



"The One Who Welcomes the Children"

Matthew 18:1-5

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There is something you should know about me, I'm dramatically afraid of snakes. And so even though I love the mountains and nature and open sceneries, they are my life and my childhood, I have found still that I often live in places where I know there is a limited possibility of me seeing a snake. Why do you think I'm in NYC right now?

And so when I lived in the capital city of Lusaka, Zambia teaching 5th and 6th graders, I thought, there's no way. It's too crowded. Nuh huh, no snakes here. My students, they had full confidence in me. I learned about their home life; they learn about my home life. I taught them English and they taught me Cinyanja. I learned about their fears and yes, they learned about my fears...you see where this is going.

So, they trusted me. We had built a relationship. I was the adult, the teacher, the one in charge, the one who cared for them, and thought they could fly to the moon. And so, one hot, muggy morning in our run down, ragged school room, where it was not unheard of to have critters, like bugs or giant, and I mean giant, millipedes on the wall outside our window. A mischievous student, who was the class clown, points to the wall through the window and yells at the top of his voice, "SNAKE!"

I'm not proud of this and I'm even embarrassed to tell you all about it...and believe me, it's all true. I was the first person

out the door. I should have been the second person, but no, in my extraordinary strength when I'm scared out of my wits, I lifted a student up and moved them aside so that I was first out the door. I was the adult, the teacher, the one who cared for them, and I made sure that I was NOT going to be left in that room with that snake. No way. No how.

Well it was pure chaos after that! I've never seen my students move so quickly through the door and they relentlessly joked with me afterwards, saying I left them with the snake when I was the responsible adult, the teacher. I left them there to fend for themselves, to fight it off! Well funny enough, good people of MAPC, there was no snake. Ever! It was all a joke and they just wanted to see how I would react. And I reacted badly, hilariously some might say, but I say, irresponsibly.

And so just when you think you know a person, they might surprise you. When you think you trust your people, your students and then they call snake. Or when they think they trust me and that I would do anything in the world for them, and then leave them with a snake. When you think you know a person...and then they up and surprise you. It can be goofy, or it can be an absolute shock to the system.

I imagine this is how the disciples felt after they asked, "Who is the greatest in the

kingdom of heaven?" They must have been shocked by Jesus' answer. Maybe they were expecting praise for their actions, or they have given up their life, their livelihood, their comfort, their safety to follow Christ. They have made so many sacrifices for this new idea of entering a kingdom, following a savior, and following a new king.¹ Maybe they thought, Jesus would say, "Good men and women, you are the greatest." Or maybe we should give the disciples a bit more credit. Maybe they thought Jesus would say, "The greatest are the poor, the crippled, the Gentiles...all those who follow me." But Jesus doesn't say this to their much surprise and maybe displeasure. Jesus not only tells them, but physically shows them by lifting a child up and placing that child in the midst of their group.

Jesus has met so many people in his ministry. He has called disciples, healed the sick, conversed with the poor, loved sinners, acknowledged women, welcomed the Gentile, even touched the unclean, however, as one theologian writes, "at no point does Jesus choose one of these as a sign of the kingdom of heaven by placing them in the midst of the disciples".² Instead, Jesus lifts up and moves to the midst a wiggly, playful, curious, naïve, lovable, lowest of the low in status during that time, child.

It's hard for us to imagine how lowly a child was in the eyes of the Greco-Roman culture, since most of our children today are thankfully placed at the center of our families. We will go to great lengths to make sure our children are well-educated and well taken care of. We make sure they are loved, and safe and well fed. Thanks be to God. I wish that for every child, and I know it's just not true everywhere and for everyone, just like with children in the

Greco-Roman world. They were considered the least in social status, insignificant to nearly the point of invisibility.³

They were often at risk and quite vulnerable to the diseases and hard labor of the day. I believe the Greco-Roman parents loved their children, but I also think there were obstacles left and right that children were naturally overlooked and held a short childhood, which might be why we hardly know the names of children in the New Testament. We know a few here and there, but mostly we don't hear much about children.

No wonder Jesus' birth was so spectacular and why when Jesus placed a child in the midst of them, it may have been inconceivable. Jesus has turned the earthly hierarchy and social status on its head, revealing a new social status existing within the kingdom of heaven. This radical kingdom that Jesus talks about throughout the Gospel of Matthew is now completely upside down. Jesus is asking the disciples to acknowledge the unthinkable by placing a child among them and a head of them in the kingdom.

And Jesus continues to turn it inside out and backwards saying, "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. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me." The kingdom that Jesus is referring to, is not for the powerful and even the most pious, but for the humbled, the curious minded, and the one who can be placed in an empty room and still imagine a magical forest. The kingdom is for the one who loves even before they know what love truly means.

¹ Keith J. White, "'He Placed a Little Child in the Midst,'" in *The Child in the Bible*, ed. Marcia J. Bunge, Terence E. Fretheim, and Beverly Roberts Gaventa (Grand

Rapids/Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 364.

² *Ibid*, 354.

³ White, 364.

I don't think this passage means to diminish our adult faith or revert back to our childhood, because for some of us, our childhood may not have been easy. But we often find, it's easier to make room in our hearts for something to love. And I believe we are to make room in our hearts for something different, something that comes with imagination and endless love, something we can grasp onto because we once knew it. Maybe it's a different language now and we just need a little refresher. Just a small hint of it. A language that belongs to God and carries a playful tone. A type of communication that has laughter and happiness, fun and pure joy. A dialect that forgives easily and welcomes an unknown friend.

A heart that feels deeply and may cry when things don't go as planned. A mind that asks curious questions and speaks aloud the obvious answers that others are too afraid to say.

And so the wonderful, wonderful thing about this passage, is that we don't have to get rid of our existing adult faith or intellectual knowledge, we only need to make room in our hearts for a language we once loved and that has merely gone away. Maybe we had to grow up too fast and take care of family members long before we should have and so we lost our language of play. Maybe someone took away our imaginary friend or hurt us so deeply, we had no other choice, but to mature and lose our belly laugh. Maybe the reality of this world hit us hard in some specific way that we lost our sense of humor. I know I remember, almost exactly, when my childhood went out one window and the responsibilities flew in another, when I had to pick myself up and then grow up because a friend needed me more than ever. It

would be so nice to find that language of "little ones" all over again and merge our adulthood language with a child's carefree nature.

In the film, *Saving Mr. Banks*, P.L. Travers, the author of our beloved Mary Poppins, resisted signing over her stories to Walt Disney for 18 years. When her finances were running low, she had no other choice, but to give Disney a chance at producing her family in ink, into more of a reality on the big screen. Travers was not afraid to express her opinion, but she was afraid to hand over Mary Poppins who got her through her childhood and adulthood. She had strict guidelines for the writers before she signed any papers and some of her restrictions included: no music, nor the color red or ridiculous words like "responsible". And absolutely, positively no cartoons. Travers tells Disney with gut passion, "I won't let Mary Poppins turn into one of your cartoons." Disney replies, "Says the woman who sent a flying nanny with a talking umbrella to save the children." Travers pauses, looks down and then back up at Disney and with sadness in her voice and says, "You think Mary Poppins has come to save the children...oh dear."⁴

It took Disney quite a while to discover that Mary Poppins was not there to save the children, but to save Mr. Banks, the father. To help him add some play and silliness to his serious bank life. To encourage attentiveness to his children and laughter to his stern voice. Mary Poppins was there to help the adults who had lost their imagination and creativity and to connect with their children and with their childhood language. Walt Disney should have caught on to that quicker, seeing how he quoted earlier in the film, "There's no greater

⁴ Tom Hanks as Walt Disney, *Saving Mr. Banks*, Netflix, Directed by John Lee Hancock, Australia, United Kingdom, United States, 2013

joy than that seen through the eyes of a child, and there's a little bit of a child in all of us."⁵

There certainly is a spirit of a child right down in you. And if you are made in God's image, then children as children are also God's image. They are God's language, as one theologian writes, "in and through which God reveals God's true nature and therefore, the nature of God's Kingdom."⁶ Children are "God's language...by virtue of being children."⁷ God is not bound to only one language of sophisticated theological words, but through words and actions of children as well. As Jesus tells the disciples, children convey the kingdom of heaven most easily and most naturally.⁸

We encounter God when we welcome children into our midst at Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church and when we encounter children, we welcome God into our midst. God is in each child's face that walks through those doors and we are called as covenant people to embrace our baptismal vows – to raise and nurture, to love and to care for, to play and be ridiculously silly at Kids' Club or Children's Worship or in fellowship hour. We know God loves them. It's right there in scripture. And it is most unlike Jesus to only use that child as metaphor or a sign in our passage today. Every person Jesus met, he was genuinely interested

and concerned for their well-being. Jesus was motivated by love and compassion and individual concern.⁹ And so, because we know this, it's our responsibility to teach it to our children at this church. We teach our children about God, so that when they grow in this broken world, they shine light into darkness and value all people, just as God has meant it to be. By embracing our baptismal vows, our children learn that they are loved by God and by this church. And well, frankly, it cannot be done without you because we are covenant and communal people. It takes a village...

You never know what influence you might have on a child. And by simply welcoming children into our midst, into this congregation, into every major fellowship moment, we do here, you are already giving a beautiful message and influencing their lives. And I can promise you that when you welcome children into our midst, you welcome God, and when you welcome God into our midst, you welcome children. For when one of our beloved children here was asked, what color are God's eyes, that child responded with, "well, they have to be rainbow because God loves everyone". May we always welcome that imagination through those front doors and the doors of our hearts. Amen.

⁵ Saving Mr. Banks.

⁶ White, 373.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 373.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 373.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 368.