

Progeria is a rare and vicious disease. It onsets in infancy and there is no known cure. One in four-eight million (estimates vary) are diagnosed and death typically occurs by age thirteen. It effects virtually every function of the body and ensures that its symptoms remain visible. Progeria ages and deteriorates its human host by an average of 8-10 years per year. Meaning that someone who is 1, is really like ten; someone 7, really like 70, and so on. Their skin wrinkles, their bones brittle, and their kidneys fail all before enrolling in Elementary School and experiencing their first kiss. Progeria is a genetic mutation that is unthinkable and yet somehow serves as an uncomfortable metaphor for today's sermon.

“But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to their other, ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did mourn.’ For John came neither eating nor drinking, and *they* say, ‘He has a demon’; the Son of Humanity came eating and drinking, and *they* say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.”

So what do you make of this passage? Many or I should say most, read the first couple of verses and draw an immediate conclusion, summoning generalizations in their mind, reinforcing what makes sense to them as matured adults: Children are loud. Children cry out. Children want immediate gratification. Children are un-experienced. Children do not understand. And children, most certainly, are not wise. And thus, when most adults read this passage and especially when they preach this sermon from the pulpit, they readily conjure these sub and conscious ‘truths’ and retrofit them into the text; urging everyone to be guarded against being too childlike and youthful in the ways they see and live life. [I’ve read a nauseating amount of sermons this week each saying the same].

But to read our text in such a way would be wrong. A disservice even. And not just to Matthew’s prose or to our Savior’s ministry (which spoke positively of children even when his own religion had forgotten to) but also to the wisdom literature that Jesus was evoking from Proverbs. You see, this text does not begin with a pejorative correlation against the merits of children, but rather, it serves as a cloaked critique of our adulthood.

Now admittedly, the structure and sequencing of the text doesn’t help us to readily see that. We see a beginning question followed by a simile. And so, because of our education in this modern language we make what we think is an obvious syntactical connection: that Jesus’ generation is being directly compared to the senseless behavior of children. But I think it would behoove us to remember that few of Jesus’ teachings are ever so immediately obvious, just as the Bible should not be approached via the constructions of our present grammar. Moreover, wisdom is often looked over and not instantly grasped, so if it is at all to be vindicated than it will take some work on our part to understand.

So let us then get to work: our lectionary text from Proverbs 8 opens with a question and answer:

“Does not wisdom call, and does not understanding raise her voice? On the heights, beside the way, at the crossroads she takes her stand; beside the gates in front of the town, at the entrance of the portals she cries out. ‘To you, O people, I call, and my cry is to all that live.’”

Can you see it? The parallel construction? Listen/read closely: Jesus says,

“But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to their other, ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did mourn.’”

The marketplaces of antiquity were located in the front of the town, at its crossroads, besides the gates, at the entrance to its portals. And there, in that place, wisdom called and cried out. And there in that same place, children played their flute and they wailed. To whom then is Jesus really comparing his generation? To the children who played in the footsteps of wisdom, or to the teaching elders who did not dance in its presence?

Now if this teaching comes as a surprise, let us take a second and remember just who our messiah was. A preacher in the synagogue at age 12 and a usurper of the social order who declared that one must have the faith of a child in order to encounter the realm of God. And when his disciples were arguing amongst themselves about who was the greatest in his brotherhood, Jesus rebuked them and instead brought forth a humble youth as his evidence to true greatness. So actually, all of this should come as little surprise.

Moreover, consider Jesus' defense of himself and his friend John the Baptist, who lest we forget, was prophesied about to restore the hearts of fathers toward children¹ and to turn those who were uncompliant onto the wisdom of the righteous (Luke 1:17). Jesus says in our text, that John came neither eating nor drinking and yet the elders nevertheless said that he had a demon; and conversely that the Son of Humanity came both eating and drinking, and yet the elders nonetheless said that he was a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners. Nothing pleased them. The straight laced, locust and honey eating John was not good enough for them, and neither was Jesus who came doing the exact opposite. Just who were they waiting on then? Like the children who played at the gates, the flutes of the messiah and the wailings of the prophet left these teaching elders unmoved. And in the end, they rejected both John and Jesus and yes, even wisdom.

Proverbs 8:32-36: *“And now, my children, listen to me: happy are those who keep my ways. Hear instruction and be wise, and do not neglect it. Happy is the one who listens to me, watching daily at my gates, waiting beside my doors. For whoever finds me finds life and obtains favor from the Lord; but those who miss me injure themselves; all who hate me love death.”*

Now what does all of this mean to us in these pews? Is the message in these parallel texts really suggesting that we are to live like children and that only by doing so will we encounter the portals of insight? Is that really what Jesus is asking of us? I know you're probably expecting this youth director to say, yes, but don't worry I'm not that touched in the head.

Neither Jesus nor I are saying to throw away your education or to disregard the life experience that brought you out of ignorance. Nor are we arguing for you to return to youthful naiveté. God no, that would certainly be foolish and quite the opposite of wise. In fact, I imagine that Jesus would be rather disturbed by certain adults like Napoleon Dynamite's uncle, or Jersey Shore's entire cast, or any of these “adults” who can't overcome the nostalgia of immaturity or the stench of arrested development.

And yet, Christ nevertheless is teaching us that the adult generation needs to listen, take joy in, and be challenged by the shadows of youth. And more, that there is a wisdom which can be found in those who are young and uncorrupted by the rules, anxieties, biases and inertias of our advancing age.

A couple of weeks ago at our church's Cinco de Mayo party I was talking with Drew Ball, one of our congregation's members and resident super doctor. Really I was more lamenting than talking. I was complaining about my advancing age. I know, I know. Everyone from the kids to all of my seniors think I'm a buddy and a young dude. And I am. But I also, if I'm honest, don't always feel like it anymore. Maybe it's my arthritic knees, maybe not. But I've confessed to really to anyone who will listen that I've just felt different these past two years. And Dr. Drew seemed to confirm my symptoms saying that medically speaking, age 30 represents some sort of cliff. An equalizer for us all. Ligaments become more strained, your body doesn't regenerate as quickly, etc.; etc. But I think it's more than just a decline in our physical elasticity.

I think as settled adults we are more susceptible to lose our inner passions. The things that once seduced us become somewhat drained of their color. We often cherish complacency and muted happiness over adventure and prefer the static noise of life over its dynamic contrasts. We become more cynical. We become less trusting. We have seen too much, we have seen enough. We know all that there is important to know. We are set. And don't want to be challenged into a new way of thinking. And this is precisely what Jesus was getting at when illustrating a comparison to his generation. Children were not the target of his metaphor, but rather this stale and stubborn and bitter version of adulthood. And we should all take notice and incline our ears to this wisdom, even if just to guard us against this kind of shift that hopefully, perhaps hasn't yet happened.

Hayley Okines is perhaps the most well-known of patients suffering from Progeria. She has made it to fifteen and has written a book. She has appeared on the Discovery Channel and she has met Justin Bieber. She is the face of hope in the face of adversity. Though she appears to us as someone advanced in her years, a grandmother at a child's height, she amazingly maintains that her affliction has defined her life for the better. She is happy. She is the synthesis of what it means to feel and look a certain age and yet remain young in spirit. Listen to her talk and read what she writes. Listen to her flute and pay attention to her cries. She sees life in a radical and new way. She is a child and wise beyond her years. Thanks be to God and may we all say the same. Amen.

¹ Children were neglected and treated rather poorly in antiquity. Society back then did not provide them with the safety nets of modernity. Thus, John was prophesied to come with such power of the Holy Spirit that he would restore the true intentions of God. That is, for fathers, or rather those in positions of authority, to reconsider the merit of the child.