

AND A LITTLE CHILD SHALL LEAD THEM

(10/13/19)

Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 11:1-9
Matthew 18:1-5

“The wolf shall live with the lamb; the leopard shall lie down with the kid; the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.” (Isaiah 11:6)

“Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 18:3)

For those of you who are not present with us but are listening to our service of worship over the radio, this morning we celebrated the Sacrament of Infant Baptism. We welcomed little Oscar Walderzak, the son of Peter and Julia Walderzak, into the Christian faith, into membership with the Christian community.

For those of you who are not here this morning, let me tell you: Oscar is really adorable. It's not surprising since his older sisters, Leona Grace and Cosette, are also really cute. Have you ever noticed what infants, babies, and little children evoke in us adults? When we talk to them, we make strange sounds; we talk in an altered voice and use strange words, sort of like a poor imitation of baby talk. Our facial features change; they become softer and we smile a lot.

It's amazing what a little child can evoke in us, the set of feelings they can bring alive in us. According to Jesus, it is exactly what we need. It also may be exactly what the world needs.

In our reading from the 18th chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus is talking with his disciples. In the preceding chapter, Jesus has undergone a transfiguration on the top of Mount Hermon that ties him, at least in his disciples' experience, to both Isaiah and Moses. When Jesus, Peter, James, and John come down from their mountaintop experience, Jesus embarks upon his healing ministry. The very first thing he does is heal an epileptic child.

In today's reading, Jesus gives his disciples a new teaching about the kingdom of God, about the kingdom of heaven. It is a teaching that, like so many of Jesus' teachings, is somewhat counter-intuitive and counter-cultural. Instead of telling them to grow up, Jesus tells them to become more childlike, more like a little child. We read:

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” Jesus called a child, whom he put among them, and said, “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Wow! This is a powerful teaching about the kingdom of heaven, that realm within which Jesus lived and to which he calls us. Jesus tells us that the Way is not difficult; it is actually easier to dwell within the kingdom of heaven than we think. We don't have to be a biblical scholar or theologian. We don't have to have a lot of fancy letters after our name. We don't have to hold an orthodox set of beliefs. We don't even have to attend worship every Sunday—though I would remind you that it *is* a good thing to do, that it won't hurt (most of the time), and it could really help! But that's not the point. The point is that, according to Jesus, all we have to do is become like a little child. It's that easy! Or perhaps it's that difficult.

Let's think about what it might mean to become like a little child. First of all, it should not be something strange or alien to us. We all were little infants, little babies, little children several years ago—actually, *many* years ago for some of us. The point is that Jesus is not asking us to become someone different from who we are. He is calling us to return to our roots, to the essence of who we are as a child of God. He is calling us to recover or regain that which we may have lost, which we probably have lost in the process of growing up, of becoming the hard-working, responsible adults we are today.

If we think about it, this strange attraction that infants, that little babies, that little children have for us may be teleological; it may be in the service of a *telos*, a goal; it may be a call to recover something precious that we have lost.

What can we learn from infants, from babies, from little children about life and about God, about our relationship with God and the life God has given us to live? How can we become more childlike? Note that Jesus calls us to become more *childlike*, not *childish*. Too many of us adults, especially those of us who harbor narcissistic tendencies, behave in childish ways. This is not the goal. The goal is to become childlike, to become more like Oscar, the little child whom we baptized this morning. Note that Jesus is telling us not to make this child more like us; he is calling us to become more like him.

What are little children like? What do they have to teach us from the way they are, from the way they live, from the way they relate to life?

Little children are vulnerable. They are open to us adults and to life in a way that enables them to be hurt, to be deeply hurt when we adults betray them or wound them. As Theodore Reik has noted, we adults cover ourselves, protect ourselves with what Reik calls a thick coat of

characterological armor. We need to take this off and become vulnerable, like a little child, or we will never be able to give and receive love.

Little children are trusting. We adults have to teach them about “stranger danger.” Yet this “stranger danger” has become a stumbling block for us adults, an obstacle that stands in the way of our efforts to create the kind of peaceful kingdom of which Isaiah speaks, the kind of peaceable society which our faith calls us to establish on earth. How can we do this if we are afraid of and prejudiced against everyone who is different from us—racially, ethnically, and religiously? Although we do need to live in the real world, a world where not everyone is trustworthy, we also need to regain a sense of that childlike trust that can build bridges with those who are different from us and who consequently suffer because of our prejudices.

Little children are not prejudiced. My wife tells me about a video that was posted on social media of two little boys, close friends, who reconnect after some time apart from each other, perhaps during summer vacation. When these two young boys spot each other, they spontaneously run up to each other, throw their arms around each other, and embrace. What is so beautiful and moving about this video is that one of the boys is white and the other boy is black. That’s right--we have a lot to learn from our children.

Little children are spontaneous; they incarnate an ingenuous childlike delight. We in the Boston area were gifted with an example of this several months ago when a nine-year-old boy named Ronan Martin attended a Handel and Haydn Society concert with his grandfather. At the end of one of the movements of a piece by Mozart, as the audience sat in silence, Ronan spontaneously and loudly exclaimed “Wow!” This, of course, absolutely delighted the conductor, the musicians, the concert attendees, and people around the world. Ronan, by the way, is on the autism spectrum, but this did not prevent him from giving voice to the ineffable feeling that people have had about Mozart throughout the centuries. If only we could respond to something that magnificent with the spontaneous joy and appreciation that Roman, the “wow child,” so beautifully expressed.

Little children want to explore. This desire to explore, this urge to explore is probably archetypal—it is built into all of us as a way to connect us with the world. Children are curious; they ask questions. As soon as they can, little children crawl; then they toddle; then they walk. I’m sure that part of our fascination with them as they explore their world is, as I mentioned before, teleological—it is in the service of a goal. This desire to explore has led us into outer

space. It has also led us within, into the depths of the psyche. I hope we never lose this child-like drive to explore, to discover the world both around us and within us.

Little children are imaginative. They are in touch with the imaginal world, the world of magic, mystical creatures. This, by the way, is a real world. It is the world of creativity. It is the world where one can make wishes on dandelion petals and shooting stars. It is a world where we are fascinated by fireflies and frogs. As the Jungian psychoanalyst James Hillman has said, “Reality is for those who lack imagination.” I wouldn’t put it quite that starkly. I believe that the imaginal world has the potential to enrich our so-called “real world.” Little children, with their imaginary friends, seem to have one foot in this “other” world. I hope that we, with all our real-world responsibilities, never lose that capacity. It is this capacity for wonder that puts us in touch with God and with the spiritual dimension of life.

Little children are accepting of others. They are not inherently judgmental. Although they can be possessive of their toys, once they learn the difference between “mine” and “yours,” they can also be generous. They demonstrate the capacity for empathy at a very early age. They find pleasure in the act of sharing what they have.

Many years ago, at a conference on empathy, a developmental psychologist showed us a video of two little children at play in a nursery school setting. The little boy and the little girl in the video must have been around the ages of three or four. They were sitting across from one another on the floor, playing with some toys that were there in front of them.

In the video, the little boy reached across and took one of the toys with which the little girl was playing. The little girl teared up; her lip began to quiver as only little girls can do. The little boy somehow realized something was wrong. He looked puzzled as he stared at his little friend. He looked at her, then he looked at the toy in his hand. Suddenly, he “got it.” He realized that by taking his little friend’s toy, he had hurt her feelings. He handed her back the toy, and his little friend broke out in a radiant smile.

What could this possibly be other than an early experience of empathy? The little boy put himself in the little girl’s situation; he either felt what she felt or else he understood what she felt. He understood why she was so sad, that it had to do with something he had done. What struck me as I watched the video, was that he cared. He really cared! This led him to make an effort to repair the rupture in their relationship. If only we could recapture this child-like sense

of empathy and of compassion; there would be much less suffering in the world. Far fewer children would go to bed hungry tonight.

Can you see why Jesus calls us to become more like little children? Little children already dwell within the kingdom of God, the kingdom of heaven. They can teach us so much. They could help us find love in our relationships and resolve our international conflicts—if only we could be humble enough to learn from them.

In closing, I would like us to listen to a passage from the Lebanese mystic Kahlil Gibran's classic spiritual guide entitled *The Prophet*. It is the passage where a woman asks the Teacher, the Prophet to tell them about children.

And a woman who held a babe against her bosom said, Speak to us of Children.

And he said: Your children are not your children. They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself. They come through you but not from you, and though they are with you, yet they belong not to you.

You may give them your love, but not your thoughts, for they have their own thoughts. You may house their bodies but not their souls, for their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow, which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams. You may strive to be like them but seek not to make them like you. For life goes not backward, nor tarries with yesterday.

You are the bows from which your children as living arrows are sent forth. The archer sees the mark upon the path of the infinite, and He bends you with His might that His arrows may go swift and far. Let your bending in the archer's hand be for gladness; for even as He loves the arrow that flies, so He loves also the bow that is stable.

What a beautiful teaching for those of us who are parents and also for those of us who are teachers. We should strive to be like our children, not to make them into carbon copies of ourselves—for “life goes not backward, nor tarries with yesterday.” Oscar, Coco, Leona, and Olivia are not only cute, they can teach us about life, about all those precious dimensions of life, those precious dimensions of the spirit that drift away from us as we become increasingly absorbed in our adult responsibilities.

Jesus tells us that unless we become like a little child, we cannot enter into the kingdom of God. If we are truly wise; if we are spiritually wise, we will know what Isaiah means when he says, “And a little child shall lead them.”

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