

Genesis 2:18-24
Psalm 8
Hebrews 1:1-4
Mark 10:1-16

Sermon for 10/6/2024

THE WAY WE WERE

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Summary: Jesus loves the little children

The gospel passage for today has two reports of what Jesus taught, and they were almost certainly offered by Jesus on different occasions, to deal with separate matters. The first has to do with the sanctity of marriage, and the second records an occasion when Jesus, once again, points to children as examples which he urges his disciples to emulate. Our focus today will be on the second of these two instructions, partly because what Jesus has to say about divorce raises so many questions, at least in my mind, that I wonder whether we would need to know more about that missing context in order to follow his thinking, but mostly because his remarks about children fit into a theme we've been pursuing the last few weeks. You may remember that a couple of weeks back we spoke about a child's innocence, and a few weeks before that about a child's faith. We'll bring that discussion to a close today by thinking a little about a child's character.

It's important to take note in the beginning that Jesus is specifically referring to small children. Our passage records a time when little children were brought to him that he might bless them. Why were little children being brought to him? Because it was a common practice in Israel at the time for mothers to wish their children to be blessed by a great and distinguished Rabbi. Usually they brought their children to such a person on their first birthday. And our passage confirms that at its conclusion, when it says Jesus picked them up and put them in the crook of his arm. These were little, young children, and from the several cases in which Jesus holds up little children as ideals, it seems clear that he regarded every newborn child as manifesting a perfect idea of God's, and that there were few sins more grievous than deflecting a child away from the path towards the fulfillment of that idea.

Then He said to the disciples on another occasion: "It is impossible that no ^[a]offenses should come, but woe *to him* through whom they do come! ² It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were thrown into the sea, than that he should ^[b]offend one of these little ones. (Luke 17: 1-2)

As an aside, the picture offered by this passage also tells us something about the personal character of Jesus himself, if we read between the lines. Remember when it happened. Mark tells us that it happened when Jesus came into the hill country of Judea. That means that it happened when Jesus had completed his ministry in Galilee, and was now on his way to the final destination in Jerusalem.

That is to say, Jesus was on his way to the Cross, and he knew it. He was now living and teaching in the looming shadow of the Cross, and this terrible destination can never have been far from his mind. Yet even then he had time for the children. Even with such a prospect in view, he still had time to take the children in his arms, to smile into their faces, and maybe even play with them a while.

And surely that tells us a great deal about what Jesus was like as a person. It tells us that he was the kind of person – unlike yours truly, I'm forced to admit – who cared for little children, and for whom children cared. He could not have been a stern and gloomy and joyless person: little children don't warm to people like that. There must have been a kindly sunshine on him. He must have smiled easily and laughed affectionately. This lovely little incident throws a warm light on the kind of human personality Jesus must have had.

“Of such,” Jesus says at the end of our passage, “is the Kingdom of God,” and we remember another occasion when Jesus used the same expression. In the very first beatitude, recorded by Matthews Gospel, Jesus said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for of such is the Kingdom of Heaven.” Here then, in the little child, we have Christ's own illustration of what he was referring to in that foundational beatitude.

So let's think about some of the qualities of character of little children.

First, there is the child's humility. Some children of course, as they grow older, develop the quality of exhibitionism, but when that happens, it's almost always a product of misguided adult treatment. Younger children are ordinarily embarrassed by prominence and publicity. The younger child has not yet learned from the adults around to think of himself in terms of place and pride and prestige. He has not yet learned to appreciate the importance of himself. He is not motivated by the desire to stand out from others. He is self-satisfied in the good sense, in the sense of finding happiness and contentment in who he is, rather than how he outshines those around him.

And there is a lesson here for all of us. Too many Christians pride themselves on their moral and religious superiority over others. Theirs is a pride of comparison; their sense of self-worth is founded on contrasting themselves with others, while the true Christian spirit looks only towards God for approval, and only to his or her own past for comparison, in the never ending quest to find appreciation, not in the eyes of others, but in the eyes of God alone.

And second, that kind of innocent humility is related to the little child's native obedience. Older children, of course, are often disobedient, but the little child's first instinct is always to obey his parents. He or she has not yet acquired the false independence that separates people from each other and from God.

Milton's Satan in **Paradise Lost** famously said *I would rather rule in Hell than serve in Heaven*, but we cannot imagine a little child saying or thinking such a demonic thought, even if the child had the vocabulary to do so.

Christian obedience is not a sacrifice of independence; it's a naive and uncomplicated acceptance of the reality and authority of God's love for us. A little child isn't being subservient when she takes her mother's hand before crossing the street; she's simply accepting with uncomplicated trust her mother's loving guidance. The Christian isn't following orders when he follows Christ; he's simply accepting Christ's destination as his own, and welcoming the guidance.

And third, little children are innately trusting of their parents.

We've all seen examples of this trust. One I've used before is of a big brute of a guy I saw pushing a grocery cart up the aisle at Walmart. He was overweight and had long greasy hair and a three day growth of beard, wearing baggy camouflage shorts and a muscle shirt that showed his hairy armpits. His arms themselves were covered with nasty tattoos featuring skulls and flames and barbed wire and goodness knows what else. I didn't want to stare too much for fear of giving offense, because he basically looked like an enforcer for a Hell's Angels gang.

But sitting right in front of him in the shopping cart was a sweet little blonde-haired girl in a cheap, shapeless dress, looking happily around her, as comfortable and self-satisfied as Cleopatra on her royal barge cruising down the Nile.

There's a time in every little child's life when she trusts that her mother or father knows everything and is always right and will always keep her safe and will never

leave her. She doesn't see the tattoos and the greasy hair and the gross armpits; or rather, she's seen them all through the prism of an infinite trust. She doesn't see as the world sees; she sees as love sees.

And there again is the lesson for all of us. The Pharisees and the Sadducee and the Romans looked at Jesus and they saw an unkempt, impoverished, arrogant, blasphemous blowhard from the boondocks; the disciples looked at Jesus, and they saw a teacher, a sustainer, and eventually the Son of the living God.

The Christian sees with the eyes of faith, which are the eyes of trust. That little girl in the shopping cart will eventually grow up, and may even come to be embarrassed by her father, perhaps even to distrust him. But for that brief trip up the aisle of a Walmart in the shopping cart, she still embodies the ideal Christ is looking for in his followers, the ideal of trust in Him.

And finally for this morning, let's not forget that little children have short memories. They haven't yet learned to bear grudges and nourish bitterness. The child who is crying one moment is laughing the next. They're resilient in their innocence, if I may put it that way; or to put it another way, they are the embodiment of forgiveness.

All these qualities of little children that we've spoken of today are, I think, at least some of the reasons Our Lord so often held them up as models towards which we, as Christians, are instructed to aspire, as the closest examples our fallen

human nature provides of the perfect love that St. Paul once so beautifully described:

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. 5It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. 6Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. 7It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. 8Love never fails. (1 Corinthians 13: 4-8)

Such are little children. And perhaps that helps us to understand why Jesus said elsewhere:

“Unless you become as little children you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven.” (Matt. 18: 3)

And so our prayer for this morning, heavenly Father, is that, as Christians, we may reacquire the humility, the obedience, the trust, and the short memory of little children, because Jesus loved the little children, and we pray in His name.