

ST. DENIS CATHOLIC CHURCH, MANASQUAN, NEW JERSEY
STAINED GLASS WINDOW DEPICTING MT 19:13-15¹
By Veronica Conkling

The scene depicting passage in St. Matthew 19: 13-15 is powerful in its uncommon representation.² Located to the right of the altar, the scene has five characters situated in a daylight country landscape setting. Jesus, vested in a red robe,³ stands at the right creating a focal point in the composition.

The characters in the scene form a dynamic visual triangle. The story can start with Jesus and ends with the woman holding the baby, or it can start with her and end with Jesus.

To the left a woman holding a baby in her arms is clothed in a purple gown, which symbolizes royalty or wealth, hierarchy or authority. She is extending her arms, presenting the child to Jesus. This action suggests her own recognition that Jesus is someone beyond her own authority, power or wealth and submits herself and the child by offering him to Jesus.⁴

In the center, a child is kneeling with his hands in a manner suggesting prayer. The depiction of this child communicates certain growth and maturity. This child has reached an age of consciousness, where he is equipped to discern what is good and bad, and knows how to “lift his heart” in prayer. Prayer that can be of thanksgiving, petition, and/or reconciliation.

To the right, the third child is genuflecting. A bodily gesture we Catholics perform as a sign of adoration recognizing God present in the Tabernacle of our churches. This child is portrayed acknowledging Jesus in his Humanity and his Divinity and adores him by offering three lilies held in his hand.⁵

¹ One other stained glass is marked Innsbruck what leads me to believe that this window probably was manufactured by the Tyrolese Art Glass Company, Innsbruck, Austria, which was one of the prolific and highly sought manufacturers of religious theme stained glass in the late 19th century. I believe St. Dennis’ stained glass windows are from three different manufacturers.

² Quite common, this Gospel passage is depicted with Jesus sitting on a rock resembling a throne, surrounded by children who are attentive to Jesus’ as he lifts his hands in sign of blessing or as a welcoming gesture.

³ Red symbolizes sacrifice, martyrdom, also relates to Love.

⁴ At the beginning of our lives, we count on our parents (and must add: Godparents, Aunts, Uncles, Grandparents, siblings) to introduce us to Jesus’ teaching and love.

⁵ Number three relates to the Trinity and lilies signify purity, purity of body and soul. This child has three open lilies and what seem to be three closed buds on his right hand.

Quite often we relate this passage focusing on children exclusively; that is, those of child's age. I suggest to the viewer, to experience this window under the "light" of another passage from St. Matthew in which Christ invites us all and calls each one of us to become like a child: "amen I say to you, unless you turn and become like little children, you will not enter into the Kingdom of Heaven. Whoever, therefore, humbles himself as this little child, he is the greatest on the Kingdom of Heaven."⁶

The stained glass window in St. Dennis is not static, is dynamic. The artistic composition invites the viewer to interact with the scene. It is meant for all, young and old, depicting the stages of physical growth and most importantly, the three stages of spiritual life of a Christian. We tend to forget that our spiritual life is never static, is always changing. We grow and we can stop growing. This window helps us as inspiration that we can "become like little children" and we can always go back to the arms of Our Mother-His Mother- who will bring us back to Jesus.

Reflection Questions:

1. The woman holding the baby reflects "the recognition that Jesus is someone beyond her own authority, power or wealth" and offers her child to Jesus. How do you recognize Jesus as someone beyond your authority/power/wealth? How do you offer yourself to Jesus? How do you offer your children (if a parent/godparent/grandparent) to Jesus to show them that Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life?
2. The child in the center has hands folded, reflecting total focus on Jesus. How do you focus on Jesus? What distractions do you need to remove from your life/the life of your children, so that Jesus can receive the focus He deserves?
3. The other child offers flowers to Jesus. We are called to "go and bear fruit that will remain." What have you offered to Jesus today? Are you conscious of offering to Jesus the "fruits of your labor?"
4. Jesus is seen in the stance of teaching and also blessing. What teaching of Jesus is most effective in your life? What do you need Jesus to teach you about your call to discipleship? What else would you like to learn from Christ the Teacher? What blessings do you think Jesus is bestowing on the children in the stained glass window? What blessings do you think Jesus wants to give you right now? What blessings do you want to ask of Jesus?
5. Jesus says emphatically: Amen, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. (MT 18:3) What does this saying mean to you? How can you become like a little child before God? What spiritual attitudes do you possess that help you in this call? What spiritual attitudes do you wish you could grow in? Pray for them. How can you grow in your complete dependence on and trust in God?

⁶ MT 18:3. The scene depicts children, symbol of purity, innocence, simplicity, detachment, love, sincerity, and abandonment amongst other things we tend to lose when we become adults.