

CHILD-LIKE, NOT CHILDISH

Mark 9:33-37

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Mark 9:33-37 (NIV)

They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the road?" But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest. Sitting down, Jesus called the twelve and said, "If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all." He took a little child and had him stand among them. Taking him in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me."

There was once a little boy who wanted to meet God. He knew it was a long trip to where God lived, so he packed his suitcase with Twinkies and a six-pack of root beer and he started on his journey.

When he had gone about three blocks, he met an old woman. She was sitting in the park just staring at some pigeons. The boy sat down next to her and opened his suitcase. He was about to take a drink from his root beer when he noticed that the old lady looked hungry, so he offered her a Twinkie. She gratefully accepted it and smiled at him. Her smile was so pretty that the boy wanted to see it again, so he offered her a root beer. Once again she smiled at him. The boy was delighted! They sat there all afternoon eating and smiling, but they never said a word.

As it grew dark, the boy realized how tired he was and he got up to leave, but before he had gone more than a few steps, he turned around, ran back to the old woman and gave her a hug. She gave him her biggest smile ever.

When the boy opened the door to his own house a short time later, his mother was surprised by the look of joy on his face.

She asked him, "What did you do today that made you so happy?"

He replied, "I had lunch with God." But before his mother could respond, he added, "You know what? She's got the most beautiful smile I've ever seen!"

Meanwhile, the old woman, also radiant with joy, returned to her home. Her son was stunned by the look of peace on her face and he asked, "Mother, what did you do today that made you so happy?"

She replied, "I ate Twinkies in the park with God." But before her son responded, she added, "You know, he's much younger than I expected."ⁱ

This humorous story catches us a little off guard because it rubs up against our preconceived notions of God. It allows us to view God from a different perspective. So too do our scripture lessons this morning.

In our story from the Gospel according to Mark, Jesus confronts the disciples' attitude and preconceived ideas about God and heaven. He reprimands their childish behavior, and instead calls them to become child-like. He tells them:

To become first you must be the very last and a servant of all. When you welcome a child, you welcome me, even more than that, you welcome God.

Throughout history, children have been at the bottom of the social order. Abused, ignored, degraded, enslaved, starved, abandoned . . . it is easy to have power over those who are weaker than you, who are smaller than you, and who are emotionally dependent on you.

But Jesus steps in and places these little people, the children, at the crux of our Christian theology. For it is only when we receive the kingdom of God **LIKE A LITTLE CHILD**, that we can then enter into God's presence.

Viewing God from a child's perspective, can make you stop in your tracks.
Sit up and notice.
And evaluate your priorities in life.

Ask yourself this question: What if I viewed life more often through the eyes of a child? How would I view things differently?

We could come up with a list of potential answers to those two questions, but I would like to touch on three areas this morning where I see children sharpening our focus towards the kingdom of God. Those areas are:

1. Creativity
2. Justice
3. Unconditional Love

CREATIVITY

Creative imagination plays a key role in our faith; it deepens our understanding of Scripture and allows us to avoid becoming cold and callous. You may recall the story of the concert pianist who after being imprisoned for 8 years, was released to play for a performance that the critics called "brilliant" and "outstanding." When asked how he was able to do this after not playing for 8 years, he said, "I practiced my beloved music in my imagination every day of my imprisonment."

Children know the power of imagination. It unlocks their creative abilities and takes them places that as adults, we would probably yearn to go too. Tapping into our creative side is easier for some

than others. As scientists study our brains, they have determined that some of us use our analytical side more than our creative side. However, potential to use both sides is available to us all.

If your creative side needs a little prompting, then I ask you to recall a childhood activity that I would guess almost every one of you did: cloud watching. Lying on your back in a field, or your backyard, and guessing the shapes of clouds. Now that is an exercise for your imagination!

Christian author Charlie Shedd tells the story of a young girl named Libby whom he and his family met while vacationing at their summer cabin in MN. Libby was a 15-year-old sophomore. She was an obvious lover of everything she surveyed and she missed very little of what she surveyed. She especially loved the clouds and their pictures.

This is how we met Libby. At our vacation camp, high school girls were hired to keep the cabins tidy. Girls with personality-plus could also serve as guides. So here we were sitting in Libby's rowboat, enjoying this sunny day, utterly relaxed, while she guided us around the lake.

“Now,” she began, “I will show you what the Cloud Angels have drawn for us today.”

“See? Up there is a mother fox and her two little foxes.”

“Over there behind us, see it coming. You watch. A city with tall skyscrapers, streets, and even some cars moving. A park and houses around it. Watch now. They will form for you.

“See those big clouds? Don't they look like geese flying way off there? And there's a deer with his antlers raised. Look at the man lying down with his eyes closed. And here comes an elephant. Angels don't draw like we do. They draw whatever comes to their minds and that's why it's so much fun. They do it this way so every day there will be something new in the clouds for us to discover.”

Cats and dogs, sheep and rabbits, children running and a man fishing. A child swinging, the lady sweeping, two boys fighting, the cannon going off. On and on and on. And up to that day in our lives wasn't this one of our greatest days ever?

Late that afternoon, when we said goodbye at the dock, Libby hugged us as we thanked her. We told her this was one day for sure we'd never forget. Then she stepped back, took our hands, and said one more unforgettable jewel:

“Do you know why there are pictures in the clouds? Has anyone ever told you why? The reason is that God has artist angels drawing in the clouds? *God loves us so much he wants us to have fun even when we're studying the clouds.*”ⁱⁱ

Have you used your creative imagination lately? If not, perhaps you should start looking at the clouds!

JUSTICE

Beyond helping us touch the creative inner child, children also open our eyes to more serious issues. Justice being one of them.

Teacher and author Jonathan Kozol recently published a book entitled, “Amazing Grace: The Lives of Children and the Conscience of a Nation.” It is a story of a year in the life and death of children in a single six-block section of the South Bronx. He says that when he started writing *Amazing Grace* he was in mid-town Manhattan, right in front of Bloomingdale’s on 59th and Lexington. That part of the Upper East Side of Manhattan is the richest urban census tract in the world. He got on the number six train and went up to the South Bronx, just 16 minutes away. It’s a very easy trip to make. Ten stops, get off at Brook Avenue, and you are in the poorest congressional district in America.ⁱⁱⁱ

While visiting one of the families he befriended during this time, he was there when it was time for the children to go to bed. He says,

“I went to watch them get ready for sleep. They had on their feet pajamas. Fuzzy, yellow flannel pajamas. They knelt down by the side of the bed and folded their hands. I stood in the doorway with their mother and grandmother and watched them say their prayers. This is what they said, “God bless mommy. God bless nanny. God, don’t punish me for being black.” I never thought I’d live to see a time in the United States when children would have to say a prayer like that.”^{iv}

Kozol often had conversations about heaven, which they called God’s Kingdom, with the children in the South Bronx. One child he became close to was Anthony. The winter Kozol met him Anthony was so poor he was eating cold oatmeal for dinner. That was his dinner, every night. Not cooked oatmeal, but raw oatmeal because the gas or electric had been cut off. Again, his mother had done nothing wrong. She loved him, but her brother was dying of AIDS. She had to share the very limited amount of money she had to keep her brother alive due to cuts in Medicaid. At 12-years-old, this is what Anthony said about heaven:

“God will be there. He will be happy that we have arrived. People shall come hand-in-hand. It will be bright. Not dim and gloomy like here on earth. All friendly animals will be there, but no mean ones. As for television, forget it! If you want vision you can use your eyes to see the people that you loved. No one will look at you from the outside in heaven. People will see from the inside. All the people from the street will be there. My uncle will be there and he will be healed. You won’t see him buying drugs, because there won’t be money. You might see him happy for a change. The prophets will be there with Adam and Eve and all the disciples except Judas. You won’t have to pay taxes. You’ll recognize all the little children who have died. Jesus will be good to them and play with them. At night he will come and visit at your house. God will be fond of you. How will you know that you are there? Something will tell you, “This is it, Eureka!” If you still feel lonely in your heart or bitterness, you will know that you’re not there.”^v

Kozol says that he shares these experiences with people like you and me and we often ask “What can we do?” He often likes to give them an answer that a Baptist minister shared with him in Texas:

In the Gospel of John, Peter kept asking the same question to Jesus. ‘You did not tell us exactly what to do or what you expect of us. What do we do to be worthy of you?’ And Jesus answered, ‘If you love me, tend my sheep.’”^{vi}

If you love me, tend my sheep. These children of the South Bronx are but lambs, yet they seem to have grasped more about God’s Kingdom from living on the streets than I learned about God’s Kingdom in three years at seminary. To receive the kingdom of God, you must become like a little child.

UNCONDITIONAL LOVE

Perhaps one of most valuable things children teach us about God is the concept of unconditional love. Children have such a great capacity to forgive and to love. They are not hindered by our adult world of backstabbing, climbing the corporate ladder, cosmetics, glamour, who has the biggest house and the most possessions. They love you as you are, faults and all. And to our shame, children will usually do anything for us, because they love us and want to please us. They know what it means to model costly love.

Let me illustrate with this final story from the Native American tradition:

The Comanche People moaned aloud to the Great Spirit. “Creator God, our land is dying and we are dying too. Tell us what we have done wrong to make you so angry. End this terrible drought and save your people before we perish altogether. Tell us what we must do so that once more you will send the rain and restore our land to life.”

For three days the People prayed this prayer and the dancers danced the prayer. And the People waited and waited, prayed and prayed, but no rain came. And it was very hard on the little children and the old folk.

Among the few children who had not died from hunger was a small girl named She-Who-Sits-Alone. Apart from the crowd she watched her People pray and dance. In her lap she held a doll which she treasured above all things else. It was a warrior doll with a bone belt, beaded leggings and on its head were blue feathers from the Bluejay.

She-Who-Sits-Alone spoke to her doll. “Soon,” she said, “the wise men will go off to the hill. They will listen to the winds which carry the wisdom of the Great Spirit. Then we shall know what to do once more to make the rains come and earth alive.”

As she talked to the doll she held it close to her heart, for the doll had been made by her mother, and her father had brought her the blue feathers and her grandparents had made the leggings. But that seemed long ago. They had all died from the hunger of the land so she sat alone. Her warrior doll was all that she had left from those happy days.

As she had told her doll, the Wise Men went to the hills to listen to winds carrying the voice of God. After many sunsets the Wise Men returned and the people gathered to listen to their message.

The Wise Men said solemnly, “Creator God says that the people have become selfish. For years they have taken from the earth but they have not given anything back. So they must make a sacrifice. They must make a burnt offering of their most valued possession. Then the ashes of such offerings will be scattered on the winds to the four corners of the earth. And when this sacrifice is done, the rains will come and life will return to the earth.”

The People gave thanks to God for telling them what they must do and went back to their tents to look for their most valued possessions. One warrior said, ‘What shall I give? I am sure the Great Spirit does not want my new bow.’ A woman added, “I know the Great Spirit does not want my special blanket either.” And so it went all throughout the village. Everyone had an excuse to keep what he or she valued most.

Except She-Who-Sits-Alone. She held her warrior doll to her chest and at last she spoke to it. “It is you the Great Spirit wants for you are my most valued possession.” And she knew what she had to do.

Later than night, when everyone was asleep, She-Who-Sits-Alone crawled out from her blanket, took a lighted stick from the smoldering campfire and crept outside. She went to the top of a hill, placed the lighted stick in the ground, and spoke aloud: “O God, here is my warrior doll. It is the only thing I have from my mother and father. It is my most valued possession. Please accept it.”

Still holding her doll, she gathered some twigs and fanned up a fire and held her doll near it. She hesitated and tears began to roll down her cheeks. But then she thought of her parents and grandparents and her friends who had died from the hunger and thrust her doll into the fire.

When the flames died down and the ashes had cooled, she scooped them up and scattered them to the four winds. She was now tired. So on the hill she fell asleep without her doll but with a smile on her lips.

The next morning the sun awoke her. She sat up, rubbed her eyes and looked out over the hill. As far as she could see, where her doll’s ashes had fallen, the ground was covered with beautiful blue flowers like little blue bonnets. They were as blue as the feathers in her doll’s hair.

When the People came out of their tents they could hardly believe their eyes. They ran to the hill where She-Who-Sits-Alone was to look at the wonderful sight. There was no doubt in their minds. The flowers were a sign from the God that they were forgiven. And then and there they sang and danced and gave thanks. And in the middle of their song and dance a gentle rain began to fall. The land began to live again and the people were saved.

And from than day on She-Who-Sits-Alone was known by another name, the name of the One-Who-Loved-Her-People.^{vii}

The gifts of children: creative imagination, prayers of justice, and unconditional love.

And they came to Capernaum. And Jesus asked the disciples what they had been talking about on the road. But they were silent because they had been arguing about who was the greatest. And Jesus told them "To be first, you must become last, the servant of all." And then he took a child into their midst, and took him in his arms. "Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me. And whoever welcomes me, welcomes the one who sent me."

Where does your faith need to become less childish, and instead, more child-like?

Amen.

Sources Used:

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- iv. Ibid. p. 9.
- v. Ibid. p.18.
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