

Sermon for SFBC Candidate Weekend  
Matthew 18:1-5, 10-14  
The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
September 17, 2023  
Rev. Leigh Curl-Dove, Seattle First Baptist Church

Over the past few months, I have been very slowly making my way through Dr. Robin Wall Kimmerer's book *Braiding Sweetgrass*. Dr. Kimmerer is a scientist, professor, and member of the Citizen Potowatomi Nation. In her life and work, she embraces the idea that plants and animals are our oldest teachers. In *Braiding Sweetgrass*, she brings indigenous wisdom, scientific knowledge, plants, animals, land, and water to show an interconnectivity of all things, a reciprocal relationship between humanity and all of creation. Dr. Kimmerer says that it is only when we can hear the languages of other beings, that we are capable of understanding the generosity of the earth, and then can learn to give our own gifts in return.

*Braiding Sweetgrass* is not the type of book you rush through, and I believe it is best read outside, in communion and conversation with creation, so that you can listen to the languages, stories, and songs of other beings all around you. Which is why having started the book in June in North Carolina, I haven't finished it yet because it is far too hot and humid to spend more than 3 minutes outside. But, there is a story Dr. Kimmerer tells early on in the book that I have not been able to stop thinking about since I read it in early June.

She tells a creation story, that she adapted from both oral, storytelling tradition and a book called *Skywoman: Legends of the Iroquois*. In the story, she tells of a woman called the Skywoman, who fell from the sky. There was seemingly only dark water below her, but in that void, there were many eyes watching the woman fall. A group of geese saw the woman falling and rose up from the water to fly beneath her to catch her. The geese realized that they did not possess the strength to continue to hold the woman up. So, they called a council of all the animals: loons, otters, beavers, swans, fish, a giant turtle, and a muskrat. The turtle offered his back for the woman, and she gladly accepted.

The gathered animals understood that the woman needed land to make her home, and they discussed how they might help her as there was only dark water around them. Those in the council who had dove deep down into the water had heard of mud at the bottom and agreed to go and find it.

One by one the animals took turns diving down, the great divers and swimmers all took their turn and failed because the water was too dark and too deep. They returned to the surface gasping each time, until eventually, the only one left who had not taken the dive was the muskrat, known to be the weakest, smallest diver of all.

Now, I googled muskrats, because while I have read this story and even heard Dr. Kimmerer tell this story in person, I admittedly did not really know much about muskrats other than that there is a song about the love between two muskrats by Captain and Tenille. What I learned is

muskrats can spend about 12-17 minutes under water and use their tails to propel them through the water. But, muskrats are very small. They weigh less than five pounds and are less than a foot long.

And still, that little muskrat kicked his legs and used his tail to dive all the way down to the bottom of the dark water. He was gone for a long time, time continued to pass and everyone feared the worst. Eventually the body of the muskrat rose to the top, and the worst had happened. The muskrat had died, but he had given his life to help the human. As they looked at the muskrat, they all noticed that he had successfully grasped in his paw a bit of mud.

The turtle said, “Put it on my back and I will hold it.” The Skywoman bent down and spread the mud over the turtle’s back. Then the Skywoman began to sing and dance in thanks for the gifts of the animals. As she sang and danced, the land grew from the mud on the turtle’s back until there was a whole earth. The earth came not solely from the Skywoman, but from the gifts of the animals and the gratitude of the Skywoman together, from the work of the muskrat who was far from the greatest diver, and was actually known as the weakest, smallest diver, but who brought mud up from the depths to form land.

When Jesus places a child—the weakest and smallest—among the disciples, it’s shocking. A child who at that time, was considered less than human, nothing more than property. A child who was not supposed to be seen nor heard. A child—far from the greatest.

And yet, when the disciples ask a self-serving question hoping their good friend Jesus will throw them a bone and say they are the greatest, Jesus lifts-up a child and says, “Unless you become like this child, you will never enter the realm of the heavens. If you become like this child, then you will be great. If you receive this child, you are really receiving me.”

Jesus gives them an embodied response by centering the child, because in all honesty, they should have known the answer to the question by now. Jesus has done so much teaching by this point in the gospel of Matthew, that the disciples should know that it is those who the world excludes and oppresses that Jesus stands with and identifies with. The disciples had a front row seat to the Sermon on the Mount when Jesus said, “Blessed are the poor, blessed are those who mourn, blessed are the meek, blessed are those who hunger and thirst, blessed are those who are merciful, blessed are those who are pure in heart, blessed are the peacemakers.”

They should know full well that it is not about being the greatest, but it is about who they include, who they accept, who they make space for, and who they stand in solidarity with, and they should know that these people are not the people that the world includes or accepts, these are not the people the world makes space for or stands with.

So Jesus, shows them the answer—“be like a child, this child who is weak and small and forgotten by the world. Welcome and receive this child and in doing so, you receive me.”

And wanting to make sure they really grasp the concept this time, wanting to make sure they don’t have any more questions about who is really the greatest or who they should include or who they should stand in solidarity with, Jesus tells them a story about a flock of one hundred

sheep. One member of the flock wanders off and the shepherd leaves the ninety-nine to go and find the one and bring that one back to the ninety-nine, rejoicing when they find the one and bring them back home.

Jesus wants the disciples to fully understand that without the one, the ninety-nine is not whole. The herd, the community, is not whole. The lives of the one and ninety-nine are tied up together, they depend on each other. Their liberation and their freedom are tied up together. What hurts the one, hurts the ninety-nine. It may be just one, one sheep, one child, one muskrat, but without that one, no matter how much the world looks on that one with contempt, no matter how small and weak the world says they are, no matter how much the world discounts, excludes or oppresses them, that one, that one body matters, and without that one, the ninety-nine cannot be a full body themselves.

Several months ago, during youth group one Sunday evening, my youth were voicing some of the fears they have and questions they have about what is happening in the world. This particular evening, was in the midst of Florida passing laws about gender-affirming care for trans children, and Tennessee banning drag shows.

One of my youngest youth, a sixth-grader, was asking questions to get clarification on the laws against trans kids in Florida. When I told him that it would be illegal for parents of trans children to seek the healthcare their child needed, he stood up in righteous anger, fists clenched and exclaimed “You mean they are making it illegal for parents to love and care for their kids for who they are but they aren’t doing anything about guns?!”

Later that week, I took this particular youth some ice cream and we went on a walk around his neighborhood together to chat. And we talked about how people in positions of power, who might be categorized as “the greatest” in our world, often use their power to harm and oppress because they want to maintain their power and their status as “the greatest.” We talked about his friend at school who recently started using they/them pronouns, and he said to me “I don’t understand why anyone would want to hurt my friend or make their life harder, but I am going to keep supporting my friend and having their back.”

Jesus using a child as the example of how to be and exist in the world, is radical and prophetic, because children are radical and prophetic. Author and poet, Kaitlin Curtice who like Robin Wall Kimmerer is Potawatomi, writes in her book *Native: Identity, Belonging, and Rediscovering God*, that “all children are liberators... We live in an era in which the young people are leading us. They are leading us on issues of gun control; they are leading us on issues of climate change; they are leading protests and marches and making phone calls to their senators. They are changing systems that must be changed.” Curtice goes on to say, “When I don’t really know what I believe about the world, about God, about who Jesus really is in the mess we’ve made of history. I look at the kids...if we let them show us the world they see, a world diverse and full of the mysteries of God, even our adult lives can change, and we can learn to be better people in the process.”

Jesus centered a child as an embodied example because children were seen as the smallest and weakest. They were not seen as fully human. Their bodies and lives were discounted by the

world in which they lived. And he wanted the disciples to understand that they had to welcome and stand in solidarity with the children and everyone like them. Any and all of God's children who the world discounts, oppresses, and excludes.

But, I wonder if Jesus also lifted-up a child to show the disciples how to live, because children seem to innately understand the interconnectivity of all created, living things. They see the intersections and know that the lives of the one and the ninety-nine are tied up together. They know that if the one is not free, the ninety-nine are not free. They know that we are better together, when we stand in solidarity and support even the least of these. They know that every body—every member of creation—humans, plants, animals (and especially muskrats)—must be included if our community is to be whole. They know this. And Jesus says they are the ones who will teach us.