

Like a Child

“Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.”

Mark 10:15

The Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill/Dr. Daniel L. Migliore/September 20, 2015

A child's singing sometimes does wonders. Augustine, fourth-century bishop and one of the most influential theologians in the history of the church, tells us that his conversion occurred after he heard a child singing. Alone one morning in his garden and depressed because he realized his life was a moral morass, Augustine heard a child singing: “Pick up the book and read; pick it up and read.” Augustine happened to have a Bible by his side. He opened it at random, and he read words that changed his life.

The primary actor in Augustine's conversion that morning was of course not the child singing her little song. It was God speaking through Scripture in the power of the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, the role of the child in the story should not be overlooked. As we heard in one of the Gospel readings this morning, Jesus embraced children. He tells his disciples: “Whoever welcomes a child in my name welcomes me.”

Most Christian congregations around the world, and certainly the one gathered here this morning, honor this saying of Jesus and make a practice of welcoming children. We baptize them, we welcome them into our life in Christ, we pray with and for them, we teach them the stories of Jesus, we promise to love them and bring them up in the knowledge and love of the Lord. In doing so, we acknowledge our responsibility as Christians for the well-being of our children and children everywhere. You have heard the song, I am sure: “Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world; red and yellow, black and white; they are precious in his sight; Jesus loves all the children of the world.”

It's a simple song. But these days it becomes hard to sing without becoming tongue-tied, especially if you are confronted on your TV screen with the picture of a lifeless three-year old boy face-down on a beach, a member of a family among the masses of migrants moving through Europe these days; or if you come across pictures of terrified and maimed children in the many war zones around the world, or if closer to home, you find yourself shamed by pictures and stories of hungry or abused children in our own country or perhaps in our own city. As Christians we remember what Jesus said and did regarding children, and we know we cannot ignore these grim and heart-rending realities. We know that our Lord has called us to love and care for children, to welcome them in his name.

My message this morning, however, is more than an effort to reinforce the call to welcome and care for children. It's more about that word of Jesus we heard in our other Gospel reading, the one about becoming “like a child,” receiving the kingdom of God like a child. I want us to hear in this phrase “like a child” more than a call to responsibility, more than a moral obligation to welcome and care for children that our Lord addresses to us. Instead, I want us to listen for the gospel, the good news, in these words to become like a child. My conviction is that only if we hear the gospel, the good news in what Jesus says about becoming like a child, are we truly ready to take up his call to respect and love and care for children.

That the phrase “like a child” has something to do with the gospel and Christian life may at first seem strange and even off-putting. Haven't the critics of Christianity since the earliest centuries and increasingly in our enlightened age charge that Christian faith, like all religions, is basically infantilism, the refusal of people to grow up and stop thinking and acting like children? Did not Paul in his letter to the Corinthians declare “When I was a child I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I gave up childish ways.” Yes, the apostle wrote those words, but is there not a difference between childish tantrums and childlike trust? Again, did not Paul also instruct the church in Ephesus to “grow up” in every way into Christ our Lord, to find and to own our mature humanity in the fullness of the humanity of Christ? Yes, the apostle wrote these words too, but he was also fond of calling all believers adopted children of God. We mistake Paul's instruction about growing to maturity in Christ if we think that maturity in Christ excludes a certain kind of childlikeness. On the contrary, having at least some aspects of childlikeness, according to Jesus, is part of what it means to be a mature person in Christ.

The big question then is: What is this particular kind of childlikeness that Jesus calls us to exhibit in our adulthood? The answer to this question is found in the larger context of Jesus' teachings about children. Recall first his word about welcoming children. The larger context of this word is Jesus' teaching his disciples that the time is coming when he will be delivered over to the authorities and be put to death. The disciples obviously don't want to hear stuff like this. Instead, they are arguing about which of them will be the greatest in the coming kingdom Jesus proclaims. Whereas Jesus talks about the cross he will bear, the sacrifice he will make, his coming experience of weakness and powerlessness as the culmination of God's sacrificial love for us, the disciples quarrel over who in the coming kingdom will possess the greatest power and have the highest honor. This is the context in which Jesus takes a child in his arms and says, whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me. Jesus points to a child as a visual reminder of the strange presence of the love of God not in wealth and power but in poverty and weakness. In welcoming a child we acknowledge the powerless power of the crucified Lord. That's more than a moral law, my friends. That's gospel.

The other word of Jesus about children reported in our Gospel readings must also be understood in its context. The crowds are bringing children to Jesus so that he may touch and bless them, but the disciples think this is a bother and a distraction from the important ministry of their Lord. After all, he has more important things to do than kiss the babies like some aspiring politician. Like women and the underclass of society, children in the minds of the disciples don't

count for much. But, rebuking the disciples, Jesus takes the children in his arms, blesses them, and says: "If you do not receive the kingdom of God like a child, you will not enter it." Here too, what Jesus says and does in regard to children gives witness to all of us that the grace of God comes in a surprising and disturbing form that confounds and disrupts our conventional views of the presence and power of God in the world. It is not in what the world counts as power but in weakness, not in what the world considers central but in what is counted as peripheral, not in the super hero but in that marginal one called a child that openness to God's presence and activity finds surprising expression. That too, my friends, is gospel.

So why does this call of Jesus to become "like a child" make us uncomfortable? In past eras, it was perhaps due to views of children not as ready recipients of God's grace but as inheritors of the sin of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. For their own good, children must be brought in line and as soon as possible, lest they fall under the wrath of God. A friend once told me the frightful story about his Seminary Professor who said to his students that he considered it his Christian duty to break the sinful spirit of his son before he attained the age of two. With that attitude, how could you possibly make sense of Jesus' call to welcome children and to retain a kind of childlikeness even as an adult?

There is, of course, an extreme view on the other end of the spectrum too. In contrast to a severe disciplinarian approach to children, there is the opposite sentimentalizing of the words of Jesus espoused by modern idealists. The child, we are told, is pure innocence, incapable of any wrong doing until corrupted by the outside world. Against this view, it must be said that while Jesus welcomed children and called his disciples to a kind of childlikeness, it is doubtful that he did so because he looked upon all children as angels.

Probably more influential in modern thinking about children than either the severe disciplinarian or the pure romantic is the idea that childhood is a stage of life that we will or should eventually outgrow as we mature, become adults, and then finally, enter old age. According to this entirely reasonable view, the life of every human being, indeed every creature, has stages through which it goes. A child who insists on remaining a perpetual child and resists every call to the responsibilities of adulthood is in some difficulty, and by the same token the elderly person is at risk who cannot accept the fact that advanced age places real limitations on what they once were able to do. While all this is true, the idea of life as a series of discreet stages is often accompanied by the notion that each stage of life neatly succeeds and altogether leaves behind the former stages. When matters are seen this way, childhood becomes a stage to be respected in its own right, to be sure, but the main point is now to get beyond it, to leave it and everything associated with it behind. In this view, the life of the child has nothing to teach us, nothing to give us as adults. Jesus takes issue with this neatly segmented view of the course of our life before God. A particular form of childlikeness belongs to the marks of the mature and the elderly disciple of Christ.

So what is the meaning of childlikeness as an enduring mark of the disciple of Jesus? In what way are we who know the great love of God in Jesus Christ able to discern a working of the secret grace of God in the life of the child? Here are a few suggestions. In the first place, the child confronts us as one in need. She cannot survive and certainly cannot flourish without the help of others. The child is dependent; the child is *vulnerable*. But surely, my friends, it is not only the child who is vulnerable. We, too, as adults, middle age or old age, never entirely outgrow our neediness. Regardless of age, all of us depend on the company and help of others to flourish. Whatever our age, we are and remain vulnerable in important ways. The child reminds us of that fact.

So being childlike means honestly recognizing the truth that confronts us in the reality of childhood: that however mature we adults think we may have become, however strong we think we are, however convinced we are that we can handle life entirely on our own, we too are needy, not of course in exactly in the same way the child is needy, but needy nevertheless, needy of God's grace above all, needy of forgiveness, needy of the help and comfort of friends and strangers too. If we have eyes to see, that's what attention to and care for children can unexpectedly teach us, and teach us again and again. We are saved by grace alone. The presumption of the adult who has made it, who is successful in his career, who has as it were the world as his beck and call, who presumes that he is beyond the need of the grace and forgiveness of God, beyond the need of help from neighbor and stranger, all that is sheer bravado. Whatever our age, we are reminded by the child of a real vulnerability present in some form in every stage of life and thus reminded of our own need for the grace of God and company of one another. The vulnerability of every child will remind us too of the vulnerability of the child Jesus in the manger in Bethlehem and the vulnerability of the crucified Jesus who in his ministry and supremely on the cross entered into utmost solidarity with the neediness of every human being, whatever his or her age.

Becoming like a child, acknowledging the importance of a kind of childlikeness in every stage of life, has another element: I have in mind the *receptivity* of the child, the openness of the child to what is new and surprising. "Receive the kingdom of God like a child," Jesus says. Surely this is part of what Jesus meant when he said that one must be born again to enter the kingdom of God. You have to be ready to receive, to let go of all those ways of thinking, all those habits of seeing and living that block the love of God in Christ from flowing to and through you. You have to receive the kingdom like a child. You have to begin again, Jesus says, and whatever else the child is, the child is a beginner. She exists as one ready to receive. She is at the starting line of life, not at the goal. She looks at life with fresh eyes. She is eager to experience new things. That's why she loves to play. There is a wonderful passage in Zechariah, read this morning, where the prophet promises that in the time that is coming of God's justice and peace throughout the earth, boys and girls will be seen playing in the streets. Imagine that! A vision of the new age, of the kingdom of God come on

earth as in heaven, and it's not a picture of choirs of angels singing in heaven but of children playing and laughing in the streets, safe and free from harm.

The child is a playful beginner, willing to grow, to learn new things, to be amazed. If the child is allowed to be a child, she is receptive to the new, ready to be surprised, full of joy. Which is one reason that the sight of weary, hungry, and abused children leaves us ashamed and heartbroken. In lifting up the receptivity, the playfulness, the joy of the child, the point is not to demonize our adult life of daily work. The grace of God can surely be experienced in our work. Calvinists have never been deficient in that knowledge. As adults, however, we are not inclined to forget that the grace of God is also present in our play, in the joy of being surprised, in the readiness to be amazed. Without something like this spirit of childlikeness with its playfulness, its openness to the new, its joy in the simple things of life, our adult workaday world becomes a soul-destroying drudge. Our modern 24/7 workaday mania, to which millions of people are confined or addicted, threatens to destroy the childlike spirit of playfulness, surprise, and joy. Loss of this spirit exacts a huge toll on one's own health and on the quality of family relationships. It can also endanger our relationship with God. When our sense of the mystery of God, the awesomeness of God's grace, the ever new beauty of the love of God in Jesus Christ and the deep joy this instills—when all this is squeezed into a few religious rituals observed joylessly and reduced to a few pious formulas, we find ourselves at a great distance from the word of Jesus that we must receive the kingdom like a child, rejoice in it, let ourselves be surprised again and again by it, wonder at the sheer beauty of it.

And finally, to retain an element of a kind of childlikeness in our adult lives, means to *value every moment of life*, to treasure each moment as a unique opportunity to live the life that God has given us and to joyfully render the service to which God summons us here and now. Living in the moment, valuing every moment of life, as the child does, means for the adult expecting the grace and call of God here and now; it means refusing to be paralyzed by the failures of our past or enslaved by our fears of the future. The child wants to live here and now, in this moment. What this spirit means for the adult will of course not be identical in every way with the form it takes in the child. As adults we cannot simply ignore the failures of our past or be indifferent to the challenges that loom before us. But for those of us who are no longer only children—for youth, middle-age adults, and the elderly--the question of how God is addressing us now, today, what God wants to give us and wants from us here, in this place, now at this moment, is vital in every Christian's life. What form will my love for God and neighbor assume *here and now* in grateful response to the grace of God in Jesus Christ? Which is why prayer is so basic to life in Christ: Give us "this day" our daily bread, Jesus taught us to pray. Forgive us, Lord, today; enable us, Lord, this day to forgive others. Christians live by the word of forgiveness today. They refuse to allow the injuries and unfaithfulness of the past to imprison them. As for the future, they live by hope in God, not allowing fantasies or fears of the future to lure them away from what needs to be said, what needs to be done, in this moment, in the here and now, if we are to be responsible, mature disciples of Jesus Christ.

It all comes down to this: We are to welcome children as Jesus summons us to do, not simply because that is our duty, our moral obligation as adults, not simply because it is an inviolable command given to us by our Lord. We should welcome children also and first of all because for us and our salvation Jesus Christ commenced the reconciliation of the world as a child, and thus by every child we are minded, and given an unexpected glimpse of God's grace and call to us. We are reminded of the gospel, the good news that not only as children but also as adults, whatever our age, we remain needy, but can celebrate the fact that God's grace is sufficient. We have daily work to do, but our work doesn't ultimately or exhaustively define us, for we also find refreshment and joy in the spirit of childlike amazement and childlike trust. No doubt we will have accumulated many regrets from our past, and no doubt we will have a basketful of fears and hopes for the future, but God calls us to live by grace right in the moment, right here and now-- like a child. If God in his mercy speaks the gospel to us through a child, and if God mercifully grants us the gift of childlikeness, we may experience afresh the joy and wonder that enables us to love and serve God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. . . especially our needy neighbor, especially the needy children next to us, or wherever they may be.

"Receive the kingdom like a child"—hear this word of Jesus, my friends, hear it to be sure as a command, but also come to know it and know it first of all as gospel, good news. Amen.