Like a Child

Matthew 18:3
Timothy J. Mooney
Congregational Church of Christ in Buena Vista,
10:00am, January 5, 2025

"When I was a child I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult I put an end to childish ways." (I Cor. 13:11)

"We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ..." (Eph. 4:14-15)

The Apostle Paul names and invites us to actively pursue the spiritual task of life: grow up, mature, leave behind childish things, and become responsible people of faith. These words have served as true north, emotionally and intellectually, for adult Christian education and spiritual formation. Growth and maturity are the operative words, powerful organic metaphors that are the example and goal of the fully-formed soul of faith.

When I hear these words I immediately measure myself against the qualities of Christian maturity I am called to exhibit: peace, patience, kindness, temperance, goodness, gentleness, fidelity, love, joy, self-control, knowledge, wisdom. I sit taller in my chair and comb my hair (what's left) into place. I display a serious demeanor and call forth my pragmatic best. No more funny business. My internal life puts on a suit and tie. "I put an end to childish ways." It's time to be an adult.

How odd it is, then, to hear Jesus strongly recommend the opposite. "Unless you change and become like a child you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." What are we to make of this? Is this just a matter of semantics? Is it a cute way of saying be an adult?

("Change" – metanoia – go beyond your mind; it challenges the assumption that growth is progression, climbing high to a summit. Another way to see this is to it invites us to strip off all the layers of the wishes/demands of parents, friends, culture, and return to who were at our birth, and will always be underneath everything – a child of God. Image of Michaelangelo who said he was setting free the image of what was buried in the stone by removing the stone that was no longer needed.)

I don't think so. Jesus' sayings and parables are eye-popping reversals of conventional wisdom. His words suggest that the common understanding of the mature spiritual life needs to be overturned.

"Become like a child," borders on a revolution. It's a figure-ground shift, a slap in the face,

a wake-up call. Just like the parable of the generous land-owner who paid those who worked one hour the same as those who had worked all day. Jesus is asking us to pay attention: the Kingdom of God works off of radical grace, and different values. The Apostle Paul says, "Grow up," but is Jesus saying, "Grow down?" De-mature? Regress? What in heaven's name does Jesus have in mind?

We will have the time this month to explore what Jesus has in mind, when we dive into my book, "Like a Child: Restoring the Awe, Wonder, Joy and Resiliency of the Human Spirit." Donna, are there any books left? If not, they can be purchased online at Amazon.

"Become like a child." What do you think? What did Jesus have in mind? What immediately comes to mind? *Inexperienced; vulnerability; uninhibited, free, spontaneous; independent and dependent; innocent; trusting; hopeful, optimistic; humorous, full of laughter; forthright tactfulness; tantrums, whining, stubborn; present, in the moment; awe-filled.* We will explore much of this together.

But today let me offer an alternative way of looking at spiritual growth. It's usually seen as a gradual accumulation of insight, wisdom, and maturation. It's about ascension, climbing, acquiring lessons, and assimilating learnings. It's adding arrows to your quiver of spiritual weapons. There is a distinct emphasis on "adding more." But what if spiritual growth is more of an emptying?

In early childhood, from our parents and the culture around us, all of us learn – not cognitively, but existentially – what is welcomed, what is not welcomed, what is not wanted, and is even punishable. Our need in those formative years is to be accepted, loved, belong, and we learn to bury the behaviors and emotions not welcomed, and display, demonstrate, become what is approved. And we get very good at this. What if spiritual maturity is letting go, unlearning, emptying ourselves of the masks we have worn to be accepted, and let who we really are come to life? Rilke puts it so well in one of his poems.

> No one lives his life.
> Disguised since childhood,
> Hazardly assembled from voices and fears and little pleasures,
> We come of age as masks.
> Our true face never speaks.
>
> Somewhere there must be storehouses where all these lives are laid away,
> Like suits of armor or old carriages or clothes hanging limply on the walls.
> Maybe all paths lead there,
> To the repository of unlived things.

Maybe it's not adding more, but it is getting out from under what we adopted to be

accepted, coming out from behind the masks and the roles we adopted in order to belong. Helen Luke suggests that spiritual growth, "is not a discovery of some new thing; it is a long and painful return to that which has always been." And what have we always been – a child of God.

Mark Nepo puts it this way.

"Each person is born with an unencumbered spot – free of expectation and regret, free of ambition and embarrassment, free of fear and worry – an umbilical spot of grace *where we were each first touched by God.* It is this spot of grace that issues peace. Psychologists call this spot the Psyche, theologians call it the Soul, Jung called it the Seat of the Unconscious, Hindu masters call it Atman, Buddhists call it Dharma, Rilke calls in inwardness, Sufis call it Qalb, and Jesus calls it Love.

To know this spot of Inwardness is to know who we are, not by surface markers of identity, not by where we work or what we wear, or how we like to be addressed, *but by feeling our place in relation to the Infinite by inhabiting it*. This is a hard lifelong task, *for the nature of becoming is a constant filming over of where we begin, while the nature of being is a constant erosion of what is not essential. Each of us lives in the midst of the ongoing tension, growing tarnished or covered over, only to be worn back to that incorruptible spot of grace at our core.*

When the film is worn through, we have moments of enlightenment, moments of wholeness, moments of satori, as the Zen sages term it, moments of clear living when inner meets outer, moments of full integrity of being, moments of complete Oneness. And whether the film is a veil of culture, of memory, of mental or religious training, of trauma or sophistication, the removal of that film and the restoration of that timeless spot of grace is the goal of all therapy and education.

Regardless of subject matter, this is the only thing worth teaching: how to uncover that original center and how to live there once restored. We call the filming over a deadening of heart, and the process of return, whether brought about through suffering or love, is how we unlearn our way back to God."

Nepo says that this "unlearning," if you will, is the goal of education. Education is often seen as opening up students' heads and pouring in information and hopefully wisdom. But the Latin meaning of education is "to lead out." In other words, education is bringing forth what is already in us; releasing what is there. It might be that becoming like a child, means to reclaim those parts of us that we repressed in order to get along in our families, in school, in the world.

Growing up I was mostly a good kid, living up to the expectations of parents, church, teachers. But I learned from my father, that in his eyes, I was "a disappointment." The A's I'd bring home on my report card were expected results, but the B's got all the attention because they were not A's. In church my buddy Jay and I would start giggling about something, and Dad would give me a scalp-searing glare from the choir and sometimes

would come down out of the choir to sit between Jay and I and pinch the inside of my leg so hard, I would almost cry. In the car ride home, he said, “You’re going to get a spanking.” And I’d live in fear of when that spanking would happen. In my late 20’s I finally asked my parents why didn’t you come to my basketball games or swim meets. They said, “We were very busy with church responsibilities, and we didn’t want you to become full of yourself.” Unlearning those things has been a major challenge for me and it’s ongoing, and very helpful.

“Unless you change and become like a child you will never enter the Kingdom of God,” suggests that we might not need to learn more, but to unlearn what has smothered who God has gifted us to be.

I hope you will explore over these next few weeks what Jesus meant. Become like a child yourself. Do things a child would do; do what you used to do when you were a child: Race pop-sickle-stick boats in the gutter, run through the sprinklers, and swim until you’re wrinkled. And take time to observe children. How do they live? What can they teach us? Amen.

Communion

Invitation:
Jesus allowed, welcomed, embraced children into his presence. So as we gather at his table once again, here is Christ’s invitation to you. Come as your five-year-old self, your 7-year-old self. As you are walking forward, imagine yourself taking off the masks, the manners, the film you put on, you acquired, to be accepted. And just bring your child-like self.