

## The Faith of Children

Luke 18:9-17

*...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.*

*I have always been regretting that I was not as wise as the day I was born.*

--Henry David Thoreau

For today I borrowed next week's reading from Luke's gospel, adding the portion that follows immediately. It is a more fitting lesson for Children's Sabbath Sunday, as we celebrate children and their gifts, and hear God's call to respond to the needs of children in our city, nation, and throughout the world.

Jesus tells a parable to people who "trusted in their own righteousness and regard others with contempt." This is a familiar trap. We get our self-esteem or sense of worth from measuring ourselves against others. We are right, they are wrong. We are spiritually mature, they are not. We see how things really are, others don't have a clue. However it plays out, Jesus offers us a different way of seeing ourselves that is liberating and full of joy, that helps us to love ourselves and others in life-giving ways.

A Pharisee, an expert in religion, is praying in the temple. He stands off by himself, aloof and absorbed in his own importance and piety. He seems completely satisfied that he is in tune with God, which is pretty much what the word "righteous" means. He prays regularly. He tithes. He fasts. He is morally superior to other people, especially that tax collector over there.

The tax collector is cowering in the shadows. His prayer is agonized. He seems crushed by a sense of his smallness in the vast scheme of things and his imperfections before the law. A collaborator with the Roman tax system, he is hated by his fellow Jews. His prayer is simple, brief, straight from the heart: God, be merciful to me a sinner! He's not talking about "original sin," the non-biblical theory that we are worthless sinners, born no good and can do nothing good. But you don't have to believe in "original sin" to sometimes experience your life as a complete mess. We are human beings, created good by God. We have freedom to affirm and live out of our relationship with God or to be shaped by the culture around us. Because of that freedom, we often lose our way. We end up right where the tax collector is—fed up with ourselves and spiritually in the dumps!

Jesus says that the tax collector went home in a right relationship with God, not the Pharisee. The Pharisee was fooling himself. The tax collector had a clear and open heart...humility. The Pharisee was self-absorbed and self-promoting. The tax collector had honest self-awareness. The Pharisee represents religion that promotes the feeling of being right and divides people up as good and bad, moral and immoral, us and them. The tax collector represents spirituality, a real awareness of one's life in its relationship with the living God. And with that awareness come awe, humility, and the insight that we are not the center of the universe but intricately woven into it. It is the view of the psalmist who gazes in wonder at the expanse of the universe, and asks: What are we human beings that you, O God, even pay attention to us, much less care for us out of your love (Ps. 8)?

The Pharisee comes to God as a self-satisfied, successful, and achievement oriented adult, proud of his accomplishments and full of his own pious thoughts. The tax collector comes to God as a child, open, trusting, full of wonder at the sometimes painful mystery of life. And so Luke follows with a story about children.

People are bringing little children to Jesus. They want Jesus to touch them, to bless them. Loving parents want all the blessing for their children that they can get. They know how challenging life can be. They fear for their children and want them to have everything they need, physically and spiritually, to live happily and healthily.

The disciples tell the parents to keep the kids away from Jesus. Religion is adult stuff. The world is for and about adults. Children are only potential adults. They are, as we often say, the "church of tomorrow," not

today. We ask children: What do you want to be when you grow up? We are really saying to them: You are not worth much right now, but come back when you are grown up and then we'll take you seriously.

Our teaching of children becomes a matter of filling up their heads with all kinds of stuff. Our education system for the most part is not about children themselves, enabling unique human beings to unfold and give to the world what they have to give. Instead, we set up hoops for them to jump through so that they fit into the slots our society has prepared for them.

Children are made the objects of our unchallenged prejudices and purposes, and pressed into conformity with them. Religion, unfortunately, does the same thing. Did you read about the new "Jesus Doll"? It is the latest scheme in the unholy partnership between religion and the commercial establishment. Apparently the doll talks, speaking Jesus' words about being the only way to God, to salvation. Now, that's interesting. What about the Sermon on the Mount? What about loving your enemies or not killing or selling what you have and giving the proceeds to the poor and following Jesus? This is making children objects to be manipulated into our own narrow religious views.

But there are more subtle ways that we disregard children. Anytime we see children as simply cute entertainment. Any time we fail to take seriously what a child is saying. Any time we fake interest when a child tries to show us something she has discovered. Any time we "talk to" children as though they were lumps of clay to be formed by our adult knowledge and wisdom. Any time we want to usher children out of the way or out of the sanctuary so that we can get on with "adult business."

Even in the more progressive UCC and Disciples denominations, though we make good efforts to speak out for issues related to children's wellbeing, as a whole we do not take children themselves seriously as integral to our life as faith communities. We tend to be too intellectualized and business-minded, too focused on perpetuating the church as an institution, to let children into the center so that they shape our lives as communities of faith.

Jesus explodes all these views of children. He tells the disciples to quit getting in the way of children. The kingdom of God belongs to children already. They know what it's about. Ever wonder why there are no stories of Jesus teaching children? They already get it. It's the adults who have gotten lost! So Jesus says that unless we become like little children, we cannot enter that kingdom, that life that is truly living. This story of Jesus and the children is the most radical story in the gospels. I think that only now are we as the church beginning to understand how profound it was, and is, that Jesus welcomed children as those who are closer to the kingdom of God than we adults are.

Jesus doesn't really explain what it is about children that they already possess God's kingdom. We are left to wonder about this, to look more closely at children, to really see children. To me the most vivid aspect of the lives of young children is their sense of wonder and trust, their openness of heart. They really see things around them. There is nothing too small to escape their wonder-filled attention. They see this flitting, chirping, feathered creature hopping along the ground, and they are filled with wonder and joy. Then, as Anthony De Mello writes in his book *AWARENESS*, we tell them, "That's a sparrow." So the next time they see one, they say, "Oh, that's a sparrow; I've seen sparrows; I'm bored with sparrows." You see? Young children see things as they really are, before they are named, classified, put in boxes, and robbed of their mystery and splendor. When Thoreau wrote that he regretted that he did not still have the wisdom he had when he was born, that's what he was talking about. So he spent his adult life devoted to regaining the capacity to really see what was around him, not the way society or religion wanted him to see it. Thoreau was a true mystic, one who was able to see deeply into reality and to be really present to life. He became like a child, and he entered the kingdom of God, though he seldom set foot inside a church.

Jaden comes over to the Festival Center garden from next door when he sees one of us, especially Curtis. Curtis lets him have the hose—perhaps a mistake from an adult point of view! But then Jaden yells to Curtis to come and see the rainbow in the sunlit spray of water. Next he is digging in the dirt and finds an earthworm, which he holds as though he has discovered the most wonderful thing in the world. I think that's

what Jesus is talking about. Becoming like children means peeling away and letting go of all the grids of thought and petrified experience we have accumulated so that we really see what is around us, as though for the first time. If we did that, we would recover our sense of awe and wonder at the creation, other people, and ourselves. We as individuals and a society would see and honor life that is shot through with sacredness.

If Jesus is calling children to himself, then we have to make room for children in our worship and our life together as Jesus' community. That means there might be more noise or whispering or a baby crying when we are trying to be silent. But then we might discover that silence is not the same as the absence of sound. The silence we need to come to is the inner silence that enables us to be aware of and receptive to what and who is around us. In our worship our prayers would become more simple and brief because the children are getting restless with our long prayers and lofty words. But this may help us to become more prayerful, that is, speaking to God simply, honestly, and briefly our needs and the needs of the world as we see them. The tax collector's prayer is a good model. "God, be merciful to me a sinner." Our worship as a whole would move closer to "being still and knowing that God is God."

We may think that children are uncomfortable with or can't handle being silent. Wrong! Children are natural meditators. If given the environment and the encouragement, they love being quiet and still. Children Worship & Wonder has shown this. Children are fully capable of being still and knowing that God is God. They enjoy a space that is quiet and peaceful, that allows them to explore their own spirits, to be with themselves, responding in their own ways to the stories of faith.

Being with children brings us closer to the life of God's kingdom, life as God made it to be lived. Children help us recover a spirit of wonder and joy, a spirit of openness and humility, and they keep us honest about many things. They take us very seriously when we say things, so they make us look deeply at how we speak and what we say. They watch us closely, taking very seriously what we do and how we act. So they make us look carefully at the way we live and the things we do.

Maybe we need to just leave it where Jesus left it. Don't keep the children away. Welcome them. And see them in a whole new way, as those who know what God's kingdom is about and can teach us. Because the kingdom of God belongs to them and they can lead us into that kingdom.

The children of Greenfield Christian Church in Indiana gave us a going away party when we left for Lynchburg. There were refreshments and games and creative activities. One of the children was very involved in her project—coloring, cutting, critically examining, and cutting again a piece of paper. She finally had trimmed it down to a tiny diamond of yellow and orange, pasted it on the paper, and presented it to Kaye as her gift. "Here," said Katie, "this is for you. It's the kingdom of God." Katie could give Kaye the kingdom of God because it belonged to her and she knew what it was about. And the wonderful thing was that she knew it was hers to share, and she wanted Kaye to have it also.