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## *What Is It about Children and the Gospel?*

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*Matthew 18:1-6; Mark 10:13-16*

“Unless you change and become like children,” Jesus says, “You will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Those are strong words, but, clearly, children occupy a special place in Jesus’ world. He’s protective of them. He defends them. He wants adults to learn from them. He presents children as the only ones who fully understand what the reign of God is like.

*What is it about children and the gospel?*

“Truly I tell you,” Jesus says, speaking of a child standing there with him, “Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”

Surely Jesus could just as well have used one of the leading lights from among his followers to choose as the example to follow, as the one to emulate... “Unless you become like Peter...wait; he denied me three times... Unless you become like Paul...wait; he persecuted my followers for years before his conversion... Unless you become like the disciples...wait; they argued about who was greatest. Alright...unless you become *like a child*...”

Children haven't yet taken on the worst attributes of the adults they will become one day. Jesus sees that. It must be a relief for him to be around kids, around the innocence of youngsters.

“Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.” Jesus says, anticipating the Great Judgment scene where he says that “those who love the least of these my brothers and sisters will love me.” (Matthew 18:3-5)

*So what is it about children?* They're vulnerable. They're dependent on others. They need community. They need trust. They need security and safety and love. When children are safe and loved, they respond in a joyful, simple, good way. There's no deal-making involved, no persuasion needed. When consistently

loved, they love back – which is why their abuse by church leaders or anyone else is so heinous. It steals their innocence, and when Jesus speaks of placing a stumbling block before children, abuse is the kind of action he must be referring to. And he has harsh words for anyone who does that: *it would be better to place a millstone around the neck of such a person and throw them into the water.*

Jesus isn't the only one who thinks highly of children. The ancient Hebrew poet claims that God turns to children in the midst of trouble:

“Out of the mouths of babes and infants  
you have founded a bulwark because of your foes,  
to silence the enemy and the avenger.” (Psalm 8:2)

Sometimes it takes children to stand up to that which is wrong in the world, to say the obvious, to point out to the rest of us what seems so clear for them. Whatever we think of the politics of it, the viral video this week of a group of children urging Senate Diane Feinstein of California to support the Green New Deal because they will have to live with the consequences of climate

change, was compelling, and instructive. The argument is hard to ignore when made by children: take action now to protect the earth for our future.

As Beth and I look forward to the arrival of our first grandchild this summer, I find myself thinking about the world we are bequeathing to the next generations, and how we've not stepped up to the challenge of climate change, for their sake...*Out of the mouths of babes and infants.* What will we say when they ask why we didn't do more when we had the chance?

Adults are so much more complicated than children. Maybe that's why Jesus focused on them. We adults are so often caught up in things for ourselves. We mistake our need for attention as a desire to love and be loved. *We* are always putting ourselves at the center, not somebody else. Children are less preoccupied with status and position, privilege and power. They have a natural willingness to accept the best in others and trust them. Jesus wants that in the rest of us.

*What is it about children?* They still have imagination. They don't need everything to be fully explained and verifiable. Think of all the times Jesus tells a story - he calls them *parables* - and then has to explain it to the adults who were listening. "A sower went out to sow...Some seed fell on rocky soil, some among the thorns, some on the path, and some on good soil..."

Now, imagine the adults listening: Was there really a sower? What kind of seed was he sowing? Why did he let it fall where birds could get it? Why would he sow it among thorns?

*Look*, Jesus finally says, "The seed is the word and the good soil is the heart that hears and responds and allows the word to take root."

No wonder he expected children to hear and understand more readily than adults.

Children have a playfulness that allows for other worlds to be created, for dreams to take flight, and for stories to come to life. Children play so much better than adults, and play opens them to possibilities beyond the here and now. What more prepared

person could there be than a child to hear the story of Christmas? Of Easter? Of the miracles and healings of Jesus? It takes good imagination to trust in God.

*What is it about children and the gospel?*

The capacity for wonder is in short supply among adults. We tuck it away. We tamp it down, making it all the more difficult to receive the gift of faith. We're afraid of wonder and suspicious of our own imagination, which may be why so many adults have trouble with scripture. They take the texts with them into the desert of skepticism and cynicism, and dissect and analyze it until there's nothing left, no life in the words.

Bible scholar Walter Brueggemann describes his own struggle with finding meaning in the Bible. "I was educated in historical criticism," he says, "To keep the text in the past and to presume that it had one recoverable meaning intended by the author."

Eventually Brueggemann had to discover another way to find meaning in scripture. “That led me to see,” he says,

“That what we always do with the biblical text, if we want it to be pertinent or compelling or contemporary, is commit mostly unrecognized acts of imagination by which we stretch and pull and extend the implications of the text beyond its words.”

(<https://desertspiritpress.net/2018/03/07/second-naivete/>)

*We commit mostly unrecognized acts of imagination, by which we find meaning. It's what French philosopher Paul Ricoeur calls the *second naiveté* – the first being that of a child; the second, that of adults. It refers to the process whereby adults rediscover and embrace the power of imagination and wonder and mystery, and free themselves from the prison of explanation and literal significance and empirical verification.*

A life without imagination and wonder depletes us spiritually and leaves us thirsting for what makes us truly human. That's why a really good poem or particular piece of music or work of

art can move us; it pierces through the accrued layers of our adulthood and connects with our deep need for beauty and truth, awe and meaning.

We need to relearn how to imagine in our lives. We need more play time.

The leader of our children's parent cooperative preschool in San Francisco many years ago was a transplanted-New-York-unabashed-aging-hippie from an era that fully embraced the playful side of life. Her name was Nina, and it took me a while to figure out what she was up to. As a structured, ordered Presbyterian I didn't understand what the program was. Nina framed life in that pre-school in such a way that the freedom to play and create was the heart of their daily experience. There was no formal structure. No curriculum. No order of the day. No adult to lead them in figuring out what to do. No rules, other than, "There's always enough to share," and, "Wash your hands before lunch."

As a parent I volunteered at the pre-school one day a week. It was an astonishing, refreshing experience every time I was there. Children engineered entire universes – sometimes together, sometimes alone – not bound by the strictures or limits or parameters of the here and now, of our world. They could spend hours exploring the sand in the yard, finding imaginary treasures and going to faraway places. They could sit quietly in a group and listen to a book read aloud, letting the words spin images and stories into life. They could stand at an easel for half the morning painting a new world into existence. There were occasional tears and it wasn't perfect, but those children were learning that a full life, a life with joy requires imagination.

Fred Rogers understood that truth. Mr. Rogers knew that children found their way into life through their imaginations. He created a world that was safe, where children could be themselves and encounter others who were authentic friends.

"One of the greatest gifts you can give anybody," Fred Rogers said, "Is the gift of your honest self...Kids can spot a phony a mile away." (Rob Owen, ["There goes the Neighborhood: Mister](#)

[Rogers will make last episodes of show in December"; \*Pittsburgh Post-Gazette Magazine\*, 11/12/2000\)](#)

Maybe that's what Jesus was getting at: we adults often paper over our honest selves and try to be someone we are not. Jesus didn't have much time for phony people – people who say one thing and do another, people who act one way on Sunday and another on Monday. Jesus called them hypocrites – and that's not a quality often associated with children.

Children trusted Mr. Rogers. All those characters – Daniel Striped Tiger, King Friday XIII, X the Owl, Bob Dog, Mr. McFeeley, Lady Aberlin, Prince Tuesday and the rest – populated a world that children understood. When he visited the Neighborhood of Make-Believe Mr. Rogers invited children into their imaginations – and the rest of us along with them. It was safe to pretend, to go to a place where you could be yourself, where you could conjure up a new reality, try out a new thing, where you could talk with adults about your feelings and be heard, if you needed to.

Mr. Rogers, a Presbyterian minister, was preaching the gospel in his own way, putting the love of God right into those little hearts and minds – and into ours, as well. It may have been the Neighborhood of Make Believe, but it was a real world, because it was a world where love flourished – and doesn't that describe what God intends: *a world full of possibilities and promise, a world where love and justice might actually take root and grow; a world where we can see beyond what is and imagine what might be.*

*Unless you change – unless we change, and become like children, Jesus says, we will never enter the kingdom of heaven.*

The good news is that God has already given us what we need to make that change.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.