

A Spiritual Spring for the Week

Rev. Dr. John V. Callahan Jr.

Sermon Text: Matthew 18:1-9

Sermon Title: "Become a Little Child" (A Journey through Matthew)

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If I were to preach this sermon years ago, I probably would have said something like this: "Jesus uses a child to illustrate a wonderful lesson, because we know what children are like. Children are so innocent, aren't they? They are young and pure, with little hearts and minds that are just waiting to learn. Children listen. They like to please their parents (and even their teachers), so they do the best they can to pay attention and do the right thing. Children know how to say Sorry. When something bad happens, they lower their heads and shed a tear, and feel remorse for what they did. Using a child to illustrate how to be a Christian is a wonderful approach that Jesus uses in Matthew 18."

Now, if I had preached that years ago, either I would have had young children (less than four years old) and have had no experience in dealing with them; or I would have had no children at all and have had no idea what I was talking about. Since I have lived in a household with one child for 15 years and another for 12 years, I can safely say that what I would have

preached years ago is totally bogus. Children are not as innocent as they appear. Some children get into more trouble than others. Certain children cannot help it, but if you put them in a room without parental supervision, they will get into everything. There will be broken dishes and food spilled all over the floor, and general chaos will be found in that room. Children listen when they want to. Some children won't listen until you give them a swat on the behind, or send them to their rooms for a ten-minute time-out. And then they won't be sorry for what they did until they are caught. Rarely will a child break something and immediately admit to doing it. Children usually blame their sisters or brothers, and they both get into a loud argument, claiming, "I didn't do it, I didn't do it." Somebody did it, but nobody is 'fessing up.

So, after saying all of that, it seems that Jesus' illustration of a child is falling apart. We know what children are like. We have had experience with them as parents and grandparents. What sort of little devil did Jesus pick from the crowd and use as an illustration on how we ought to behave?

Despite what we just said, Jesus' illustration is still clever. It is ingenious. This one child has the same characteristic that all children have. It doesn't

matter what the child's color, race, or religion might be, all of them are have this same thing. It doesn't matter what we just said about children, in general *all children across the board have the need to be instructed*. All children must be shown how to live in order to grow up and mature properly.

Children themselves don't know this. All that children want to do is play and goof around. When they become teenagers, they want to do their own thing and keep parents from breathing down their backs. All children know is immaturity. It isn't until a child becomes a young 20-year-old that he or she wakes up one day and realizes that mom and dad's parenting was helpful. One day they finally get on the phone and say, "Mom and Dad, thank you so much for telling me what to do, and never stopping with your words of love and care." Children don't know they need to be instructed, but all of them do.

Jesus doesn't present a child to a group of children, who have no idea what he is talking about. Jesus presents a child before adults, who know this young boy or girl needs to be instructed, trained in the ways he or she ought to go. And Jesus says, "Just as you know this child needs help, you too need to become like him or her. You have to be open and willing to be instructed, trained, helped by God your

Father in heaven.” This is why Jesus’ illustration is so ingenious.

Humble yourselves, Jesus says. Humble yourselves like little children. How many times does Jesus tell us to humble ourselves before the Lord and before others? If we know anything about the Latin language, we would know that the word *human* comes from the same word for *humus*, which is *ground* in Latin. Human beings came from the ground, the dirt – that is very biblical. Jesus tells a parable in which we should be like rich soil, soil that the farmer can work with; soil that receives the seed and lets it grow, so that a vast crop is produced. Humble yourselves like a little child, whose mind is workable. A child’s brain and heart are not set in their ways, yet. They do not hold on to certain convictions and beliefs that cannot be easily transformed. A child is like a clean, unworked field of rich soil. A child is ready (whether the child knows it or not) to learn, to grow, to be transformed.

Going back to that Latin word for ground, *humus*, and how it comes from the same word for *human*: We might think of the image from the prophet Isaiah, in which God our Father is described as a potter, a clay worker, and we are that clay. The best ground/dirt a

person could work with is clay. Clay comes from the earth, and it can be molded into anything you like: a vase, a cup, an ashtray. The clay cannot determine what it will be before the potter gets his hands on it. The clay cannot force the potter to make it into a vase or a cup. The clay cannot do anything to stop the potter from molding it. The clay is vulnerable, defenseless, at the mercy of the potter. It must move as the potter moves it. It gives itself over to where the strong fingers and thumbs twist it, curve it, stretch it, and smooth it.

A lump of clay is like a little child: impressionable, vulnerable, defenseless, at the mercy of others. Jesus presents a little child to a group of adults, and says, "Become as vulnerable as this child. Be as open to whatever the Father in heaven might present to you. Be molded like clay, like a little child. God the Father has much work to do in us, and he is always twisting, curving, stretching, and smoothing us out. Do not fight the movement of the Potter. Be like the clay, be like the child who is willing to trust the strong hands of our Father. He has much work to do in us, so we may grow, mature, and become perfect.

As we view ourselves as little children, we realize that others are children along with us. They too are

opening themselves to how God is influencing their lives. They too are willing to be vulnerable like us, defenseless, refusing to put up a fight, welcoming anything that God might do through them. As vulnerable children/clay, we realize that others are susceptible to anything, even things that are harmful.

A little child is so young and vulnerable that he or she could learn how to be good or learn how to be bad. It all depends who the child's parents are: are those parents good or bad? It depends on the other influences on a child: people living next door, kids at school, the neighborhood in general. Children pick up all sorts of things from all sorts of places, and not all of those things are good. So the hope is that, when we come in contact with those children, we might not do any harm. We want to be positive influences. We want them to understand good and bad, and shun the bad. Do the good, which will go well for them and everybody else. We don't want to damage a child in any way.

Jesus wants us to make sure that we do nothing to damage children, whether those children are 5-year-olds or 95-year-olds. "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin..."¹ These little ones are actually little ones, and all adults who

¹ Matthew 18:6.

humble themselves as little children. Jesus warns us to do no damage, cause no hurt toward others, because we all are in the process of growth, good growth, and nothing must interrupt that process.

This is so hard to do. We don't wake up in the morning wanting to hurt people; it just happens. Somebody says something to us that causes an angry reaction, and we spew fire and poison all over them. We see somebody doing something we don't like, and we have to tell them, and tell them in a loud and abusive way. We can't help it sometimes – it just happens in a blink of an eye. Jesus says such outbursts are worthy of receiving a millstone around the neck. A millstone is a huge, circular stone that is used to grind grains like wheat or corn into flour. Do you know how much a millstone weighs? Between 2000 to 5000 pounds. How would you like one of those things to be tied to your neck and thrown into the deep ocean? Nobody would survive that.

But then again, that might not be a bad idea. It would be nice if God would throw a millstone down on us from heaven every time we hurt somebody with callous, hateful words. Maybe a holy millstone around the neck would shut us up, and keep us from doing any more damage to another one of God's children. It is so hard not to do any damage. We don't plan to

hurt others.

God doesn't want to throw millstones on us. Jesus gives us a warning, telling us how the Father is in the world to save it, not to condemn it.² We should be in the world to help save it, too, not condemn it. It would be better to have a millstone and a deep lake stop us from doing harm, but before all of that: do not do any harm in the beginning. We are all children whom God the Father loves. We are impressionable. We are vulnerable. We put ourselves under the care of our God, and we look to God to shape us up.

So do not harm to others, Jesus says, and do no harm to ourselves. Do nothing to damage our hearts and minds. Jesus says, "If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away... If your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out and throw it away."³ If anything causes us to trip up and mess up, find every way to get rid of it. If anything causes us to slide away from God, then get rid of the slip-and-slide, and slide on back to God.

A young child is so impressionable, so easily influenced, that any drama that he or she faces as a young child may mess him or her up throughout adulthood. When a child is living in a dysfunctional

² Cf. John 3:16-17.

³ Matthew 18:8, 9.

family, in which nobody gets along, that child will learn how to argue and not love. He or she will learn how to fight and not resolve anything. When a child sees violence either on the movies or in the neighborhood, the child will become scared and nervous, and will not trust anybody. The child will be suspicious of everybody, and may learn how to manipulate people for their own desires. Young hearts and minds are so vulnerable to the bad that may influence them. So get rid of the bad. If we are to be like little children, get rid of the bad in our lives. Eliminate it. It does us no good.

We mentioned how we are like clay that the Potter can mold. That clay has no debris, no rocks or dirt, in it. It is only clay. Since we are the clay, all the trash and junk needs to be removed. There is no room for violence or arguments. There is no room for arrogance or pride. We as the clay are not concerned with who is the greatest. Remember the question in verse 1 that started this all.⁴ There is no room in the clay for that. Who is important, popular, good-looking, intelligent: None of that. Our Potter God will form us into the people he wants us to be. God will give us the shape that we should take on, a shape that is capable of sharing grace, compassion, kindness, and peace. If it

⁴ "At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, 'Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?'"

causes pain, cut it off. Better for it to go to Hell than for us to.

“Become like this child,” Jesus says with a little person standing in the midst of them. Becoming a little child is not a one-time thing. It is a never-ending process. It is a conversion, as Jesus puts it, a constant turning around from what is dead to what is alive. It is a day-to-day exchange, in which we give over what people think we ought to be to who God wants us to be. We exchange our desires for God’s desires, our wishes and wants for God’s wishes and wants. It is a battle sometimes to consciously be a child of God. It may be painful – it may not feel comfortable. It is the process that Jesus presents to us, if the kingdom of God is given to us as a prize. “Living the repentant, disciplined life [as a little child, as the Potter’s clay] really hurts.”⁵ The pleasure-seeking world is not going to make it easy for us. But we are willing to go through a little pain for today, because what we will gain for tomorrow is life, everlasting life.

⁵ Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: Volume 2, The Churchbook, Matthew 13-28*, 639.