

“A Child of God”
Sermon by Lisa Crismore
February 22, 2015 – John Knox Presbyterian Church

Matthew 18:1-5

At the time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” He called a child, whom he put among them, and said, “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.”

Fred Chaddock tells a story of a time when he was pastoring a church in Tennessee. There was a seven year old girl who came to church regularly for Sunday School. Her parents would sometimes let her stay for worship but they never came. They would drop her off in the circular drive in front of the church. The church had that drive built that way to not to inconvenience anyone who wanted to drop off their children for church. But this little girl's mom and dad were very consistent in bringing her. Her parents had moved from New Jersey with the new chemical plant. They were known to be status climbers; very ambiguous; and they didn't come to church. There wasn't any need for it, I guess says Fred.

But on Saturday nights, they were known to throw grand parties. They gave parties, not for entertainment, but as part of an upwardly mobile thing. That determined who was invited: the right people, the ones who would help them climb the corporate ladder. And those parties were full of drinking and wild and vulgar things. Everybody knew. But there was their beautiful girl every Sunday.

One Sunday morning Fred looked out and saw the little girl. But something was different; she was with her mom and dad. At the end of the service, we extend an invitation of discipleship. Mr. and Mrs. Dad and Mom came forward to profess their faith in Christ. Afterwards Fred asked, “What prompted this?”

They asked, “Well, do you know about our parties?” Fred said, “Yes, I have heard about your parties.” They said, “Last night, we were having one of our parties. It got really loud and really rough because there was too much drinking. We woke up our little girl. She came down the steps. When she saw us eating, she asked if she could give us a blessing. The girl said, “God is great. God is good and we thank God for our food. Good night, everybody!” When she turned to go back to bed, everyone began to make excuses to leave. It cleared out pretty quickly.

As we were cleaning up the party mess, my husband and I met up in the kitchen with trays full of empty cups and half eaten sandwiches. We looked at each other and asked, “Where do we think we are going?” The moment of truth hit them in the face! (Craddock Stories; by Fred B. Craddock; 2001; Chalice Press; p. 23-24)

When the disciples are gathered around Jesus, asking him who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, I don't think they were prepared for what came next. It wasn't the one that had memorized the most scripture or who had served on the most committees. It wasn't the one that spent the most hours at the temple or helped the poor and lame. It wasn't even the one that had given the most money to the church. Scripture says, “He called a child.” He said, “Unless you change and become a child, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Christ turns things upside down and uses the image of a child. Christ uses a role reversal. The disciples know that in society standards a child has the lowest ranking. Christ humbles them by saying this is what you need to be to enter the kingdom of heaven. Jesus says you must change and be a child of God because that is what the greatest is.

So how do we humble ourselves and become like children? Well I go back to the Fred Craddock story. It is not so much about wild parties but I think there is a lot that we can learn from children.

As children of God, I wonder what it would be like if we could be open and honest like children can be. Children have this amazing way of telling the truth. What would it be like if we could tell each other what we really think and feel? Could the truth be told in a gracious way not to hurt another's feelings? Once we hear the honesty of another would we receive it with humility? Would we want to cover up our faults or face them head on and learn from them?

My friend was telling me recently about her time tutoring a little African American girl. She had asked my friend about the color of her hair. My friend responded by asking the little girl what color did she think it was. The little girl stood up and was really examining it. She said, "Well, it is brown and a little bit of yellow. Then, at the very top, I see some white!" My friend was not upset with the little girl because she was just being honest about what she saw. But my friend also admitted that the next day she went to her hair dresser to get her gray roots covered.

This is the first Sunday of our Lenten journey. We will spend the next 6 weeks making our way to Jerusalem and preparing to receive our Risen Lord at the empty tomb on Easter morning. To prepare for this, one is urged to spend time with the Spiritual disciplines. One of those disciplines is self-examination, looking at ourselves and seeing what is getting in the way of us having a stronger relationship with God. What would it be like if we were more open and honest when it came to being children of God? When we go to examine our lives, we should ask ourselves how we are at being a child of God.

As a child of God, I wonder what it would be like if we were children who play, who sing, who dance, who finger paint or who build sand castles. I just finished a book called Sensible Shoes and the pastor in the book has gotten so caught up in her job that she forgot how to play. She was so serious all the time. She got so hung up in taking care of others that she forgot to just have fun. She felt guilty if she took time out for herself. She forgot what it was like to be a child of God.

As a child of God, I wonder if we think about how our creator feels when God is trying to teach us. During my vacation last week in Mexico, my husband and I were visiting friends who had 3 grandchildren. The littlest one was almost 2 years of age. You can imagine how busy she is. It was constantly watching her and teaching her. It was "Hannah stay out of the street; Hannah get in the car; Hannah eat your food; Hannah don't stand up in the car; Hannah give the toy to Ian." Is God constantly sending us messages as a parent would a child? Are we quick to listen and to follow the messages that God is sending?

As a child of God, I wonder how God feels when we get lost? I took my 5 year old nephew to the Children's Museum the other day. We were on the third floor and he decided he would run away from me when we got to the ramp to go down. I got that sick feeling when I lost sight of him on the second floor. I was so relieved when I finally caught up with him on the ground floor. Is this what we do to God when we run away and leave the path that God has called us to follow? Does God get that sick feeling when we leave our faith in the dust? Does God rejoice when we are found?

As a child of God, I wonder how we can be so open to welcoming everyone into God's kingdom. Children can be so accepting of everyone, especially at a young age. It is almost scary as a parent because we teach our children not to talk to strangers because we want to keep them safe. In our society, we have to do this. But what if we could be as accepting as a young child. That is what Christ wants us to do. How do we open our doors of our church and welcome all of God's children? How do we continue to explore ways to being the open, caring, community which we profess to be?

I believe Jesus stretches his disciples by humbling them with the image of a child. Today, we celebrate the children in our congregation with a children's Sabbath. This is to show them how important they were to Christ as well as how important they are to us. Children can teach us a lot. May we be open to learning from them and welcoming them into our midst. Thanks be to God. Amen.