

“THE MOST IMPORTANT THING IN LIFE”

Mark 10:13-16

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I still remember the story I heard about the time Henry Kissinger, a bishop and a Boy Scout were on an airplane. As they were flying over the Rocky Mountains, there was some severe turbulence, and the plane appeared to be in trouble. The pilot's voice came over the intercom. He announced that he was going to bail out because the plane was going down, and he advised the passengers to do the same. He added, "I should tell the three of you that there are just two parachutes back there." The bishop, the Boy Scout and Henry Kissinger, could hear the sound as the pilot ejected from the aircraft and leaped into space.

Henry Kissinger, a man not exactly known for his humility, immediately jumped up and said, "I am the brightest man on earth; it is imperative that I stay alive." He grabbed a parachute, and in a flash, was gone.

The bishop looked at the Boy Scout and said, "Son, I've led a long and full life; I have a great deal of confidence in the hereafter. I want you to take the other parachute. You've got your whole life ahead of you. Go ahead and save yourself." The boy looked up at the noble bishop and said, "Sir, I think we're both going to be all right. You see, the brightest man on earth just grabbed my Boy Scout backpack and leaped out of the airplane!" Moral of the story: the brightest people on earth are not necessarily the smartest!

Sometimes truth comes from unexpected places. When Jesus' disciples discussed who was the greatest among them, another group that had a lot to learn about humility, Jesus surprised them by taking a child, like any one of the children in our church. Jesus put this child in their midst, and then proceeded to say that **the most important thing in life** is not the results of our intellectual discussion, but the qualities symbolized in the presence of a young child. Children teach us by their very lives what is **the most important thing in life**: how to live as God intends.

Psychologists tell us that there is within the personality of the young child, notably four to seven year olds, an intuitive ability to cope with life that we somehow lose as we get older. Psychologists call these traits "the little professor," and by that they mean that it takes a Ph. D. from a university to teach an adult what young children know instinctively. Can it be that modern psychologists have grasped some of the message that Jesus tried to explain to his disciples? According to Jesus, the child in our midst can teach us more about our walk with God than we can ever hope to learn from a textbook on religion.

Jesus uses the term "little ones" to refer to those who cannot manage for themselves, those who are vulnerable. Jesus is clearly on the side of the vulnerable. He is always sticking his neck out for the fragile, the frail, the marginalized, and he expects his followers to stick their

necks out, too. One of the questions that reveals our true character is the question, how do we treat those who can do nothing for us in return? How do we treat the “little ones?” What priority do we place on their needs? That is a sermon in itself. But this morning I want us to focus, not on what we need to be doing for children, but upon the qualities that children possess that are necessary for us as youth and adults to develop as people of faith. Last Sunday we lifted up those whose job it is to teach our children, youth and adults about the faith. And well we should affirm and pray for these folks on a daily basis, for theirs is an important job. But at the same time, I believe that the children in our midst have much to teach us about the faith as well.

First of all, every young child possesses the quality of **awe** and the ability to **wonder** at the marvels of God’s creation. I remember the time a robin made a nest in a pine tree near our home close enough that my sons, who were pre-schoolers at the time, could watch what was happening. Every day they checked. There were the eggs: small and beautiful. Then one day my boys came running breathless into the house. One of the eggs had hatched! The shell was broken, and in the midst of it was a little birdie! Oh, the excitement of it all!

Now if I came to your front door jumping up and down about a robin’s egg that had just hatched in a tree near your house, you’d think I was crazy! But that’s sad, really, because what is more exciting than the wonder of God’s creation? Martin Marty, a prominent contemporary Lutheran theologian, says that religion begins with wonder, with the absorbing and all-encompassing presence of the holy. We have all had these feelings as children, yet we have allowed them to get buried under a facade of sophistication which we call maturity. Some of us don’t get excited about much of anything anymore, especially at church. Can we allow ourselves to feel the sheer awe and wonder of God’s presence like the children in our midst?

Children have a sense of **trust**. They know they cannot make it on their own. They depend on their parents for food, clothing and shelter, and they never worry about whether or not their needs will be supplied. When my boys got hungry, they just went to the cupboard or to the refrigerator. They never questioned whether or not food was there, they simply trusted that it was. When we ran out of something, they would inform me that Mommy would get more at the store. They didn’t worry about the price of groceries or whether the money would last until the month was over. They simply trusted in childhood innocence that their needs would be supplied. What a lesson in faith! We who become uptight over money, making ends meet, worrying about what the future will bring — could regain our perspective if we would put a fraction of the faith in God that our children place in us. If only we had the faith of a child!

Children are **open** and **receptive**. They take what is offered to them gladly and willingly. They do not worry about the motivation of the person who is passing out the goodies: if they want it, they simply take it. In fact, children have to be taught to be suspicious. Don’t take candy from strangers, we tell them. Don’t get in the car with someone you don’t know. These are appropriate rules for living in the so-called “real world.” But in the process of learning to be careful, some of us go too far, and end up distrusting everything and everyone. There are adults who will not take anything from anyone if they can help it. They call it “rugged independence,” but what an expensive trait it is! For life was meant to be shared. Those who have not learned to give and receive are carrying more of a load than God ever intended any of us to bear.

When we are told that God’s love and grace are free for the taking, many people have a hard time accepting that. We have been taught that there is no such thing as a free lunch, you see, that there is nothing that is really free in this world. When someone tries to give us

something, we question their reason for sharing. Yet if we want the new life that Jesus offers, we must receive it as a gift — openly, eagerly and with grateful hearts — following the example of the children in our midst.

Children **accept all people**. Remember the song in the musical, “*You have to be carefully taught to hate.*” It’s true. Prejudice is not an inborn trait. It’s something that is learned. We have to nurture our ignorance and suspicion in order for prejudice and racism to flourish. Children will have none of that. How much we can learn from them.

A child is **honest** and **straightforward**, and is there anyone who wouldn’t agree that we need more of that? We play so many games as adults. We beat around the bush. We tell white lies. We try to spare each other’s feelings, and we get offended when others don’t follow suit. Yet the damage we do behind people’s backs is more harmful than anything we could confront them with honestly and openly.

Children, on the other hand, “tell it like it is.” They embarrass us with their honesty. But they certainly get to the heart of the matter! I shall never forget a certain game of miniature golf that we played as a family while on vacation. Those of you who know me know that I am not known for my athletic ability. So when I got a hole-in-one on one of the greens, I was elated, and proudly announced it to the rest of the family, apparently in a louder voice than I was aware. A little boy from halfway across the miniature golf course yelled, “Oh, that’s an easy hole! My little sister got a hole-in-one on that one, and she’s only five years old!” So much for the golf pro!

Do you remember the classic story, “*The Emperor’s New Clothes?*” A clever con artist convinces the king that he has a material so fine that the eye cannot see it. The vain king has a robe made of that material and pays a big price for it. It takes a child to bring the kingdom back to reality, for when the king parades down Main Street in his underwear, none of the adults will admit that they cannot see the beautiful robe. But then a small child blurts out, “Mommy, the king is not wearing any clothes!” Surely we in the church could take a lesson from the honesty of a child..

Finally, I believe that the children in our midst can teach us a lot about **the reality of God** in our world today. God is so very real when we are children. One of my favorite stories is the one about the little boy who was up in his room saying his prayers. He suddenly came running down the steps exclaiming, “Mommy, mommy, there’s a lion outside!” His mother, tired after a long day, and frustrated with Johnny’s vivid imagination, replied wearily, “Johnny, there’s no lion outside. Now go back upstairs and go to bed.” The second time Johnny came down the steps with the same news. Again his mother sent him back to bed. A third time Johnny appeared. Finally, annoyed with the child, she decided to look for herself. Upon looking out the window, she discovered that a large stray dog had wandered into the yard and was drinking water from a puddle in the driveway. “Johnny, that’s just a big dog. Now go back upstairs and ask God to forgive you for lying to your mother.” Johnny went back upstairs, but soon appeared on the stair steps one more time. “I asked God to forgive me, and he said he would. But God told me not to worry. He said the first time he saw him, He thought it was a lion, too!”

Do you remember when God seemed that real to you and that personal? A woman confessed to me just recently that God doesn’t seem as real to her these days as he did when she was a child. Many of us can relate. Yet, that’s tragic, really. It’s tragic that for many of us

“growing up” means losing that childlike relationship we once had with God. And so we take a course in school on religion and learn about the *mysterium tremendum*, which is wholly other and unrelated to our mortal being, forgetting the message of the Bible that God is as close as our prayers, that God is not remote or far away, but as near to us as the air we breathe, and with us every hour of every day.

Make no mistake about it: children need the care of adults if they are to survive. None of us would be here today if it had not been for the love and nurture of parents and other adults. But adults need to learn from children, too! We need to learn from the children if we are to grow and become the people that God intends us to be. Let each of us approach life as a child: eagerly, receptively, and with excitement and a sense of anticipation. Let each of us trust God to supply our needs. Let each of us receive the gift that God offers us — the peace of God which comes through our Lord Jesus Christ — as children – with open hearts.

Have you discovered **the most important thing in life?** Are you willing to learn from the children?

The poet put it so well when he said,

*“Last night my little boy confessed to me
Some childish wrong, and kneeling at my knee
He prayed, with tears: ‘Dear God, make me a man
Like Daddy, wise and strong; I’m sure you can.’
Then, while he slept, I knelt beside his bed,
Confessed my sins, and prayed, with low-bowed head;
‘O God, make me a child, like my child here ----
Pure, honest, trusting Thee with faith sincere!’”*

Prayer: Dear God, as we come to the table on this World Communion Sunday, may we come with open hands and expectant hearts, ready to receive what you have for us today. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.