

THROUGH THE EYES OF A CHILD

Mark 10:13-16

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The Church of the Covenant, Washington, PA

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Jesus leaned his aching back against the doorframe of the small, simple home, trying to collect his thoughts. The crowds of people that had trailed him for weeks jammed the yard and surrounding countryside, their tired eyes rimmed with dark circles of desperation as they struggled to hear a word of comfort, of joy, of hope.

Time was running out, and this reality weighed on Jesus like a cloak of stone. He answered the Pharisees' question for the second time that day, but the words had barely left his mouth when he heard the angry voices of his own disciples. "Scram!" they grumbled at a small cluster of folks hovering at the edge of the crowd. "He has more important things to do than to be bothered by a bunch of children."

Jesus pushed through the crowd, his temper flaring like a flaming torch. "Leave the children alone!" he snapped at the startled disciples. "Better yet, bring them to me. They know more about the Kingdom of God than you do and unless you start seeing through their eyes, you don't stand a chance of getting your dusty feet in the door." Kneeling to the ground, Jesus stretched out his hands, and as everyone, including the disciples, stood there drop-jawed, he gathered the children in his arms.

It's hard to imagine a time when children weren't cherished like they are today when parents and society often put children first. But in Jesus' time, children weren't even to be seen, much less heard. Yet Jesus, instead of thanking the disciples for trying to protect him from those unwelcome rugrats, chewed them out, right there in front of God and everyone. They could hardly believe their ears,

"Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." What does that mean, anyway? How does a little child receive the kingdom of God?

For one, children ask questions. Their curiosity is insatiable, and they're not afraid to ask questions. This includes questions about faith.

Is God a boy or a girl? How do I get to heaven? Why did Jesus die? Is the Holy Spirit scary? Does God love me even when I do something wrong?

Asking questions is how we learn about the world around us, and about our faith. But adults are often ashamed to ask questions, to admit we don't know everything. If I have questions, does that mean that my faith is weak? What will people think of me if I dare to question God?

How will you learn what you believe if you don't ask questions?

Jesus asked questions:

What shall we say that the Kingdom of God is like?

Do you believe that I am able to do this?

Why are you so afraid?

What shall we say that the kingdom of God is like?

Do you believe that I am able to do this? (Mt. 9:28)

Why are you so afraid? (Mt. 8:26)

What do you want me to do for you?

Who do people say that I am?

And perhaps the most important question Jesus asked:

Who do **you** say that I am?

That is a question that each of us needs to answer. We come to that answer by asking questions, and trusting that God isn't diminished in our doing so.

The poet Rilke wrote:

"Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then, gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer."

I started writing books for children in part to answer questions that children asked me as a pastor. One morning, a mother came up to me with her little girl.

"Caroline wants to ask you a question," she said. The child was shy, so the mom ended up asking for her. "She wants to know if God is a boy or a girl." Since I was dashing into the sanctuary about to start the worship service, I said to her, "Great question! Let me think about that and get back to you."

I took her question seriously, and I was going to find a way to answer in a way that a five-year-old could understand. I read through the Bible looking for images of God, and found so many wonderful examples. I started writing them down, and before I knew it, I was writing a book, *What is God Like?* which then became the first book I ever had accepted for publication. Now when someone asks me a question about faith, I write a book.

What is God Like? set off a series of books, the second of which, *Who is Jesus?*, came out two years later. When my editor and I brainstormed a topic for a third book, I suggested heaven. She wasn't convinced.

Since my 3 children were born and baptized here, I'm going to shamelessly extend my preaching privilege and share a few stories about them this morning. My three children, since they were born and baptized here. The first story is about our youngest, David, who still roots for the Pirates even though he was only two when we left here.

Late one night, in the midst of deliberations with my editor, I tucked David, then around eight, into bed. "Mom, I have a question," he said. It had been a long day, and I was tired. I didn't feel like answering a question right then. But trying to be a good Mom, I said, "Ok, David, what's your question?" praying that it was something with an easy answer like, "can I have fruit snacks in my lunch tomorrow?"

David sighed. "Well," he said, "I have these questions niggling around in my brain. All this talk about eternal life, I just don't get it. Does that mean that after we die, life goes on and on and on? Won't that get boring? What will I do in heaven? Will I have my own brain in heaven? Will I know myself in heaven? Will others know me?"

I flipped on the bedroom light and handed David his journal. "Write that all down," I said, and he did.

The next morning, I emailed my editor. "I think this book has to be about heaven." This time, she agreed.

I told my congregation that I was writing a book about heaven and wanted to know what questions their children had. What surprised me was that it was the adults who came up to me between worship services and whispered in my ear. "Um, I'm embarrassed to ask this, but I've always wondered, will my dog go to heaven?" "Is there peanut butter and jelly in heaven?" It wasn't just the kids who had the questions, it was the adults. They were just afraid to ask.

How does a child receive the Kingdom of God?

By being curious, and asking questions. That's one way to see through the eyes of a child.

One Sunday morning after worship, Amy burst into my office as I was putting things away before we headed home. She was around 6 at the time. "Mommy! Mommy!" she said breathlessly, her big blue eyes wide with excitement or fear, I wasn't sure. I threw my clergy robe on the nearest chair and knelt down. "What is it, Amy?" I asked, hoping one of her brothers hadn't been caught trying to climb the church steeple. Again.

The words tumbled from her mouth. "Oh, Mom!" she gasped. "I found the baby Jesus in a closet and I unwrapped the blanket he was in and *guess what?* Baby Jesus has a belly button, just like me! I never knew Jesus had a belly button just like me!"

I'd seen that baby Jesus doll when I'd wrapped it in the blanket a few months before for the Christmas pageant. To me, it was nothing more than an ordinary, plastic baby doll that'd been elevated to the status of the holy infant for the annual Christmas pageant.

But to my little girl it wasn't a cheap, plastic doll. In that moment, Amy recognized the incredible wonder of God-made-flesh, a Savior who came into the world in human form, with a belly button, just like us. Wow, is that cool or what?

How does a child receive the Kingdom of God?

With wonder, joy, and amazement.

It is to such as these that the Kingdom of God belongs.

No wonder Jesus welcomed the children. As the burdens of the world grew heavier upon his shoulders, he found little comfort from the adults around him. The disciples were by his side day and night and still shrugged their shoulders when he asked them who he was. The Pharisees split every legalistic hair they could find, certain that they knew more about who was going to get into the Kingdom than Jesus did.

The children, on the other hand, were a breath of fresh air, nestling in his arms like a bouquet of spring flowers, a bright splash of color emerging from the grayness of the world. They wrapped their little arms around him and loved him, not because of what he could do for them, but out of pure, untarnished love.

It is to such as these that the Kingdom of God belongs.

That was kind of a slap in the face to the Pharisees, telling them that these children had a better chance of getting into heaven than they did.

Some of you remember our eldest son, Chris. The one who held us captive during children's sermons? When Greg and I were leading worship and couldn't do a thing about it?

Whenever we asked a question during the children's time, Chris always had an answer, but not always an appropriate one. Our flowing, black clergy robes might have hidden the stains on our wrinkled clothes but they could do nothing to hide our chagrin when Chris spilled some family secret that we hadn't planned to share with several hundred people.

One morning, it was Greg's turn to give the children's message. He looked around at all the little angels sitting at his feet and tried to explain the presence of God. If God can be here, how can he be somewhere else, too? Greg gave a few examples, and then asked the children, "Where do you think God is?"

Nobody raised a hand. Nobody, except Chris.

Greg ignored him.

"Do you think that God is up in the sky?" he asked, trying to elicit a response. No hands went up. No hands except one that is: Chris.

"Anybody have an idea?" Greg pleaded, getting more and more anxious.

Our young son's persistent hand went up even higher.

The rest of the children sat very still, unusually quiet that day. Greg realized that he had no choice. "Okay, Chris," he said reluctantly. "Where do you think God is?"

We braced ourselves for some answer like, "In the dirty clothes hamper!"

Chris lowered his hand and looked up at his father with his brown velvet eyes. "Well," he said, with the innocence of a child and all the wisdom of the ages. "I have always believed that the whole world was in God's heart."

What more could be said?

Greg bowed his head. "Let us pray," he said. "Dear God, thank you for holding the whole world in your heart."

Never before nor since, not with all the theological books I've read through over nearly 40 years, have I ever heard a better answer.

Is it any wonder that Jesus said, "let the little children come to me, for it is to such as these that of Kingdom of God belongs"?

The good news is, that we don't have to be a six-year-old to receive the Kingdom of God as a child. The Bible says that in Christ Jesus, we are all children of God through faith" (Gal. 3:26). In Christ, we are made a new creation as children of the living God. We are free to ask the questions that are niggling around in our brains. We are given fresh eyes to see the wonder and amazement of God dwelling among us in the flesh through Jesus, belly button and all. We are welcomed into the loving arms of God, where we can rest our weary souls and trust that despite the darkness and despair all around us, God still holds the whole world in his heart.

I have learned from my own children, and I have learned from your children over the years we were here, and since.

I received the Kingdom of God from 6 year-old Katie Jones, who sat quietly with me in a porch rocker when we were being interviewed to come to the Church of the Covenant. I was feeling overwhelmed, and needed to sit for a moment with a child by my side.

I received the Kingdom of God from Laura Gladden and Emily Wharton and Julie Lane and Susan and Mandy Beam and Nica Burchett and others who babysat and loved our kids and who have raised their own children on my books.

I received the Kingdom of God from Charlie and Kevin Bowers, one of whom now serves our country while the other serves a church, and both of whom serve our God.

I received the Kingdom of God from Jessica Craft Hickman, who on our last Sunday sang a beautiful song that rings all the more true today: friends are friends forever, if the Lord's the Lord of them. Now Jessica serves as your Director of Christian Education, and yesterday during my program, she prayed for me, as I had prayed for her so many years ago.

I could go on and on, and I would if I had all day. If I haven't mentioned your name, it isn't because you graced my life any less, just that I have run out of time.

Take the hand of a child, and let that child open your eyes. See the Kingdom of God, the wonder, joy, and amazement of it, through the eyes of a child. The view is out of this world.