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# “Like a Child”

*Mark 9:30-37*

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From Child-ish to child-like...

“Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the way?” But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest.”

Now, before we judge the disciples too harshly here, let’s remember that there’s no reason for us to assume that their dispute ever disrupted their duties or their ministry. Maybe this is just something they were ‘discussing’ along the way – speculating – idle conversation on a road trip. I can hear them -- cant you? -- sounding rather childish as they argue, “I’m the greatest.”

“No, I am.”

“He likes me best.”

Or my personal favorite, “Jesus loves you, but I’m his favorite.

And Jesus overhead their idle ‘discussion’. And it’s the kind of conversation that you generally don’t want anyone to overhear.

Like schoolboys caught passing notes, hey were understandably embarrassed. They knew what they sounded like. Maybe thinking, “He’ll never think I’m the greatest if he thinks I think I’m the greatest!”

But I can’t get the idea out of my head that in this passage, Jesus shows the disciples the difference between child-ISH and child-LIKE. He doesn’t rebuke them. He doesn’t feed them some line about how he loves them all equally, how they’re all his favorites.

When the disciples, overly enthusiastic as ever, asked Jesus who was the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, Jesus pulled a child out of the crowd, placed him or her in the very center of the group, and said, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me...”

We all love this passage because it’s one the ones that has children in it. Children are so cute. All our sentimentality cylinders fire at once with these passages. But Jesus wasn’t being sentimental. He doesn’t say, “I just love these little guys. Look – how adorable! We don’t even know the child’s name.

In Jesus’ time and community, children were not nearly the focus of attention that they are today. They were loved and cared for and taught, but in a world of poverty and political oppression, there wasn’t much leisure time in which a parent could attend to the emotional and creative needs of children. And like women, children were way down on the totem pole of status – lower, in fact, if that’s even possible.

Children were a form of family property, they began to learn to work as soon as

possible, and their very survival was often a matter of hope more than reality. Injury, disease, famine, warfare – all of those things took a terrible toll on babies and small children in the ancient world. Few people gave much attention to small children playing around on village roads and paths.

How unusual it is, then, that Jesus gives such attention to children! Perhaps we're used to it. We've all seen countless pictures of Jesus sitting, maybe on a small hillside, surrounded by children, holding two or three of them in his arms. Those images come from texts like today's, in which he takes a child in his arms and says that whoever welcomes such a child welcomes both him and the one who sent him.

Go a few verses later, and he is warning us not to put stumbling blocks in the way of the faith of small children. Go to the next chapter, in which Jesus has been on the road again, and he again points to children, responding to the disciples who are trying to prevent people from bringing their children to him. That's where Jesus says, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." And once again, he takes children into his arms to touch and bless them.

I've been thinking about his this week and I think that the most important underlying quality children possess, the one that provides the foundation for all the others, is wonder. Don't we all enjoy the wonder experienced by a small child? It's wonder that enables them to find so much joy in a simple thing like blowing bubbles. It's wonder that stops the kids in my neighborhood in their tracks when they see me walking Mindy.

And so we have a set of stories in the Gospel where Jesus tells us that to welcome a child is to welcome him, and also the one who sent him. He tells us that children are not to be trifled with, and He tells us that we must receive the kingdom of God as a little child.

In a world in which children were of such small significance, these must have been startling, eye-opening metaphors. In a world in which all decision-making power, economic power, and social power was in the hands of adult men, these teachings must have stopped people in their tracks.

Jesus' teachings were quite distinct from the usual ones. It was the place of scholars and priests to welcome God -- in sacred settings with formal rituals. It was the place of the father, the head of the household, to decide how children would be raised and treated. And to enter the presence of God was presumed to be conditioned upon great righteousness and seriousness.

How did children suddenly become prioritized where God was concerned?

Maybe we need to look again at who children are. Maybe we're being invited to look at children differently than the socio-economic and family systems of the first century. Maybe we're being invited to look at them not as our own tangled family situations and consumer society look at them, but in more important ways. Because it's so easy to forget, children are creatures of freedom; of imagination; of wonder. And maybe we are being invited to recover those gifts in ourselves. Freedom. Imagination. Wonder.

Martin Luther, not King, but the great church reformer of the 1500s, wrote an essay entitled "On Christian Freedom." In it, he captures the paradox of Jesus' teachings when he writes, "...a Christian man is the most free lord of all, and subject to none; a Christian man is the most dutiful servant of all, and subject to every one."

Freedom doesn't mean the freedom to do whatever we want, the way we like to think of it today. Freedom means freedom from needlessly imposed restrictions in order for us to then have the freedom to give, and to serve. Freedom to become the people we are destined to become: a people who love God and others -- who give of ourselves sacrificially to our neighbors.

It takes imagination to do that. Children imagine wonderful stuff, and so can we. In *Through the Looking Glass*, Alice says to the Red Queen, "There is no use trying," she said, "one can't believe impossible things."

"I daresay you haven't had much practice," said the Queen. "When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast."

Believe impossible things. Believe that the hungry will be fed. Believe that the homeless will be housed. Believe that the poor will be helped. Believe that those who despair will find hope.

In other words, become people of wonder. Welcome the wonder in yourselves. Jesus says that when we welcome children, we welcome him. When we welcome wonder, we welcome him. He says that we must become as children to enter his kingdom. We are called to enter his kingdom as people of wonder.

Sometimes it's so easy. We look out at the autumn colors, and we can't help ourselves but wonder in awe at the brilliance of the colors and at the natural processes of growth and decay that create them.

Sometimes it's hard. We sit at the bedside of a dying loved one and we catch a glimpse of the reality that this life is a similar natural process and a passageway to a greater one -- that's a more difficult form of wonder.

Frederick Buechner writes this about children and this passage:

*Jesus was not being sentimental. He was saying that the people who get into heaven are people who, like children, don't worry about it too much. They are people who, like children, live with their hands open more than with their fists clenched. They are people who, like children, are so relatively unburdened by preconceptions that if somebody says there's a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, they are perfectly willing to go take a look for themselves. Children aren't necessarily better than other people. Like the child in "The Emperor's New Clothes," they are just apt to be better at telling the difference between a phony and the real thing.*

I'd like to finish with a perfect example of what goes wrong when we let all our selfish, childish, priorities get in the way.

Last Sunday night in Irving, Texas, a 14-year-old boy named Ahmed Mohamed got bored. But instead of firing up the Xbox, or checking up on his fantasy football stats, Ahmed decided to build a digital clock from scratch. He likes to tinker.

By now you've probably heard what happened next: Ahmed took his masterpiece to school to impress his teachers. The clock was confiscated and Ahmed was pulled out of class. He was interrogated by five different police officers. His belongings were searched. He was threatened with expulsion. He was accused repeatedly of wanting to build a bomb, or wanting people to think he'd built a bomb. Requests to contact his parents were denied.

Instead, law enforcement agents handcuffed the frightened freshman, marched him out of school, and took him to a juvenile detention center where they took mug shots and fingerprints. The school suspended Ahmed for three days, and until the story went viral, police were considering charges. Is that how we welcome a child? Good grief!

Let me tell you: If we're handcuffing autistic children or throwing them in jail overnight, we're failing them. If we're hitting kids with felony weapons charges for bringing fishing tackle to school, we're failing them. And if we're using suspensions (which don't work) against students who build clocks, or twirl pencils, or write about pot, or chew their Pop-Tarts into the shape of a gun, then we're failing them.

The child in this passage represents all the marginalized – the least among us.

We are called to serve them and when we do, we recognize the commonplace, yet awe-inspiring wonder that when we give, we receive; when we teach, we learn; when we serve, we are served.

As a friend of mine posted yesterday on social media: "Love first. Ask questions later."

Amen.