. They don't need honorable recognition in the academics or the extra-curricular activities.

They don't have to be the best. They don't have to be perfect. The world will have its immense opportunities to speak of reaching for the stars, and not always with the most ill will of intentions, necessarily. However, the ultimate Gospel is not Jesus saying, "Let the children come to me." But that the brightest light in Jesus Christ, far exceeding that of anything in the sky, has already come to dwell in them. And that no matter what happens for this upcoming school year and beyond, no matter how dismal they might feel at times, no matter how much they might feel so alone amidst all the expectations galore, this Jesus Christ is never ever going to leave them to fend this life for themselves. And not only that, but this Jesus Christ insists that they are a masterpiece in the eyes of God, and nothing is going to happen to change God's mind about that for them and children of God of all ages. Let the children come to me is a wonderful Gospel hospitality message to be sure, but even if they're not so sure they're worthy to approach their Lord, Christ has already come in with a love that can never be stopped for them and all of us. And for that Greatest News to last a lifetime, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen!