

“Childlike, not Childish”  
Matthew 18:1-5, 19:13-15  
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Loving God, we thank you for the presence of these children this morning and for the presence of each and every one of your people here in worship today. Help us to hear a fresh word from you and to be inspired to do your work in the world.

Amen.

If you’ve been looking for a theme to this summer’s worship, there isn’t one. The Bible passages this summer have been preacher’s choice. When I heard this plan, I was elated. Finally, I thought, all I need to do is select a Bible passage that says something about children, and I would have a captive audience to tell stories about my own boys for a good 10...maybe even 15 minutes. And fortunately, my guys say and do any number of cute things, so I knew you would all love it! My only complaint is that we’re not a multi-media church, and so you won’t get to see any pictures of my boys...so you’ll have to trust me when I tell you that they are really, really cute!

And as luck would have it, everyone loves the story of Jesus saying, “Let the children come to me.” It is so well loved that it is one of only 10 stories to make the cut for the *Baby’s First Bible* that my sons enjoy.

The picture in their Bible, and the image I’ve always had in my mind, is of Jesus as a sort of avuncular bachelor, good-naturedly tolerating children and patting them on the head, while the disciples look slightly shame-faced for assuming that Jesus has more important things to do.

But this image misses the real point – that is, it misses the radical turnabout at work. When we look at today’s two passages together, Jesus blessing the children is not a sweet image but a demonstration of this radical turnabout.

To be fair, these stories actually occur many verses apart, and as part of a lengthy description of Jesus’ teachings on any number of subjects ranging from paying the temple tax to the lawfulness of divorce. So they are two

unique stories, but when we put them together, we find that Jesus first describes a different way of life, and then lives it.

In the first story, the disciples have, once again, completely missed the mark. We can imagine their arguments. “Well, I do the best job at gathering the crowds,” Andrew could say. “But I’m the best public speaker,” Philip might counter. “But Jesus likes me best!” Peter would argue. “I’m the one he calls the ‘rock’!” We can imagine that they, like us, have all the good reasons why they think they just might be the greatest.

And so Jesus stops them in their tracks. The greatest, Jesus tells them, is the one who “becomes humble like this child.” The greatest, Jesus says, is the one who “welcomes one such children in Jesus’ name.” And to make matters worse, unless the disciples change and become like children, they will never enter this kingdom of heaven that Jesus keeps telling them about.

True to form, Jesus is messing with what people – even his closest followers – assume is the natural order. They are hard-wired to assume that there is a pecking order in this world, and so they care a great deal about being at the top. This is so natural to the disciples that they blatantly jockey for position in front of Jesus. And so Jesus uses a child to illustrate another way, in which the lowly and humble rank first with God.

I’m sure that people in Jesus’ time loved children, just as we do, but the culture didn’t value children as fully developed human beings. “The Romans viewed children as particularly vulnerable, physically and mentally weak (Ferguson, Everett. *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 80),” and so naming a child as “the greatest” simply wouldn’t make sense. And prioritizing the need to pray for children ahead of the needs of the adults clamoring for Jesus’ time makes even less sense.

The text simply says that “the disciples spoke sternly” to those who brought the children. The assumption of every commentator is that the disciples thought Jesus was too busy or important to take notice of these children. And so Jesus practices what he preaches, demonstrating that the children are not an interruption, but rather an opportunity for Jesus to do his work, to bless children as well as adults.

Remember that it is Matthew who gives us the Beatitudes – who tells us that the meek, are the ones who are blessed. So Matthew and Jesus are

showing us that God's priorities are not the world's. The kingdom of heaven is a place where the "last shall be first" and where the meek and humble have a special place. Jesus takes it a step further, telling disciples that it isn't enough to value the children, they must become like children if they hope to enter the kingdom of heaven.

This is crazy advice. Become like children? Jesus lifts up the children for their low status, but we educate and raise our children to improve their place in this world, not to embrace lowliness.

While that may be true, I think that being child-like is about more than just being humble. My favorite part of Vacation Bible School is teaching the songs to the youngest children. Over time, kids become too cool for school, but the 4- and 5-year olds get right up in the front and dance and belt out the songs and they believe every word they sing. These winsome faces are so transparent; they register awe and wonder when they hear of God's mighty deeds...and they register sheer joy as they sing of God's love. Developmentally, they are still able to hear and appreciate Bible stories unquestioningly.

The more time I spend listening to children, the more I am convinced that God created us with an innate desire to seek and know God. I'm hardly the first person to say this. The authors of Genesis said it from the beginning when they describe God strolling in the Garden of Eden, seeking the company of Adam and Eve. St. Augustine said it more poetically when he wrote to God, "...thou hast made us for thyself and restless is our heart until it comes to rest in thee (Augustine's Confessions 1)." Gene Hamer said it more scientifically in his book *The God Gene* that seeks to prove that seeking the divine is built into our DNA.

And children are living proof of this. In my role, I am pleasantly inundated by parents and grandparents eager to tell me what their children say about God. One proud grandpa told me that his grandson asked to be pushed high, high, higher on the swing set so that he could take "just a wittle peek" into heaven. And my 2-year old, Nolan, as part of the pre-bedtime stalling process, once tried to persuade me that he needed to go "look for God."

"Where do you think you will find God?" I asked him.

“In the world,” he responded confidently, using the words from one of his favorite stories (Kushner, *Because Nothing Looks Like God*). “God is in the world.”

Now Nolan already seems to have this connection with God that I am spending my lifetime working toward. Certainly he has an advantage – I was writing a theology term paper when I went into labor and we’ve been reading children’s Bibles since he was in the womb – but he still astonishes me. In my professional world, I spend a lot of time thinking about what prayers to teach children; meanwhile, my son came up with his own prayer and he says it faithfully each night. “Thank you God. Amen.” That’s it. That’s his prayer. It works just as well for grace. “Thank you God. Amen.”

At first, I wasn’t sure if he meant it or if he was repeating something he had heard, so I asked, “what do you want to thank God for?”

“Mommy Daddy,” he replied. “Mommy Daddy special.”

Now, after nearly a year of this prayer, I know what’s coming, so I prompt him, “who else?”

“Aunt Laurie Uncle Drew special...Marmie special...Granda special.” The usual suspects make the list every night, but there are always surprising additions: the man who came to fix our porch...a neighbor...or another toddler buddy. Sometimes objects are mentioned – God is thanked for racecars...scoopers...even cement mixers.

Often, people from church are mentioned. “Pastor Chris” ...sometimes Nolan’s honorary big sister Grace Gescheidle. “Pastor Corey’s fishies,” are frequently lifted up in prayer as well (and Corey tells me that he has not lost a single fish this year).

The other night, as we began our bedtime story, the phone rang. Thinking it was my husband, I answered it. It was a friend from church, clearly distraught, calling with some bad news. When I returned to Nolan’s bedside, I was shaken and teary. “You are sad, Mommy?” Nolan asked.

“I am,” I told him. “A friend of mine from church got some bad news. Can we pray for her?”

So we said another little prayer for this friend, finished our prayers and said goodnight. Three nights later, in the middle of the bedtime ritual, Nolan asked, “how your friend, mommy?” It took me a minute to realize

that he had remembered our prayer of several nights earlier. “She’s doing a lot better,” I replied honestly.

“We pray for her,” Nolan said. “Lots of people pray for her. We help her feel better. God helps her feel better.”

Now many, many volumes have been written on intercessory prayer, but I have never read such an earnest and heartfelt description as I heard from my two year old. As I listen to Nolan and children like him, I am convinced that their connection to God is stronger and more fully developed than grown-ups imagine.

And the reason that the kingdom belongs to “such as these” is that children receive it naturally, without a sense of entitlement. Unlike the presumptuous disciples who assumed that of course they would “get in” and so were worried about who would be first among equals, children haven’t yet learned to play that game.

The hard part for us is that we have learned too well. We can try to act humble. But to set aside our egos and desire to be the greatest is really, really, hard. So I think that this is why Jesus reminds us to look to children as our model. This doesn’t mean that we have to be child-*ish*, but we can reclaim something in us that is child-*like*. We all had that child-like connection to God at some point, and we, like our children at VBS, were able to meet God with awe and love and sheer joy.

I am not advocating a childish faith – the process of questioning our faith and not accepting everything that we are told is a part of growing into a mature faith. But I know that I am often guilty of intellectualizing and reasoning my faith to the point that I lose that simple, faithful experience of God that I treasure in our children.

Jean Paul Sartre famously wrote that there is a “God-shaped hole” in all of our hearts...a hole where Sartre assumes “the divine used to be” but is no more...that for modern people, God is no longer relevant and has left this big gaping hole. While I am saddened by this, it’s also a powerful image to explain why so many people no longer feel God’s presence. If there is a God-shaped hole inside many hearts, it is a hole that grew and grew over the course of a life-time. I don’t think that that hole existed at birth.

Somewhere along the way, someone will tell Nolan and Rowan and all our children – either outright or by implication – that when you grow up you become too mature and too wise to really believe in God. And perhaps that God-shaped hole will begin to form like it does for so many. If it grows and grows, it leaves a big gaping hole to be filled up with whatever is out there – to be filled up with a need to be #1 rather than a need for God.

And so I pray for my boys, and I pray for everyone's children, that we can hold on to this reminder that Jesus had a special place for children...that ministering to them and blessing them was part of his call and his work. Jesus held up children as an example first for their humble status, but also, for their many gifts; gifts that we can learn from when we are blessed by children in worship, in this church or in the world and gifts that we can reclaim in ourselves because they remind us that we were created to know and to need God. And no God-shaped hole will ever grow big enough to allow us to completely forget that need.

And so I say, "thank you God."

Amen.