

**Jesus Loves Me!**  
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**John 6:1-21**

<sup>1</sup>After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. <sup>2</sup>A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. <sup>3</sup>Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. <sup>4</sup>Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. <sup>5</sup>When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" <sup>6</sup>He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. <sup>7</sup>Philip answered him, "Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." <sup>8</sup>One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, <sup>9</sup>"There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?" <sup>10</sup>Jesus said, "Make the people sit down." Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. <sup>11</sup>Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. <sup>12</sup>When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, "Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost." <sup>13</sup>So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. <sup>14</sup>When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world."

<sup>15</sup>When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.

<sup>16</sup>When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, <sup>17</sup>got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. <sup>18</sup>The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing. <sup>19</sup>When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were terrified. <sup>20</sup>But he said to them, "It is I; do not be afraid." <sup>21</sup>Then they wanted to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the land toward which they were going.

**Matthew 19:13-14**

<sup>13</sup>Then little children were being brought to him in order that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples spoke sternly to those who brought them; <sup>14</sup>but Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs."

Raise your hand if you learned "Jesus Loves Me!" as a child. Not surprising that many of you raised your hands. This song has a beautiful simplicity, as if it had been written just for children. However, the hymn had a very different beginning. The author of the lyrics is Anna Bartlett Warner. She "and her sister, Susan, grew up near West Point Military Academy, where they became known for leading Sunday school services for the young men there. After the death of their father, a New York lawyer, the sisters supported themselves with various literary endeavors. Susan became known as a best-selling novelist. Anna also wrote novels and published two collections of poems. She wrote this simple hymn in 1860 to be included in one of her sister's novels, [*Say and Seal*]. In the story, it was a poem of

comfort spoken to a dying child.”<sup>1</sup>

Sunday school teacher, Mr. Linden, is at the bedside of Johnny Fax and he offers these words:

Jesus loves me - this I know,  
For the Bible tells me so:  
Little ones to him belong, -  
They are weak, but he is strong.

Jesus loves me, - he who died  
Heaven's gate to open wide;  
He will wash away my sin,  
Let his little child come in.

Jesus loves me - loves me still,  
Though I'm very weak and ill;  
From his shining throne on high  
Comes to watch me where I lie.

Jesus loves me, - he will stay  
Close beside me all the way.  
Then his little child will take  
Up to heaven for his dear sake.<sup>2</sup>

Not exactly the words we sing and noticeably missing the refrain we all know. There exist folk tales that when William Batchelder Bradbury read the words of the poem, he cried. Whether that story is true or not, we know that he is the one who composed the tune we know and added that refrain we miss in the original poem.

Of course, Bradbury's addition of the refrain is not the only adaptation of the poem. Many hymnals carry their own versions of the song. One such added verse says, “Jesus loves me when I'm good, / When I do the things I should, / Jesus loves me when I'm bad, / Though it makes him very sad.”<sup>3</sup> Another verse for another purpose. Even among us we have another example of a personal verse. Ilisia DuMez wrote this verse, which we will sing as an added verse after the sermon: “On the cross He died for me / Love Him well is the way to be / He was sent from God above / He will fill our hearts with love.” This song is simple and powerful and can be made so relevant in a variety of situations and can be used for teaching in so many ways.

In my studying I found two particularly meaningful uses of the song. Among the theologians of our time, Karl Barth is particularly well known. Professor C. Michael Hawn at the Perkins School of

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<sup>1</sup> Brown, Robert K. and Mark R. Norton, *The One Year Book of Hymns* (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 1995) October 10.

<sup>2</sup> [http://books.google.com/books?id=t201AAAAMAAJ&pg=RA1-PA296&lpg=RA1-PA296&dq=%22say+and+seal%22+poem&source=bl&ots=-K-HIBfw7U&sig=Emz11mDuWV7do6VI5HocbYg\\_y7E&hl=en&sa=X&ei=AL4FUMaiHsrfqgGO9Iy4CA&sqi=2&ved=0CE0Q6AEwAQ#v=onepage&q=%22say%20and%20seal%22%20Johnny&f=false](http://books.google.com/books?id=t201AAAAMAAJ&pg=RA1-PA296&lpg=RA1-PA296&dq=%22say+and+seal%22+poem&source=bl&ots=-K-HIBfw7U&sig=Emz11mDuWV7do6VI5HocbYg_y7E&hl=en&sa=X&ei=AL4FUMaiHsrfqgGO9Iy4CA&sqi=2&ved=0CE0Q6AEwAQ#v=onepage&q=%22say%20and%20seal%22%20Johnny&f=false), pp. 115-116.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.umportal.org/article.asp?id=8605>

Theology recounts a tale about Barth and the hymn this way.

Of the many famous stories about this hymn, one of the most memorable came from the Swiss-German theologian Karl Barth. Popular evangelist, teacher and preacher Tony Campolo cites the context: “. . . Karl Barth delivered one of the closing lectures of his life at the University of Chicago Divinity School. At the end of the lecture, the president of the seminary told the audience that Dr. Barth was not well and was very tired, and though he thought Dr. Barth would like to open for questions, he probably could not handle the strain. Then he said, ‘Therefore, I’ll ask just one question on behalf of all of us.’ He turned to Barth and asked, ‘Of all the theological insights you have ever had, which do you consider to be the greatest of them all?’

“This was a remarkable question to ask a man who had written tens of thousands of pages of some of the most sophisticated theology ever put on paper. The students sat with pads and pencils ready. They wanted to jot down the premier insight of the greatest theologian of their time.

“Karl Barth closed his eyes and thought for a while. Then he smiled, opened his eyes, and said to the young seminarians, ‘The greatest theological insight that I have ever had is this: Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so!’”<sup>4</sup>

What a credit to the writing of Anna Warner!

And of the song’s pervasiveness in cultures worldwide there is a story recounted by Rev. Ed Hird. “When Mao Tse Tung attempted to crush the church in China, things seemed very bleak. In 1972 however, a message leaked out which simply said: ‘The this I know people are well.’ The Communist authorities did not understand the message. But Christians all around the world knew instantly that this referred to the world’s most famous children’s hymn.”<sup>5</sup> Such a small but powerful phrase.

Small but powerful. I love the telling of the loaves and fishes story in John as we read it this morning because of the way the miracle has been interpreted by some. Through the actions of a boy - small - five thousand people were fed - powerful. Some have posited that the young boy’s willingness to share, his generosity, opened the hearts, and rucksacks, of those around him, who contributed what they had been squirreling away for themselves to the baskets as they were passed. The miracle was the generosity and goodwill fostered by the teachings of Jesus and led by a small but powerful action. Our youth may not be small but they are young and yet powerful, and our delegation to Green Bay may have been small but it was powerful. In four days, our youth repacked food to make it easier to distribute to those in need; they sorted hundreds of donations to help St. Vincent DePaul ready them for sales to those who utilize their store; they visited with people who had no other visitors - all powerful acts, never looking down on those being served, not making fun or whispering. Powerful to behold.

For those of you old enough to remember, think of the classic Coca-Cola commercial with Mean Joe Green. An injured Mean Joe Green is hobbling to the locker room when a young boy calls out to him,

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> <http://edhird.wordpress.com/2009/08/13/jesus-loves-me-this-i-know/>

asking if he wants any help. Mean Joe Green responds gruffly but the boy persists. The boy offers his Coca-Cola but Mean Joe declines his generosity. The boy persists and Mean Joe Green finally accepts, drinking the soda, which causes him to smile and, in turn, call out to the boy who is leaving and toss him his jersey. A young boy believes in the good of a man, despite his being called Mean...Joe Green. He tells him he thinks he's "the best ever."

It is a bittersweet time in parenting when we need to teach our children that they shouldn't trust everyone they meet, that not everyone is as good as they might assume. At such a young age, the easiest explanation is black-and-white, for gray is too abstract for young minds; how does one explain that people are not inherently bad, that it's right to look for the good in others but don't assume it's there? At what age can we be confident children grasp that ambiguity? How do we reintroduce the topic? Those answers are not easy and tend to be very individual to the child and the situation and the environment. But we should not let the difficulty dissuade us for it is to those who believe like children to whom the kingdom of heaven belongs.

Our hymn opens with "Jesus loves me! This I know, / For the Bible tells me so; / Little ones to Him belong; / They are weak, but He is strong." Jesus loves me, and you, and you, and you even if, even when, even though we are weak. And Jesus' words in Matthew call us to love as children do, not looking upon others' weaknesses as reasons to withhold love, but loving just because. Because Jesus loves us, because the Bible tells us so, because Jesus did not look down on others or make fun or whisper. Those behaviors are learned. This hymn brings us back to a time before we knew those behaviors, a time when we trusted that the people all around us were good. I am not suggesting you lay aside the hard learnings you've had in life about others; just don't let them be the final word for it is to such as the little children that the kingdom of heaven belongs.

And not just the kingdom of heaven in that time beyond death; no, this is also the kingdom of heaven here on earth. Wouldn't it be a slice of heaven to see people with the eyes of hope rather than despair or disgust? Even if only we were changed by changing the way we saw others, the kingdom of heaven would be that much closer to being fulfilled on earth. The beauty of such a change of vision is that sometimes those being viewed begin to see things differently, too. One more slice of heaven - coming right up! It's just as Ilisia wrote: "He was sent from God above / He will fill our hearts with love." Heaven on earth.

Let us pray: God of love, we thank you that your word the Bible and your Word the Son will not let us forget that we are loved. Amen.