

The Little Ones: What Children Show Us

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Deuteronomy 6:1-12, 20-25
Matthew 18:1-5

“Lord, when was it that we saw you as a child and welcomed you?” That’s the question, which comes to mind when we hear our gospel lesson. Lord, we were not among the shepherds who visited you on the night you were born in Bethlehem. We were not among the magi who brought gifts to you as our newborn king. We were not with the extraordinarily devout Simeon or Anna in the temple when you were presented there as an infant. Neither were we there when you were 12 years old, got separated from your parents and wound up in the temple amazing the religious leaders with your understanding and your answers. Lord, when was it that we saw you as a child and welcomed you? That is the question that would seem to precede the final verse of our gospel lesson when Jesus answers such a question: “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.”

It boggles my mind to seek to fathom such a claim! “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.” Does Jesus really mean that we can welcome the Redeemer of the world and the Lord of the church into our presence by welcoming a child? Which child? Any child? Jesus had called a child to put among his disciples when he told them that. The passage, in spite of how it is conveyed by some translations, doesn’t tell us if the child was a boy or a girl, tall or short, or what color hair or skin or eyes the child had. That lack of specificity about a particular child makes it sound like any child we welcome is one through whom we can welcome the presence of our Lord.

Let’s look a little deeper at what this form of the presence of the Lord might mean, for I’ve been around children enough to know that they aren’t representatives of Christ in that they are pure and sinless like Christ or are little angels among us. Quite the contrary. How much of their sinfulness is innate and how much is learned is questionable, but that it is present, is without question. However, even as we can learn from looking at Christ what God intends for humanity, so too can we learn it in another way when we see simple childish ways that reflect our adult foibles and can teach us about ourselves.

An example: any parent or child care provider or children’s Sunday school worker knows that young children tend to have difficulty sharing. It also becomes apparent quite quickly that things don’t work well when children don’t share. If we are in a frame of mind when we are with children that we can learn from them, then seeing the problems which result from their lack of sharing will raise questions about our lack of sharing in a society run by adults. We come up with sophisticated rationalizations why we don’t share food, power, goods and things to play with, but our experience with children can remind us that a lack of sharing leads to a lack of peace. We can learn about the blessings of sharing and many other lessons children can teach us if we open ourselves to welcoming these little ones who are Christ in our midst.

A second way children and youth can function as Christ’s own presence is through the probing questions they ask about the Christian faith and how we live it out. Throughout his ministry,

Christ asked probing questions: “Is it appropriate to heal on the Sabbath?” “Who do you say that I am?” “What do you want me to do for you?” Those who are young have a similar uncanny ability to ask us simple, basic, probing questions that push us to not only articulate our belief but analyze whether our faithfulness extends to and beyond our Sunday practices.

Our Old Testament lesson puts the faith community on notice that children will be asking questions about our beliefs and practices and encourages responses which interpret the story of God’s redeeming work in our lives. Such questions may come to us in the form of: “Why didn’t you help that woman?” “Where is Grandmom now that she is dead?” Is what so-and-so did wrong?” “Why can’t I see God?” To have to face such questions are a challenge that encourages us to grow in faith.

In addition, the very presence of children and youth calls us to question the priorities of our society which often does not take the existence of the vulnerable, impressionable young into consideration in its initiatives. The great commandment to love God, according to our Old Testament lesson, was given in order to be a blessing to the adults, their children and their children’s children. To live mindful of the youngest generation is to live in a way that is a blessing to all. Some of our Native American sisters and brothers have expressed that vision in the Great Law of the Iroquois Confederacy which states: “In our every deliberation, we must consider the impact of our decisions on the next seven generations.”

How would we use our natural resources, how would we care for God’s creation if the well-being of our children and our children’s children were given high consideration? How ought our behavior to change in every area of our lives as we realize that kids are watching? Is what our society makes widely available as entertainment that which benefits our children and even our children’s children? The very presence of children can be a moral force in how we shape society if we truly welcome their presence.

A third way children are a Christ-like presence to us is through their example of humble dependence. Jesus told his disciples, “Unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” Earlier I began to explore how we can grow through encounters with childish behavior, but this is a call for followers of Christ to be childlike. How so?

We get a clue about one desirable way to be childlike when Jesus talks about the humility of a child. There is little that children can do for themselves to care for themselves. They can’t provide their own food or shelter. As youth and adults, we move toward God’s reign when we learn all over again what it means to be deeply dependent on our Heavenly Parent. We fool ourselves by calling ourselves independent, for without the air, water, food, or materials for shelter that our trustworthy God provides, we are soon without life. We can learn to relate to our Creator and Provider through our children, and thus, truly live out our identity as children of God.

From what Jesus says, it sounds like he calls on us adults to combine in our lives the practices and ramifications of welcoming children and being childlike. To do so means getting down on a child’s level. Those who relate well to children will squat down to communicate with them, not

as someone above them in height, power, and importance, but instead as one who can come down to their level. During the time of Jesus' earthly ministry, children had the lowest status or rank in a stratified society. In light of the fact that children are by far the most likely age group to be poor in our society and have the least political and economic power of any age group, I believe things have not changed in that regard. We can approach the greatness that Christ talks about only by abandoning our propensity of lording it over others and putting ourselves in a place of solidarity with the least of these.

Many of you were present at the Hanging of the Green service last December. At the end of the service is the time when the children form the nativity scene. My daughter, Grace, was the youngest of four angels this last time. The assigned location on stage for the angels was over by the shepherds, but Angel Grace wanted to be up by Mary to see the baby Jesus. Her angel outfit was a little big on her, so the bottom hem was down over her shoes, resulting in quite a floundering in the hay as she attempted to arise and relocate. I was fully expecting to see a fallen angel. The other angels discretely discouraged her wandering, but wisely, they did not grab her, as she almost certainly would have rebelled. Finally, Grace got her feet under her and moved around to sit with Mary, wonderfully portrayed by her good friend Rachel Gerald. The congregation seemed to enjoy the innovative qualities of this version of the nativity as the choir sang softly in the background. But great fear struck this parent's heart when Mary picked up the doll baby Jesus, for I was convinced that we were heading for a tug-match and I have visions of the Christ child being dismembered right there in front of God and everybody. However, God is indeed gracious, for Mary and the littlest angel sitting next to her took turns holding the baby Jesus and the service came to a glorious end, at least for this nervous parent.

"Lord, when was it that we saw you as a child and welcomed you?" Grace and Rachel each simply wanted to be close to the baby Jesus and were happy to sit by her friend. There are vast ramifications that the gospel story begins with God coming to us as a child. If we truly welcome it, that presence has the divine giftedness and power to transform us. "Lord, when was it that we saw you as a child and welcomed you?" May it be today and every tomorrow so that welcoming spirit might be a blessing to all people. Thanks be unto God.

Amen.

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