



LAKWOOD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
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YOU'RE JUST A KID ... HOPEFULLY!
Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

Isn't it amazing what little kids can do? I don't know; maybe it's just grandparents who think so, but isn't it astonishing what children can do, and see, and hear, and say?



You've probably heard this story before, but quite a few years ago, an 18 wheeler was making its way through Iowa and the driver misjudged the height of his trailer while going underneath a bridge. Sure enough; half way through, the truck got stuck; its roof lodged into the overpass. The officials consternated for hours as to how to remove this rig, but then an eight-year-old boy suggested that they try letting the air out of the truck's tires. Now, why didn't the experts think of that?



During a time of drought in a Midwestern farm town, citizens were asked to come to a prayer service for rain, and they were asked to bring a tangible expression of their faith. One adult brought a bible, another brought a cross, and still another brought a picture of Jesus, walking on the water. But a little boy brought an umbrella. Why didn't the adults think of that?



And don't forget "The Emperor's New Clothes" ... it was the child among hundreds of adults who had the courage to tell Hans Christensen Andersen's king that he was naked!

Yup, children are amazing, even when they spill their milk, or dent the car with their bicycles, or dent the family car with their driving.

But the wit and wisdom of children shouldn't surprise us. Jesus makes us aware of it in our lectionary passage today. "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth," Jesus said, "because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants..." (Matthew 11:25) Apparently, at the beginning of time, God decided that some things in this world would only be grasped by small children and NOT by intelligent adults. And just a little later in Matthew's gospel, Jesus would one day say "Unless you become like children, you will never enter the Kingdom of God." (Matthew 18:3)



Actually this is kind of a confusing text ... thrown into the middle of a bunch of stuff that seems to be a whole lot more important for Matthew to be discussing with his readers. I guess we should have backed up to the beginning verses, where Jesus was talking about John the Baptist ... the prophet who wore funny clothes and ate grasshoppers ... and was one of the most misunderstood people of his time.

Jews in first century were actually looking for a prophet who could tell them about the coming of the Messiah ... but John didn't fit their stereotype of a theologian. He didn't have a seminary degree. He didn't wear typical clergy clothing (I've been accused of that when I wear shorts to the hospital). John's office was the Judean wilderness; his sanctuary was the banks of the Jordan River. And his MESSAGE was astonishing simple: believe in God, turn from your sins, and be baptized. There was NO list of religious rules to memorize, NO complicated rituals to follow, NO graduate-level courses to pass. Just "believe, repent, and be baptized." So most Jews rejected the message of John; they ridiculed and criticized him ... criticized him for being a strange sort of prophet.

Therefore, Jesus begins this 11th chapter of Matthew by chastising the Jews for their treatment of John. I can just hear him saying:

"You're like children who tease other children ... those who reject other kids for walking to the beat of a different drummer. You criticized John for reaching out to the nobodies of this world. He was speaking the truth about me, but God has hidden the truth from you and, instead, revealed it to little babies."

These little babies ... the "infants" Matthew refers to ... are the Gentiles, the non-Jews, the "Johnny-come-latelies" of this world. How could the Jews ... these faithful Jews; the chosen people of God ... NOT be "in the loop" when it comes to spiritual truth? The truth was right there in their midst, and they failed to see it because of pride ... it didn't conform to THEIR idea of religion.

And then they missed MORE good news.

Jesus talks to them about how simple their faith can actually be and that they don't have to carry around all that garbage anymore. You can give all that stuff to Jesus and go on with your lives. "Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest." (Matthew 11:28)



Back in Ohio at my church, I was counseling a young couple whom I had married about six years earlier. They were having some big time problems, bringing up stuff from the past, not letting it go. For a couple of weeks they kept pointing fingers; blaming each other; bringing up old complaints and hurts. I kept telling them they needed to let it go! Concentrate on the present and their future together.

Well, on their third visit with me they started in on the same old stuff. I put up my hand and said, "Wait a minute." I was prepared. I stepped out of my office and brought in an easel with some butcher paper on it. "Okay, I want you each to take a turn and write down all the crap that you've been bringing up ... you each get a turn." Man, they filled up those pages! "Alright, is that everything you can think of?" "Yep." I then pulled out a big trash bag from my desk and had them wad the pages up and stuff them inside. Then, I marched them down to the boiler room in the basement and in a far corner where no one would see, I had them stash the bag. Then I said, "If you ever want your garbage back again, you know where to find it. But today, you're walking out of here and leaving your garbage behind." (By the way, they are still together and doing great ... the wife is a friend on Facebook. That bag may still be stuffed in that corner of the boiler room.)

The LOAD of garbage that most Jews carried was their "religious rules," and the "guilt" for breaking them. I mentioned it in a sermon before ... they actually had 612 laws to follow; plus the Ten Commandments. They had rules about dressing, and cooking, and eating, and washing, and marrying and burying. Laws for working and laws for resting; laws for women, and different laws for men. Rules, rules, rules! And Jesus said: "If you're tired of carrying the weight of all these rules, come to me, where the rules are few and grace is abundant."

Some did; most didn't. But the ones who really understood Jesus' message were the infants, the newbies, the Gentiles, whose lives were littered with sin, but were uncluttered by religious rules.



Jesus started his teaching by saying: "But to what will I compare this generation?" If he were here TODAY, I wonder if he would start out in the very same way. Probably so, because aren't the religious people of THIS "generation" just as consumed by rules as those 2000 years ago? IS the measurement of your religion how well you keep the rules? Is THAT it? Then no wonder unchurched people run from us! They don't want a life of rules that people can't keep anyway. So when they actually HEAR the gospel of Jesus, it sounds like GOOD NEWS to them. Because they don't hear "DO THIS!" and "DON'T DO THAT!" What they hear is "Come to me, if you're tired of carrying your guilt and shame, and let ME carry it for you."

Now, if children can understand how this offer is a wonderful gift to sinners, then I wonder why we adult sinners are so stubborn about hanging on to the garbage of the past. Why do WE have such difficulty grasping a simple thing called "forgiveness"?

- ◆ Imagine how different the WORLD would be, if instead of harboring resentment and anger at our enemies, we just decided to forgive them.
- ◆ Imagine how different the CHURCH would look, if we stopped carrying grudges from previous generations, and accepted and loved others in spite of our differences.
- ◆ Imagine for a moment how the POLITICAL LANDSCAPE would change, if candidates refused to personally attack one another and instead, had simple conversations as to what each would do to make this a better city, state and nation.
- ◆ Imagine how peaceful LIFE would be, if we accepted unique and diverse people for the way they are, instead of being cruel to them until they become just like us.

I've just given you FOUR examples that are the natural qualities of children. And I believe this is, in part, what Jesus had in mind when he said that we must become like children. But instead, we raise our children to become like US ... judgmental, self-centered, sometimes hurtful, often angry, and always right. And I definitely think Jesus looks down on us and wonders "What IS it they don't understand about LOVE and GRACE?"



There's one more thing I need to say about the understanding of children, and it has to do with a funeral I did about a dozen years ago. It was a funeral for a friend in Akron who died from a blood clot that broke loose in his leg.

We were all together planning the funeral for Mib when I said, "Well, I think I have enough information to work up the service now. How about we say a prayer before I leave?" Mib's 6-year-old great granddaughter, Kaylee who had been fairly quiet throughout the planning, spoke up and said, "Can I say the prayer?" "Sure you can," I replied. This is what she prayed:

"Dear God; I am glad that Papa, Mib is with you,
but I'm sad because I will miss him."

So childlike. So simple. And so honest.

How do WE come to see life with fresh eyes like that?

How do WE get in the loop and understand things that make perfect sense to the simplest of minds, yet confound the wisest and most intelligent people of this world?

"Jesus said 'Unless you become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.'"

You're just a kid ... hopefully! Hopefully!

Amen and Amen.