

## *Help a Child Be a Child*

The final sermon in the series:

*The God We See*

Mark 9.30-37

Children's Sabbath Celebration

September 20, 2009

Unless you become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of God, Jesus told his followers. He wasn't telling us to act playful or childish; he was telling us that until we recognize our utter reliance on God we'll never enter God's kingdom. But, once we drop the illusion that we can be worthy enough to merit God's grace, that's when we will experience God's grace, freely given...

- Children's Defense Fund (adapted)

"Many of the things we need can wait. The child cannot. Right now is the time his bones are being formed, his blood is being made, and his senses are being developed. To him we cannot answer 'Tomorrow,' his name is Today."

- Gabriela Mistral

*The Reading* They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; <sup>31</sup>for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again." <sup>32</sup>But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him. <sup>33</sup>Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" <sup>34</sup>But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. <sup>35</sup>He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." <sup>36</sup>Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, <sup>37</sup>"Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

What a dose of humble pie for those disciples! They're walking along arguing about how important they are, arguing over who is going to be first in the kingdom ...and Jesus throws them a curve. Jesus sees some children ...and he welcomes them. Some have argued that Jesus welcomed the children only to make a point. He was trying to put his disciples in their place. I think you will agree he did this all right! Nevertheless, it would be a mistake not to take Jesus seriously; discipleship and a childlike spirit are important to him, and so are these children

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who exemplify it. That being said, he is trying to teach them a lesson. But he has no interest in embarrassing or humiliating them; he is simply using the occasion to show them what discipleship is like; what is needed to enter the Kingdom of God. And it's simple, Jesus says, become like children.

Jesus has some significant things to say about children and a childlike attitude but as I mentioned in the worship preparation e-mail on Friday, I think everything Jesus has to say to us about children can be summarized in one expression, the title of today's sermon; help a child be a child. Depending on how you parse this statement, it offers us several gems of advice. The example I offered in the preparation for worship was to help a child *be...* at the very least, give children a chance to life, let children have a life. There are so many places in our world that are strife-torn and embroiled in anger and hatred and warfare, and where the death of children is looked upon simply as collateral damage. Children die in our world far too frequently and far too easily; not only from war, but from hunger, want, and disease. The bottom line is just this; let the children be. Give them a chance to live.

Or, how about this; help a child be a *child*. That is to say, allow our children be children for awhile before they have to be adults. Childhood is a disappearing critter in our society. Children grow up so fast; not nearly as fast as they think they do, but they still grow up very, very fast. We adults complain about our frantic schedules, our obligations and responsibilities; we often need to be in several places at once. But look at our children's schedules. They are, some of them, as full and frantic as ours. Our children need time to take their shoes off; they need time to scuff their knees, time to get dirty, time to eat too much candy. They need time just to be kids, not have the weight of the world on their shoulders, not have all of the peer pressures of Facebook and My Space and more. If we want to help our children, we can help them be children, give them some space; let them be kids for awhile before they grow up.

I remember some of the wonderful events from my childhood that I treasure to this day; simple things for the most part. I remember the milk man arriving on hot summer days when we'd been out playing baseball, riding bikes or whatever, and he let us jump up into the truck to grab a handful of ice from the cooler. We were just kids, building our coaster cars and riding

down what we called the big hill, falling off and scraping our arms and our elbows; we were just kids who got to enjoy a handful of ice on a hot day. Our kids deserve the same.

Jesus has some other wisdom to share with us in his statements about children; the first of which is - *help* a child. This was a radical statement in his day, reaching out to children and providing for their needs; because children in his day were little more than chattel, they were at the complete and arbitrary disposition of their parents. They had little if any standing in society. This is why the disciples are so surprised, not only because Jesus welcomes the children, but because he honors them just as he says God honors them. Children are important. Help a child. Children in Jesus' day had no rights, they had no protections. Not that God worries about who has rights. We like to assert our rights and entitlements, but this kind of talk goes right over God's head. God's not worried about our inalienable rights. God's not worried about any of our entitlements. God is only concerned with our *needs*; and with God we don't need rights. It's enough that we have needs; God will lovingly address them. God never looks at a child in need and tries to decide if she or he has the right to this or that or the other. God never looks at a child and asks if she or he is entitled to wholeness or peace. God could care less about rights. God sees needs and reaches out to fill those needs.

Children had no rights, no protections in Jesus' day; but should we choose to mold our lives on his, to adopt his attitude, our children won't need rights in our world, because we will simply identify the needs and do something about them. Help a child, Jesus says, because children are important.

Help a child, but in addition *be* a child, for this is the spirit that is welcomed in the kingdom of God. Jesus is not thumbing his nose at the disciples, he's not saying it takes one to know one; he simply underscores simple spiritual truth that we are all children in God's eyes, and that we all should exhibit a childlike spirit.

Jesus is not advising us to be childish, he's not inviting us to be irresponsible; rather, he's inviting us to see the world through the eyes of a child and oh, how wonderful that is. Do you remember? Do you remember waking up each day with the wonder and excitement of life that's brand new? The hymnist said, morning is broken like the first morning, and this is the way children wake up. The world is new. They understand intuitively God's promise that He is

about to do a new thing. Each and every day is a new thing. For goodness sake, even a puppy dog understands this! Our little Rosa Lee – our eight month old sheltie – greets us each morning with unbridled enthusiasm. Puppies have a childlike attitude, full of wonder, aware that every day is a gift. It's a gift to be cherished, a gift to be shared.

And children are so spontaneous, curious, and hungry to learn new things. Children are like sponges. They never assume they know everything. They are never concerned with being seen as the one who knows... the one who has all the answers. Children are always eager to learn something new. It's only when we get to be adults that we decide we've got everything just the way we like it, thank you very much. It's all right here in black and white, it's inscribed right here... if you don't understand it just ask me. We don't want things to change, we don't want to be sponges, we don't want to absorb anything new, broader, grander. Children do; children are open to any and all the surprises God has to offer.

Jesus is not instructing us to be childish. He is inviting us to recognize that every day is a gift, that everything we have, everything we are is a gift from God. This is what we need to live in the Kingdom of God, the recognition that we can't earn our way into God's love. We can't stand on our own feet strong and secure and able to conquer the world... we need God. We need God to hold us, we need God to love us, we need God to sit us down on His knee and say, it's going to be alright because you're mine. God's knee is not reserved for children under twelve; it is for all of us, whatever our age.

We are all children of God, and until we understand this we will never be able to help our children. We will, quite simply, never have the vision that's necessary to help our children, and we certainly will never have the generosity of spirit that's needed to help our children unless we recognize and realize our status as the children of God.

Anyone can identify needs. All you have to do is watch the news on any given day. It's easy to read the statistics of how many children are dying in warfare, how many children die of hunger every day, of how many children are stricken with horrible diseases. Anybody can recognize the needs that our children have, but only a child of God can see a vision of the whole. Only a child of God can see the parameters of a world in which the needs of our children are met, some glimpse, as it were, of what the Kingdom of God in its fullness will be like.

Even with the vision, however, even seeing the parameters of a fair and nurturing society, we would lack the generosity of spirit to share with the children were it not for the model God shows us in Jesus. Somewhere along the line we have to recognize that if life is a gift, if everything I have, if everything I am is a gift from God, then it's OK for God to share that gift with others as well. I don't have to hoard everything. I don't have to dig and push and pull and scrape and make sure I get my due; it's OK for God to be gracious to other children. Not as well dressed as mine, so what? Not as well fed, not as well behaved, so what? They're children, it's OK that God reach out to them through us. Become like children. Be childlike. Be open and curious and open and in so doing recognize God's loving embrace. Envision yourself sitting on God's knee and let the joy and generosity of that gift overflow your life into the lives of the children. Why? Because Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world.