

So we are going to start with a little bit of fun. Have you guys ever watched Gladiators on TV before. It's a bit of an old program, but a lot of fun. Anyways we have 3 children that are going to compete against these gladiators. Please let me introduce to you the strongest most powerful people in our congregation:

1. Dazzling Dale
2. Warrior Wayne
3. Beastly Brett

So we have 3 awesome kids who are going to try make there way here to me. They each have a sign board with them as they have a message for you the congregation. However we have asked them to each take on a gladiator before arriving on stage.

Congregation... Are you ready?

Gladiators... Are you ready?

Children... Are you ready?

GO!

Well done – give every one a big round of applause. Those gladiators were a little scary!

Each sign board represents a story or challenge that I have been told by someone within the Deaf community.

Sign one: #12years

Tayla's mom has not been able to attend church for the last 12 years

Sign two: #differentnotbroken

There has been a historical pattern amongst the church that has invited deaf people to healing ministries at the church and not welcomed them into the family. A message that they need to be healed or changed before they can belong. And all they have really wanted was to belong and be embraced. Even children that are currently part of our SOAR Ministry have had to experience this.

Sign three: #needforaccess

Even with an interpreter here at church deaf people are still not getting full access to the service. They need captioning on every video. Every time someone upfront mumbles or turns their mouth or body away while talking they lose ability to access the communication. Even walking between them and the interpreter disturbs their ability to access communication.

As you can see from the sign boards up here that there are people amongst us that have felt like they have had gladiators in front of them preventing them from attending church or being part of a body of believers. For some of them that meant limited or no access to church for a number of years. Today we are celebrating Deaf Awareness Month in our services and so highlighting stories from people within the Deaf community. Thank you for sharing. (Let kids sit down)

The truth is that there might be many other people sitting in church today and for very different reasons have had gladiators in front of them.

In the NT there is a story about some people who faced opposition as they tried to connect with Jesus.

Read story from Jesus StoryBook Bible

This passage of Scripture which is found in the gospels – and particularly in Matt 19:13-15. This passage has been a big part of my journey as a kids pastor. It has been one of my heart shaping verses... an anchor verse. I remember the first moment when God used those verses in my life.

It was at an overnight event with kids – I was still young and had just started ministry. You can tell I was young and just starting out as I mentioned children and sleep over in the same sentence. Anyways we had a message and worship. It was an event where we really wanted to see kids connect with God. As the evening went there was one child that was really struggling to connect and I was ready to let it go. Go have some fun. I was done, but a friend walked passed me and said remember Jesus says let the little children come to me. Her words pushed me to not loose hope and encouraged me to pray that whatever was hindering that child God would resolve. It was this thought that was just so simple: an uncomplicated idea or belief that children had a special access to God. And over the years I have been witness to it and especially that night at the event. We saw such a significant change in that child's life as we asked God to remove hinderances from him. That moment – even though not dramatic or a miracle as such has never left me and whenever I see a child not connecting with God I want to pray, but as I have stayed in ministry and been part of more organized and structured kids ministry I have seen many more gladiators. Not just spiritual gladiators, but physical and emotional ones. Things that hinder our children from accessing God. Spiritual, emotional and physical gladiators that hinder people of every age from connecting with a God that loves them.

So let us look at what are the things that hinder? What would it mean to turn people away from Jesus? Lets go back to that passage of scripture.

Before we start asking questions about this passage I just want to put in a good word for those poor disciples. They must have been hard work for Jesus. Not always getting it right. I am sure though that they were trying to do there very best. I don't think they stopped people from meeting with Jesus out of maliciousness, but a heart to serve Jesus. They had the best heart and yet they could get it soo wrong at the same time.

So it leads to my question and I would like an answer from you? Why did they stop the children from meeting with Jesus? (hand out sweets)

- Jesus was busy with other people
- He was preaching a sermon – we must not interrupt.

Children were not seen as important within the culture. Jesus was important. His time was important.

However Jesus was trying to change culture and challenge beliefs. This topic of children being important came up before this encounter – in fact just one page before in your Bible – in Matt 18 – Jesus speaks about children. He tells the disciples that they should desire to be like children with a child like faith. He tells them not to look down on children or to cause any harm to them. Jesus shares a whole chapter about how important children are....

In order for behaviour to change or the way we do things to change it often has to have conversations around it before it changes from the inside out. We need things to sink in deep. Also just because the disciples had heard Jesus say that children are important they might not have known how that would change their behaviour or way of doing life. Jesus speaks about it and then in chapter 19 He does not just say it – HE shows them what He was meaning, by stopping what they were doing and doing it differently.

There is people here who may have felt like those children and their parents. The Deaf community has been hindered from meeting with God. Needing to overcome a gladiator to access God. Things that we may have taken for granted, they have had to overcome. And we as a church have heard the call from God to change the way we do church. To be more accessible. To learn how to do church differently. To be inclusive and a place that people who have been marginalised find comfort and belonging. We want to be a church that not only acknowledges people's gladiators, but a church that helps prevent, take away or overcome each others gladiators. Let me say that again....

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As I have been on this journey quite intensely I just want to share one of my own personal moments. As I have looked for ways to do kids min differently one of the simple changes has been at holiday club. At holiday club we used to scream a lot. In fact we had competitions about which team could scream the loudest. 400 kids screaming it was loud. I realised that the screaming hurt the girls ears with the cochlear implants. We started doing silent screams and teaching the kids to be competitive without a lot of noise. It's a simple thing. That year I had about 5 other parents come to me and say that there kids usually don't last the whole week at holiday club due to the noise, but this year they managed. What a win! A simple change to make our ministry more inclusive and it opened up doors for more kids to access.

Sometimes we are just like the disciples we might have the best heart to serve Jesus, but our ways might be hindering. We need to commit to leaning in to God's guidance. Holding loosely to our ways as we listen for God's voice. If this journey with the Deaf community is to be deep and wide it will mean that it cant just be done by the staff of this church or family members of a person that is Deaf. In order for our journey to be deep and wide, to be beautiful and glorifying to God it will need you the people of this church to step into it and be part of it. And I can assure that is will not be easy... it will be difficult, but beautiful

The one thing about this passage of Scripture that really stands out for me is that Jesus wanted to be found!

You see God's heart is for every person to know Him and have access to who He is. He is a God that loves to be found!

Jeremiah 29:13 God says if you seek me with all your heart you will find me.

Proverbs 8:17 "I love those who love me, and those who seek me find me."

Today you might not have had to overcome a gladiator to get here. In fact church might even be the most mundane thing that you have had to do this weekend. You have had 8 other activities to do just today and you are watching the time to make sure it fits within an hour. Or you are the other extreme. You only have got a service once a month for you. You live far away and it takes you 4 taxi's to get here. You wake up t 4am to be here. Whoever you are and wherever you fall on that scale – the truth remains the same. There is a God that desires to be found by you today. The children from Promise Land have been preparing an item for you today in hope that it will lead you straight into God's throne room today. I am going to ask the kids to come up while I end with a prayer.