

## Sermon for Oct. 23, 2016 – “Child-Like”

30<sup>th</sup> Sunday in OT, Year C, Children’s Sabbath – Texts: Mark 10:13-16

A teacher asked her 6th grade class how many of them were atheists. Not really knowing what an atheist was but wanting to be liked by the teacher all the kids raised their hands except for Little Johnny. The teacher asked Little Johnny why he has decided to be different. Little Johnny said, “Because I’m not an atheist.” The teacher asked, “Well, what are you?” Johnny said, “I’m a Christian”. The teacher asked him why he’s a Christian. Little Johnny answered, “Well, my Mom’s a Christian and my Dad’s a Christian, so I’m a Christian.” Annoyed by this answer, the teacher asked, “If your mom were a moron and your dad were an idiot, what would that make you?” With a big smile, Little Johnny replied, “That’d make me an atheist!”

This morning I’d like to talk about the nature of faith. To get us started I’d like us to think about our faith. When is it child-like? And when is it child-ish? This morning’s Gospel points out that there **is** a difference. It also tells us which kind of faith we’re to have. Listen again to Jesus from this morning’s gospel reading: **“Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.”** Now listen to what Jesus says in Matthew’s gospel: **“I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because You have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children.”** What Jesus is talking about is child-like faith.

I’ve felt for quite a while now that faith’s not complicated. It’s not rocket science. And, what Jesus is saying is that faith isn’t something that we come by on our own...It’s God gift to us. Martin Luther emphasized this when he said, “I believe that I cannot, by my own reason or strength, believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith.” It occurs to me that even a child can have this faith. And it’s amazing the faith children do have, isn’t it?!

Spend a few minutes talking with just about any child and you’ll see. Or, just watch our children today. They will show you a child-like faith! Okay, so what exactly is child-like faith? Well, for starters, it’s a faith that trusts Jesus with their lives. It’s a faith that seeks to help even in the smallest tasks, that asks honest questions, that has no agenda of its own...That trust God completely! It’s believed that children as young as four understand that a prayer is qualitatively different than a wish, that it’s a special kind of conversation between them and God. It’s around that same age that kids show some appreciation of divine omnipotence and omniscience. They can explain to you that a person made a car or a pizza but it was God who made the mountains.

By five or six, they understand that even though their parents are very smart, God knows things they can’t and they know enough to be able to predict God’s superior knowledge in unique circumstances. Now, can children also be easily fooled and led astray? Sure! Can they, especially in earlier stages of development, miss the truth? Are they sometimes unable to grasp certain more abstract concepts of faith? Yep! But what this all boils down to for Jesus, what He’s talking about here, is a humble, honest faith in God. This is why He used the innocence of a child as an example. (Remember “blessed are the meek” from the Sermon on the Mount?) Emulating the faith of children, we should simply take God at His Word.

What’s interesting in all the passages in the gospel where children are mentioned, Jesus wasn’t actually speaking **to** children, He was actually talking to adults. He often referred to them as “this generation” and **rarely** (actually, never) in a complimentary way. And any similarities between those in Jesus’ time and now are **not** coincidental. Sadly, little has changed.

We (adults) are (like them) very often fickle and self-centered, all too willing to leave it to someone else, always wanting things done our way, not all that responsive to Jesus' message unless it suits us, all too easily upset and ready to walk away in a huff when it isn't what we want to hear, or when things happen that we don't like. All that sounds a little child-ish wouldn't you say? So, indeed, Jesus is talking to adults. To people that ought to know better. But adulthood is potentially dangerous, why? Well, for one thing it can create the false expectations of what we need to be, self-sufficient, highly competent, etc. For another, it leads us to believe (often to a greater extent than is actually true) that we've got things pretty well figured out, when in reality we're just adrift in a sea of people who are quite literally making it up as they go.

There's a danger living in a time and culture often hostile to Christians, and the danger is that we may come to believe the lie that the decisions we make come without the burden of consequence we knew as children. On the other hand, considering the word "adult" as C.S. Lewis did as a term of approval. We sometimes can fall prey to the notion that adulthood carries a sense of gravitas that childhood lacked. Scripture makes it clear that this simply isn't the case.

This is Jesus, again from Matthew's gospel. He says, **"To what can I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling out to others: 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance... We sang a dirge and you did not mourn'".** The analogy is one of children inviting others to play and others selfishly refusing, thinking themselves too important and better than others. That they have better things to do. I think this highlights the problem that Jesus has with child-ish faith. And the problem is that far too often our immediate reaction is to think of ourselves first, which is essentially the definition of sin. Martin Luther used to say that sin is being curved in on oneself. Sin is looking at oneself.

Try looking at yourself now. When we look at ourselves, what do we do? We look down. What do we see? We see no one else. We see our stomachs and focus on filling them. We see our pockets and focus on putting and keeping money in them. We see our hands and see what's missing from them, or how to keep them from getting dirty. We see our feet and wonder how fast we can get away from someone. The same, of course, is true with children. We love our children don't we? We love many of the things they do but don't they, occasionally, drive us up the wall? At times they can be very generous. But other times they can be very selfish and stubborn. There are times they want everything their own way. They want everyone to play the game their way. And, when they don't get their way they can be very difficult. They not only make life miserable for everyone around them but, because of their selfishness or stubbornness, they miss out on so much that's good.

But it's not just children, look at Congress. Look at our presidential candidates. In the middle of an important discussion someone who doesn't like the way the discussion is going starts acting up. Sadly, we're not immune from such behavior – are we? It drifts into our lives, our homes and, unfortunately, into the church. Sometimes we hide it, sometimes it's a little more obvious. The reality is that in our church life we have to deal with many issues. We have to deal with changing situations. And, let's face it, things aren't always how we like it. They're certainly not what we want them to be. When this happens folks often respond in ways that are less than helpful, in ways that are – dare I say it? – child-ish...

But here's the question...What are we supposed to do? How are we to have child-like (again, not child-ish) faith? How, as they say, must we live? Here's where our children can teach us. They've a unique perspective to offer but we often ignore it.

Okay, so what can our kids teach us about faith? Specifically, what can they teach us about Child-like faith? Three things...

- **First** – they can teach us to trust. Children trust completely. They embrace people and opportunities without reservation. Maybe it's because they haven't experienced hurt or rejection yet. Be nice to a child, and they'll likely accept you as a trustworthy friend. Sometimes children will offer solutions without fear of criticism even if it seems impossible to grown-ups. Remember the boy who offered his five loaves and two fish to Jesus? The disciples couldn't see how they'd be enough. The result was nothing short of miraculous. Yes, we should be wary of people's intentions, but child-like faith assumes the best rather than the worst.
- **Second** – children teach us to believe without limits. Kids believe that the world is big, amazing and full of potential. But soon enough they grow up and become cynical and the world becomes familiar and ordinary. Kids believe what they're told caring little about appearing crazy to others. Jesus commends children for their willingness to accept the things of God even if they don't understand everything completely. But since when was complete understanding ever a requirement to follow Jesus? It never was and never will be! Simple faith – child-like faith – is.
- The **third** thing kids can teach us is curiosity. Kids ask questions about everything...And I mean everything! They aren't afraid of the answers or of asking what adults might consider "dumb questions." Adults on the other hand, tend to want quick and easy answers...Why? So we don't have to keep digging. Let's be honest, the full truth about something can be intimidating can't it? It can change us in some way so it's something we're often inclined to avoid. But children keep asking "why?" They keep asking until they can understand the answer in their own way. A child-like faith is hungry for truth. God loves when people pursue Him with passion for the truth.

Brothers and sisters, we're called to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, not our own ideas. We don't do this for Jesus' benefit, we do it for our own. And here – I think – is the thing. When were children – we what? We spoke like children...We thought like children...We reasoned like a child. But now that we're adults, we need to set aside child-**ish** ways. We need to trust that there's a better way to live...We need to trust in God...Not simply believing that He can, but knowing that He will! We need to accept the fact that we don't know everything there is to know about God. That as long as we draw breath there will always be a need to grow in our faith. That this side of heaven we will never reach full spiritual maturity. We need to **give up** the notion that at this point in our lives, at **any** point in our lives, that God couldn't possibly have anything more for us to do. At every stage in our journeys we are called by God for some purpose. We need to embrace now, more than ever, the notion that we are children of God. And though we've a Father who holds His children responsible for their decisions, He will nevertheless guide us through the confusion and complexity of adulthood from now until the moment we are called home. This is not your "ordinary" parent-child relationship. Far from it. Whatever our own experience with our parents God is the ideal parent – one who's caring, attentive, and highly involved in our day-to-day lives. He's an understanding, patient confidant. Always there to offer encouragement and support. This is, as I see it, incredibly freeing. This, brothers and sisters, is child-like faith.

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.