

“The Wonder of a Child”

Matthew 18:1-5

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I am so glad that Jesus came into the world and onto the scene as a child! Though the baby Jesus was a threat to old King Herod, he wasn't a threat to anyone else. Jesus came into the world as a child to rule in the hearts of people everywhere. Unlike other rulers who come onto the scene with bravado and with shining armor and with super-human strength, Jesus enters the world wrapped in swaddling clothes, fragile, vulnerable, lying in a manger.

There is something about a child that inspires wonder in us. A child is a trusting soul. A child is spontaneous. A child is curious. A child is quick to love and quick to forgive. A child is dependent upon others to provide the daily bread.

Years after the miracle birth, Jesus catches his disciples arguing amongst themselves over who is the greatest. Can you hear them debating this? “I am the greatest because I can pray like an angel.” “No, I am the greatest because I can preach a great sermon.” “No, I am the greatest because I can raise funds for mission work.” “No, I am the greatest because I have a gift for music.”

I picture Jesus looking each of them in the eye, saying, “Unless you change and become like children, you'll never enter the kingdom of heaven.” This had never occurred to the disciples. Become like children?

Jesus raises up children as the key to understanding the mystery of God's hope for humanity. We're not talking about being child-ish, but about being child-like.

For me, one of the great gifts of Christmas is the invitation to focus on a child, to reflect on the possibility that a child can lead the way, that it is the children among us who give us a glimpse into the way of Shalom.

I am guessing that the disciples, like most of us, were striving for independence. They valued their independence. Thus, it was a mighty challenge for those disciples to allow themselves to be dependent upon a higher power for the gift of salvation, for the gift of wholeness, for the gift of true freedom. They had labored long and hard to gain their independence, so when Jesus instructs them to become child-like, dependent upon God for their daily bread, they cringed. They were caught off-guard. Yet, they knew they had heard a truth they could not deny.

The image of Jesus wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger is an image of vulnerability, but it is also an invitation to turn and become vulnerable as the Christ child is vulnerable. There is something utterly mysterious, utterly unreasonable about being dependent upon God. Our culture and our language are laced with phrases such as "rugged individualism," such as "fiercely independent," such as "I can stand on my own two feet," such as "I am the captain of my soul." Don't get me wrong. There is certainly a place for an independent spirit. Yet, in our walk of faith, there comes a time when reliance upon the strength and love of God is what allows us to be known as the children of God. **Reliance upon the strength and love of God is actually what allows us to discover the fullness of our humanity.** It is a great paradox. It is a great mystery. And it happens to be the truth of the Gospel.

Recently, I arranged with Stephani Letizia, the director of our pre-school, to read and tell stories to the children who have just turned five. They'll be in kindergarten in the Fall. I've picked out two books I'm going to read and a few Anansi stories from West Africa to tell. I've been told by my kindergarten-teaching daughter that HOW I read is as important as WHAT I read. So, I've begun to get in touch with my childlike qualities. And I just can't wait for those pre-school children to be MY teachers on January 13th. I am certain that their curiosity and their trusting spirit and their enthusiasm for a good story will inspire me to be more like them. My hope for this coming year is that we all choose to change to be more like children. For in so doing, we catch a greater glimpse of the abundant life Jesus came to reveal. This I share with you all in the greatest of hope. Amen.