

On Getting Little

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February 5, 2006

Matthew 18:1-5

Mark 10:13-16

Occasionally we sing to our daughter Anjali the song, “Jesus Loves the Little Children.”

I’m sure most of you know the words:

*Jesus loves the little children,
All the children of the world.
Red, yellow, brown, black and white,
They are precious in God’s sight.
Jesus loves the little children of the world.*

Our two gospel accounts this morning confirm that undeniable fact: Jesus loves the little children of the world. He took them up in his arms and laid his hands upon them and blessed them. Children flocked around Jesus because he loved them, because he cared for them, because he was gentle with them. It’s easy to imagine Jesus laughing and playing with these little ones. And Jesus saw something very important about children and his mission on earth. More than once he pointed to children as examples to teach adults about what it means to take him seriously, about what it means to enter the kingdom of God and be part of that kingdom.

On a par with his words to Nicodemus about being born again, Jesus tells his disciples that “unless you turn and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven,” and “whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.” Jesus was saying to his disciples, and to any of us who have ears to hear it, that to be part of God’s kingdom here on earth, we must become like children. In some way we must become like them. How is it that we must become like children to enter the kingdom of God?

Some of you know Bob and Jackie Sabath. Bob was one of the founders of Sojourners and Jackie joined us a couple of years later. And some of you may also know his son, Peter, who

is recently attending Hyattsville with his wife, Zsofia, and their two young boys, Sebi and Lebi. They are at Rolling Ridge this weekend celebrating Bob's birthday.

When Peter was very young, I would occasionally spend the weekend taking care of him when Bob and Jackie were out of town. Although I was always exhausted when his parents returned, Peter and I had great fun playing together and he would always bring out the child in me, the same way Anjali does these days.

I'm not sure Peter always felt as good about my substitute parenting as I did. One of the first times I was with him, he was still small enough to be given a bath in the kitchen sink. I misread his parent's note to put one drop of baby oil in the bath water and instead put in one whole capful. By the end of his bath, his body was a little grease ball with beads of water clinging to his oily skin. After several moments of looking at his little body, Peter got a quizzical look on his face and gazed up at me. He couldn't yet talk, but the expression on his face left little doubt as to what he was thinking: "My parents left me with you!?"

But it was a couple of years later that Peter taught me something that only a child can teach. I was substitute parenting again, this time on a week day, and I needed to get Peter off to our community day care center. I had gotten his shirt, pants and socks on and was trying to put on his shoes. He was a bit fidgety, so I decided to make small talk with him to slow him down a bit. I said, "Peter, I really like your shirt; it looks really nice." The comment seemed to accomplish its purpose because he calmed down and I easily got his shoes on. But I could see he had a serious look on his face and he was thinking about something and so I asked him, "What are you thinking, Peter"? In an almost somber tone, Peter replied, "Do you really like my shirt, Joe"? I assured him I did and then he responded to me with full seriousness, "Well, you can have it when you get little."

I was so startled, I just started laughing. The way he turned around in his mind the concept of growth, reversing it, imagining me getting littler and being able to fit into his shirt. It was only after I dropped him off at the day care center that the theological import of what he had

said sunk in. In his own imaginative, child-like way, Peter reminded me of the very thing that Jesus was telling his disciples, “Unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of God.”

But what is it that we are supposed to become? What is it about children that Jesus commanded us to emulate? Why, in the midst of so many very adult matters that he addressed, like peace and wealth and loving enemies and reconciliation, did Jesus tell us that we need to become like little children if we want to enter God’s reign? How do we go about “getting little,” as Peter imagined it? (And, in case you are wondering, I did ask Peter if I could use my experience with him in this sermon and he happily agreed and is looking forward to reading the sermon.)

It might be instructive to look at the poor in Jesus’ time and how they responded to him. I think the poor often did respond to him as children in the way he had hoped. With the Psalmist, Jesus said, “Out of the mouths of babes, you establish peace.” Another time he thanked God for hiding truth “from the wise and intelligent and revealing it to babes.” And the beatitude, “Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of God,” sounds very much like, “let the little children come to me, for to such belong the kingdom of God.” So what is it about the children and the poor that Jesus thought so important for us to emulate and become?

Two things come to my mind. The first is perhaps most obvious. They knew that they were needy. Jesus once stressed that “those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.” The poor who flocked to Jesus knew that was true and they knew they had need of him. It’s not that they in reality needed Jesus more than those who were not attracted to him; it’s simply that they knew it and the others didn’t. By analogy, the same is true for children. They instinctively know of their dependence upon parents to satisfy their basic needs and to grow.

But this sense of dependence, of being needy, we don’t like very much. It is a humbling experience. We like to think of ourselves as self-sufficient and capable human beings. We often define maturity and strength in terms of self-sufficiency than in a recognized need for someone

outside of ourselves. Humbling as that may be, it is what Jesus says we must be if we are to enter the kingdom. “Whoever humbles themselves like a child is the greatest in the kingdom of God.”

The second thing I want to mention is perhaps less obvious, but at least for me, it strikes at the heart of what I think Jesus is trying to say to us. Those who responded most to Jesus, the poor, saw the world and acted in it more out of what was simple and basic and true about their faith than what was complex and complicated and ambiguous. They hungered for Jesus and sought him out because he, unlike the scribes and Pharisees and elders, could cut through the fog and speak directly to their hearts about faith’s fundamentals, about what is true and pure and simple about belief in God and walking in God’s way. It is the same thing that the apostle Peter was saying in his first letter to the Asian churches when he exhorted them to “like new born babes, long for the pure milk of the word.”

I think children are similar, in their own way. They don’t know yet what to do with life’s complexities or even understand them. They act out of what is simple and direct and true. When I tried to explain to Anjali a couple of weeks ago why I joined our CPT friends protesting the military recruiting office in front of her former preschool, I could tell it just didn’t clearly register with her. But when I showed her a picture of us right near the playground she and her school mates played in, she smiled widely—she got that.

I’m not trying to romanticize children or the poor and neither did Jesus. Neither am I suggesting that the complexities and ambiguities around the intersection of the world and our faith are unreal or should be ignored. And I don’t think Jesus was either. There are issues and questions around us that are real and need to be faithfully addressed. The danger, though, is becoming so engrossed in the complexities and hard questions that what is basic and simple and true becomes lost, even eroded away. I don’t think it was by editorial accident that Mark placed this incident of Jesus and the children between a complex theological debate about marriage and divorce and the story of the rich you man who sought eternal life by trying to obey rules but could not bear the thought of giving up all he possessed and giving it to the poor. In the midst of

addressing those realities, Jesus said, “You must become like little children if you want to enter God’s reign.”

If Jesus were standing here among us this morning, I’m sure some of the questions foremost in our minds would involve a lot of things. How should we most faithfully respond to our government’s war in Iraq? How to most fully seek justice in the city? How do we most lovingly respond to our sisters and brothers in conference who reject our membership practice of receiving gay and lesbian members into our body and who now appear to seriously question the validity of the ordination and licensing vows of our four credentialed people? And many more questions we would love to ask Jesus and hear his response. I’m also sure that Jesus would understand the complexities and difficulties of those questions. He would no doubt have some very good counsel for us.

But I think he would do something else, too, something he would probably consider even more important. I think he would call our children down in front, those being dedicated this morning, those in the nursery, the fellowship hall and in the pews. He would place them before us, hold them, bless them, play with them and enjoy them. And then I think he would say to us, the rest of us, “Unless you turn and become like these children of yours, you will never enter the kingdom of God.”

And in saying that, he would be telling us to keep our faith rooted and steeped in that which is basic and simple and true about the gospel, to humble ourselves before God and trust God completely, to get little again, just like these our children.

I want to close with one last thought. Many years ago, when I was briefly in the role that Jim Rice now so expertly occupies, Managing Editor of *Sojourners*, I received a letter from one of our authors and a friend, Jim Forest. Jim served as Executive Director of the International Fellowship of Reconciliation and we had asked him to write an article for the magazine. Jim’s stationary always had something uniquely interesting that was drawn at the top. On this particular letter was the drawing of a child in a crib with an adult leaning over the crib looking

down intently at the child. The silent plea in the adult's gaze was recorded in the caption: "Tell me one again about God, I forget." Tell me once again about God, I forget.

The next time you look into the eyes of a child, let your gaze ask that child to tell you once again about God. Because you do forget.