

Faith of Our Children
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June 8, 2008

Mark 10:13-16
John 10:2-5,11-16

“Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.”

We have been taught that Jesus is saying that we must become child-like in our faith if we want to enter the kingdom. We have probably all heard sermons that make a distinction between childish and child-like faith. We preachers are also fond of saying that to be like child-like means we are to be innocent, naïve and trusting. But these explanations of what Jesus means have never quite satisfied me.

Add to this discontent, the complication of being Mennonite. We are committed to the Anabaptist practice of adult baptism, a clear rejection of naïve faith. George Blaurock and Conrad Grebel had good reason to insist on adult baptism. Baptism was used as a census tool for taxation purposes. Church membership and state citizenship were synonymous. Early Anabaptists maintained that baptism was more important than counting heads and registering citizens.

After 500 years we continue to teach and believe that children are not old enough to make mature decisions about following Jesus. Does that mean we don't teach children about God in Jesus? Of course not. We bless babies as we did this morning and commit ourselves as a congregation to help parents teach their children the way of Jesus. We are claiming, “it takes a village,” that the

children of the congregation are “our” children. Here at Hyattsville Mennonite we publish a list each fall of all the children of the congregation. The result is that many of us can imitate the good shepherd, calling each child by name. We give the first graders bible storybooks. As high schoolers enter the youth group we give them each a bible. And of course we have Sunday School where we teach our children bible stories and, as they get older, challenge them to interpret the bible for themselves.

Our hope and prayer is that by demonstrating the love of God and teaching our children about God’s work they will develop a relationship that eventually results in a personal decision to be baptized. But we might well ask, what kind of relationship do our children have with God until that decision is made?

Another peculiarity of Mennonites is our propensity to take *the words of Jesus* very seriously, almost literally. So what do we do with these words of Jesus about children and the kingdom? How do we handle this seeming discrepancy between our tradition that says children are too young to intentionally follow Jesus and Jesus’ words that we all must become like little children to receive the kingdom?

For hard questions about children and faith I turn to my friend, Catherine Maresca, the director at the Center for Children and Theology. Some of you know her; she has spoken in Adult Ed and she worshipped with us on this past Mother’s Day. She has made it her life’s work to observe children and

understand the theology they offer to adults. Through this she helps adults learn from children, even as they teach children.

Catherine's work and study center on the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, a religious curriculum that uses Montessori methods. One of the first lessons the youngest children receive (at age 2-3) is part of the gospel reading we heard this morning from John. This passage is so basic and comforting that even the youngest children understand it and grasp it immediately.

When the children receive the presentation of the scripture it is not only read but also enacted, as Wendy did this morning with another lesson from the Catechesis. After they have heard the scripture a few times they can tell the story over again themselves using the shepherd, the sheep and the sheepfold. Even before all the repetition many children grow to understand that Jesus is the shepherd and they are the sheep without being told. They understand that this means they are loved and protected, that Jesus is their friend and guardian. And they instinctively begin to have a relationship with this Jesus who loves them and keeps them safe.

This is in stark contrast to those first hearers of Jesus' words as recorded in John. Cecilia did not read the whole passage this morning. Further on in John 10 when Jesus has finished saying these things the listeners

19 ...were divided because of these words. ²⁰Many of them were saying, 'He has a demon and is out of his mind. Why listen to him?' ²¹Others were saying, 'These are not the words of one who has a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?'

As simple as it is for children, these adults just didn't get it. Or maybe they did get it, but they didn't like what they heard. It made them squirm. Eventually these listeners got so uncomfortable they thought it better that Jesus be killed.

Here at Hyattsville Mennonite we "let the children come" forward in every service. We have a time for children each Sunday when we help the children understand the teaching of the day. And at the end of the service we invite the children to bring their offerings forward.

Catherine Maresca reminds us that in the faith community it is not only children that learn from adults. Children can teach adults and contribute to our theology if we are attentive. We have learned this from our own children as we see them give their offerings with an open hand and joyful heart. In this way children lead us all to the kingdom of God.

Catherine writes that young children have at least "three characteristics that create their unique perspective of God: essentiality, wonder and joy." (Children and Theology, Occasional Papers from Center for Children and Theology, Vol. 1, no.1) These may sound strange to us — joy, wonder and essentiality. As descendents of the 16th Century reformation these are not gifts we prize highly. Are they even part of our experience?

Certainly we experience joy in our congregational life together. I would even argue that we are more joyful now than we were when I first came to this congregation in 1986. Some of us play volleyball and softball together, we eat great food together, we do dishes, we sing. We laugh, even in worship. We enjoy each other's company. Our life together is joyful and our children are an integral

part of that joy. The question from the child's perspective is how do we bring that joy to our relationship with God?

Wonder. That is a bit more unusual in our life together unless we are wondering about a building project or wondering about what the future may bring? But I imagine that Catherine is talking about wonder and awe. The kind of wonder you feel when you see a large tree felled by a storm. Or the awe you have when you walk into a cathedral and the light is shining through the massive stained glass windows and there is a rainbow right across the face of Jesus.

The wonder we experience together might happen in music. The wonder of the whole congregation singing together with concentrated, hushed voices — and when we stop the presence of the Holy Spirit is palpable.

I imagine though that wonder is not a big part of our individual lives or our congregational life. It is true that we allow more questions here than in many churches, but we still prize certainty and conviction. Most of us want things in order. We are careful and responsible and sometimes that can squeeze out awe.

A third gift that Catherine says children bring as a unique perspective on God is essentiality. I had to call Catherine and ask her what that is. Essentiality, in this regard, is a term used by Sofia Cavalletti, the woman who has observed children for over 50 years and developed the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd. What Cavalletti discovered was that the youngest children have the ability to get to the heart of what is important.

Over the years Cavalletti offered many lessons to the children from the bible and about her own tradition of Catholicism. Cavalletti observed that the

young children (and here we mean up through age 6) returned again and again to things that are at the heart of our faith. The good shepherd; the bread and wine; the parables that teach us about what the kingdom is like; the pearl; the mustard seed. The children ignored the things that were not essential and were drawn to the materials that depicted what is fundamental and vital to faith.

For Cavalletti and Maresca and the children that they observe, the essential thing is the relationship God has with each one of us. It is not doctrine and dogma, it is not polity, guidelines or boundaries. The heart of faith is relationship with God.

I am continually tempted to try and translate the concepts from the catechesis from Catholicism to Anabaptism. But no translation is needed. The essentials are just that essential, very basic.

So what does it look like for children to have this experience and relationship with the Divine? Let's listen to some examples from the blog of the Center for Children and Theology (<http://cctheo.blogspot.com/>):

A catechist was presenting the Good Shepherd parable to four-year-old Oliver, a child often known as the class clown of the atrium. (The atrium is the space where the children receive catechesis lessons.)

As they read the Scripture, Oliver moved the figures. At the end, he chose not to move the sheep back to the Good Shepherd. Then he took one sheep from the group and moved it away from the others, and then into the sheepfold, alone. The catechist asked him, "...this sheep is not with the others?" He said, "The sheep doesn't want to be with the others right now." He thought a moment

and added, "But the Good Shepherd is keeping his eye on him anyway." The catechist said, "The Good Shepherd and these sheep may be very far away — can he see the sheep still?" He answered, "Yes."

Later, Oliver moved all the other sheep into the fold to join the one. He looked at the Good Shepherd and said, "His face is beautiful. The sheep like to look at him ... he has a beautiful face."

There we have it, joy, wonder, beauty, essentiality. As silly as Oliver the class clown may be sometimes he understands the shepherd and their relationship with each other.

Hear this example from a mother of a much younger child whose family is involved with the Catechesis:

Kristina (5th grade), Kyle (18 months) and I were sitting on Kristina's bed. Kyle was holding a small icon picture of the Good Shepherd, which had just fallen from where it had been hanging in our hallway. As far as I know, Kyle had never seen it before. Kristina pointed to the Good Shepherd and said "Who is this, Kyle?" To which he responded "Mommy." I then pointed to the sheep, and asked, "Who is this?" "Baby," he answered.

A short while later, my husband wanted to show us all how well Kyle knew all our names. He proceeded to ask him, "Where's Kristina?" "Where's Eric...Eliza...Mommy... Daddy?" To which Kyle pointed appropriately in turn. When asked "Where is Kyle?," he pointed to the sheep in the Good Shepherd picture he was still holding and said, "Me." I had never talked to him about the Good Shepherd.

The mother further observes — How vividly we see the deep spiritual connection between the Good Shepherd and the child that exists and is beyond our understanding.

While these are beautiful and fascinating stories, we intellectuals might well ask if this kind of relationship with God is so personal as to be irrelevant in the world? Perhaps for some adults, but not for the child. You see we are talking about young children for whom, developmentally, relationship is all, for whom personal connection is what it means to be alive and healthy. Being in relationship with God through Jesus is the way for children to know God at this age.

And as children grow so does their understanding.

During a conversation with a group of 9- to 12-year-olds about intercessions and petition, a catechist asked, "Why, if God loves us as you have said, and knows us and knows what we need AND how to give it to us — why then do we need to pray for ourselves and one another?" (The catechist was very honestly asking this question of the students, because she said it had puzzled her for years.)

Ursula, age 10, said, "If I give you the gift of my pencil (and here she held out her pencil to the catechist), the gift is not complete until you take it. That's what prayer is: taking the gift God is holding out to you."

It has been noted (Gretchen Wolff Pritchard — *Offering the Gospel to Children*, p.5) that in biblical stories it is the youngest son that inherits the wealth, sometimes by trickery, sometimes by what seems to be God's design.

If the youngest receive the inheritance what does that mean for us who like to think we are in charge of the church? What does that mean for adult spirituality?

Wonder, joy, essentiality. Who is truly receiving the kingdom of heaven?

“Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” ¹⁶And Jesus took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.