

Date: June 28, 2009

Title: We're Supposed to Be Like Children?

Jesus Blesses Little Children

¹³ Then little children were being brought to him in order that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples spoke sternly to those who brought them; ¹⁴ but Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs." ¹⁵ And he laid his hands on them and went on his way. Matt 19:13-15 (NRSV)

Later today, we are going to begin our Vacation Bible School. Vacation Bible School is one of those times when we decide to gather together for the sake of our children and give them one week of intense learning and singing and praying and playing... Why do we do this? Is it just so the parents can have four nights off without children, or is there another reason?

I may have told many of you the story of how Debbie came to me after we had been married for several years and said, "I think it's time for us to start our family." Now that is a pretty big statement for a young man to hear. Yes, we had been married five years already. Yes, I had graduated from college, yes, we were buying a house and yes, we did both have jobs. But as I stood there considering what she had just said, I could see my independence vanishing before my eyes; sort of like watching a helium balloon get smaller and smaller as it rises into the sky never to be seen again. I remember questioning her as to whether she really wanted to bring children into our lives. I asked something like, "Debbie are you sure you want to have kids right now? You know they will change everything?" To which she replied, "No they won't. If we have a baby, we will simply bring the child along with us where ever we go. It can't be that different from what we are currently doing."

Now, of course any of you who have spent any time raising children or being around them will know that you don't just live your life the same after children as you do before children. I was pretty sure that bringing a child into our little family would explode our lives and pretty clearly, on this difference of opinion, I was right, every aspect of our lives began to change drastically the day we brought that little bundle of joy home from the hospital.

She was:

- precious;
- she was tiny;
- she was stubborn,
- she was demanding;
- she was beautiful,
- she was mysterious,
- at times she was loud,
- other times quiet,
- she was hungry, (for food and for affection)
- and she was wet and messy a great deal of the time and expected someone to come take care of that for her.

And throughout those first early days of our daughter's life, the thing that amazed me more than anything else was the fact that she was never a pet. Emily was from the first moment I laid eyes on her, a human being; not just because she looked so much like a human being, but rather because she had a personality and a presence that let us know that she may be small, but she was very definitely a person and she demanded to be treated like a person. And when I looked into those deep blue eyes I could see God's reflection so clearly it would nearly take my breath away.

Now, my guess is that my two children are not the only two children who had a distinctive personality from day one. I have only raised the two, but I think that this is pretty universal when it comes to raising children.

But as universal as it is, I think that many times children are treated like pets rather than human beings. I mean, that is sort of what the disciples were doing in our first scripture, isn't it. The parents were bringing their children to be blessed by this amazing man of God and the disciples were trying to protect Jesus from the little rug-rats. Can't you just see the disciples telling the parents to leave the teacher alone?

"I'm sorry kids, this here is the newly discovered messiah. He's going to set us free from the tyranny of the Roman occupiers. He is going to be the greatest king we have ever had in this country. You can't expect a great man like this to take from his busy schedule to bless a few pesky children." Can't you just see them puffing themselves up telling the parents that their Messiah was far too important to spend his energy on... *children!*

But then Jesus turns it all around and tells the disciples that in the Kingdom of God there is no place for their prideful categorization of people no matter how small and socially insignificant those people might seem to be. Jesus actually lifts the children up and uses them as the standard for Kingdom of God membership. This must have seemed strange to the disciples. This might seem a little strange to us too because we know that children are not always on their best behavior. Sometimes they scream and cry when life doesn't go their way. Other times they embarrass their parents. I've known a few children including my own that seemed to have a knack for doing the exact opposite of what they were told. But there are also some other characteristics that we associate with children too, are there not?

I know that there are probably too many ways to count how children are examples of how Kingdom of God people should be, but I would like to mention four characteristics of children that might help us understand why Jesus used them as a standard by which we should judge our own readiness for Kingdom of God living.

1. First, children seem to have an openness about them that draws us in to their lives. Unless they have been injured or abused in some fashion, children are amazed at the world. They see things with a fresh perspective that reminds us of what a miracle life really is when you don't simply take it for granted. Even something as simple as a ride on an elevator can be cause for wonder. I

remember when Emily accompanied us on an elevator ride from the first floor of a department store to the second. From her perspective we walked from a big room filled with all kinds of stuff into a little room, stood there for a few seconds and then walked out of the little room back into the big room to find that all the stuff had been changed. With awe and wonder she said, "It's all different." Leave it to a child to remind us how amazing even the most ordinary of things can be.

2. Children also have innocence about them and that innocence often leads to honesty. Many of you may remember the part of Art Linkletter's show called *Kids Say the Darndest Things*. In one of his interviews a five year-old said he would like to advertise something on TV. When Mr. Linkletter asked what the boy's product was he said,
 - "I want to sell my sister for half price...that's fifty cents!"
 - "What would you do with the money?" continued Mr. Linkletter.
 - "Buy a baby brother that'd be some fun for a change."
 - "Where would you buy him?"
 - "From my mother, of course. She is the one who produces them all."

Or, there was another child who had a secret. When Mr. Linkletter asked what the secret was he said, "I think next Tuesday my mom and dad are going to get married."

These statements by the children conjure up all kinds of images, but we are willing to allow for the child's innocence as they don't know just what they are saying.

This innocence works when you say things to a child also. They usually take what you say at face value without a lot of reading between the lines. When we adults 'read between the lines' a lot of times we read things wrong, which can be extremely detrimental to our relationships and our self-esteem.

3. Children are dependent. In their earliest years, children are dependent upon adults for everything but the air they breathe. Even as they get older and are able to get food out of the refrigerator, they are still not able to earn the money to buy the food to put in the refrigerator. They depend upon adults and older siblings to take care of things they cannot take care of. Of course we want our children to grow up to get a job and to take care of their basic needs, but I think that most of us strive for a little too much independence. What we really need in the Kingdom of God and in our lives is *interdependence*. And while interdependence is not the same as dependence, it seems to me that we independent adults must humble ourselves like children and become more dependent in order for us to become more interdependent.

How many of you adults like to depend on others to meet your needs? Not too many hands went up just then. And I have to tell you I am right there with you. I don't like to depend on anyone for anything. Of course I do, though – we all do.

Our entire economy is based upon the inter-dependence of one person on another. We depend upon people at the electric company to provide our electricity. We depend upon the truck drivers and the storeowners to carry the food and clothing we need. Inter-dependence is a necessary component of our economy and it is also a necessary component of the Kingdom of God. The only difference is that in our economy we use money to pay for what we get which gives us the illusion that we are not really dependent upon people because we are paying them. If I have money in my bank account or as it is in these strange days; available credit on my credit card, I can get people to do what I want them to. But they do what I want them to not out of a sense of relationship or out of love but because I have what they want and I will give it to them if they do what I want. Children are not this way. Their needs are met because someone loves them enough to care for them. I think that the reason we don't like to depend on others is because we are afraid that if it comes right down to it, no one will love me enough to want to care for me. Children don't have any choice. They have to depend upon others.

4. There are many other characteristics of children, but one of the most important when it comes to Kingdom living is their ability to love unconditionally. Children are amazing in that they love us – warts and all. Now, I realize that not all children love their parents unconditionally, but unless there is some deep psychological or physiological reason, nearly every child loves their parents no matter how messed up they are. I know of many children who loved and adored their parents even though their parents were far less than perfect.

So, there you have four out of maybe a dozen reasons children make good examples for the Kingdom of God; four reasons Jesus may have told his disciples that they must be like little children if they are to enter the Kingdom of God. So, I guess that about wraps it up for us then. All we need to do is to go out and act childish and everything will be fine...

Well, maybe it's not quite that simple.

It's not quite that simple because there are reasons we don't act like children.

1. We have been open and excited about the world, but somewhere along the way life has turned a little boring and seems to have no purpose.
2. It seems that the more exposure we have to life and it's mean and nasty aspects, the more it challenges our innocence.
3. We have tried to depend on other people and they have let us down.
4. And loving unconditionally is fine in the general sense, but by the time we have reached adulthood (when ever that is) most of us have met people that are almost impossible to love.

We don't act like children because life has happened to us and we have responded and reacted. We have learned many things on our way to adulthood.

- We have learned how to hold a grudge and how to nurse it.

- We have learned how to judge other people.
- We have learned how to form opinions without knowing the whole truth.
- We have felt the sting of disappointment and felt the cost of betrayal.
- We have been hit by others and followed the impulse to hit back.
- We have made decisions about how life is and we have developed strategies to cope with the really tough parts
- and in the process we have sinned against each other and against God.

And if we are blessed, one day we wake up and realize that all of the strategies and resentments; all the judgments and regrets; are just not working for us. We wake up and ask Jesus to help us figure out a better way. And he says to us, *“I know what you really need and desire. It’s the Kingdom of God. Not all this other stuff that you have been chasing. It is the Kingdom of God that you want and if you really want it, you will have to learn to be like a child again.”*

And for a while we say “No way! I have no intention of returning to my innocent, open, dependent and loving, stage. I have no intention of learning how to return to that place that makes me so vulnerable.”

But then, when we see how vulnerable Jesus made himself and when we see how he commands us to do likewise we begin the process of learning to be open and honest and loving and dependent again.

And you know why we teach these children about Jesus in VBS and children’s church and Sunday school? We teach them because we know that eventually they are going to learn how to be adults and they will let go of their innocence and they will be less open and they will learn to be so independent that their relationships suffer and they will learn first hand about those who are hard to love and they will begin to set conditions for their love.... just like we adults do.

And then, if they are blessed, they will look at their lives and find that they are tired of the stress and the struggle and they will want to know how to do it better. And do you know what I hope they will learn here. I hope that even if they don’t learn anything else, the children that are in our congregation will learn to trust Jesus. So that when they decide that they want to live a better life, they will remember how they learned to trust Jesus and they will be a part of a church that will help them learn how to be more open and honest, more interdependent and loving... you know, like children.