



THE EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
SEPTEMBER 23, 2018

“UNLESS YOU BECOME LIKE LITTLE CHILDREN”

MARK 9: 30-37

They left that place and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were, because he was teaching his disciples. He said to them, "The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise." But they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it. They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the road?"³⁴ But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest. Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, "Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all." He took a little child whom he placed among them. Taking the child in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me."

SERMON

- AMONG THE DUSTY PAGES OF CHURCH HISTORY LIVES A FORGOTTEN PARISH HOLIDAY.
- AS THE COOL FALL NIGHTS FALL ON SLEEPY LITTLE EUROPEAN PARISHES, THE PRIESTS—AND THEY WERE PRIESTS BECAUSE THERE IS ONLY THE ONE HOLY ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH—THE PARISH PRIESTS STEP OUT IN THEIR CLERICAL ROBES AND WAIT OUTSIDE THE RECTORY.
- OUT OF THE SHADOWY WOODS COME MEMBERS OF THE PARISH. LIKELY, THIS MANY MEMBERS HAVE NOT GATHERED FOR A CHURCH OCCASION SINCE LAST YEAR AT THIS TIME.

- YOU CANNOT IDENTIFY ANY OF THE PARISHIONERS BECAUSE THEY ARE DRESSED IN THEIR OWN ROBES, HOODS, AND MASKS. EACH ADEQUATELY COVERED TO AVOID DETECTION.
- THEY CARRY BASKETS FILLED WITH ROTTEN TOMATOES, ANIMAL WASTE, AND DECAYING FRUIT OF EVERY KIND. IN THE LAST MONTH, SOME HAVE BEEN SETTING ASIDE PARTICULARLY RANK, MOLDY, PUTREFYING, INSECT-INFESTED FRUITS AND VEGETABLES.
- ALL IS QUIET AS THE CONGREGANTS GATHER. NO HYMNS, NO LITURGY, NO SOLEMN PRAYERS. NO ONE WANTS HIS OR HER VOICE IDENTIFIED.
- AND THEN THEY BEGIN TO PELT THE PRIESTS WITH THEIR PUTRID TREASURES; WATCHING AS THEY BLAST THEIR CLERICAL TARGETS AGAIN AND AGAIN AND AGAIN.
- AND THEN, WHEN THEY RUN OUT OF THEIR FOUL, DISINTEGRATING AMMUNITION, THE PRIESTS SLOWLY WALK BACK INTO THE RECTORY AND THE CONGREGANTS FADE INTO THE WOODS.
- IF YOU THINK I MADE THIS UP, THAT ONLY GOES TO SHOW HOW FAR YOU ARE FROM THE PLAYFUL SPIRIT PRESENT IN THE MEDIEVAL CHURCH.
- WHEN THE CHURCH WASN'T BEREFT OF A CHILD-LIKE SPIRIT, SHE UNDERSTOOD THERE IS NO WAY FOR A PRIEST (OR PASTOR) TO BE WITH A GROUP OF CHURCH MEMBERS YEAR AFTER YEAR AFTER YEAR WITHOUT SOME PEOPLE BECOMING UPSET, ANGRY, DISAPPOINTED, OR FED UP.
- AND SO, THIS ANCIENT EVENT WITHIN THE LITURGICAL YEAR, ALLOWED THE WORSHIPPERS TO ACT OUT THEIR NEGATIVE FEELINGS.
- HECK, THERE ARE A FEW OF YOU WHO WOULD LIKELY PAY TO DELIVER A ROTTEN TOMATO OR HONEY-BEE INFESTED PEACH TO MY OLD KEISTER.

- BUT, WE'RE TOO RATIONAL FOR THIS TODAY, ARE'T WE? TOO WELL-MANNERED, TOO GROWN UP, TOO ADULT.
- INSTEAD, WE USE *MATURE TACTICS* LIKE CALLING THE BISHOP, WRITING ANGRY LETTERS TO THE SYNOD, OR PASSIVE-AGGRESSIVELY COMPLAINING, BACK-BITING, AND CRITICIZING BEHIND THE SCENES.
- FOR MY MONEY, I'LL TAKE THE COWPIE IN THE NOGGIN.
- WHEN JESUS TAKES A CHILD AND PLACES IT AMONG THE DISCIPLES, SAYING, "WHOEVER WELCOMES ONE OF THESE LITTLE CHILDREN IN MY NAME WELCOMES ME; AND WHOEVER WELCOMES ME DOES NOT WELCOME ME BUT THE ONE WHO SENT ME," THERE WOULD HAVE BEEN A COLLECTIVE GASP FROM THE CROWD.
- JUST AS PEOPLE WOULD HAVE LOOKED STUNNED, SHOCKED, AND COMPLETELY CONFUSED WHEN JESUS SAYS, "TRULY I TELL YOU, UNLESS YOU CHANGE AND BECOME LIKE LITTLE CHILDREN, YOU WILL NEVER ENTER THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN."
- IN JESUS' DAY, CHILDREN HAD NO RIGHTS. WOMEN WERE THE PROPERTY OF MEN AND CHILDREN WERE THE PROPERTY OF THEIR PARENTS.
- TAKE THE RECENT PENNSYLVANIA GRAND JURY REPORT AND MULTIPLY IT A THOUSAND-FOLD AND WE MIGHT HAVE SOME SENSE OF HOW CHILDREN USED TO BE TREATED BY ENTIRE CULTURES: NOT JUST SEXUALLY ABUSED, BUT PHYSICALLY ABUSED, NEGLECTED, AND MADE TO WORK UNDER HARSH CONDITIONS. ESSENTIALLY WITHOUT VALUE.
- AND SO, HERE IS JESUS, PLACING A CHILD AMONG A GROUP OF MEN AND SAYING IF THEY WANT TO BECOME INHABITANTS OF THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN, THEY MUST BECOME LIKE LITTLE CHILDREN....

- THREE SUNDAYS AGO, I “FELL” DURING THE CHILDREN’S SERMON.
- WHO SHOUTED OUT, “PASTOR, ARE YOU ALRIGHT?” AND JUMPED UP TO HELP ME UP?
- KEVIN.
- TWO SUNDAYS AGO, WHEN THE PIRATE PARROT STOLE MY SERMON AND I WAS CHASING HIM, WHO SHOUTED, “I’LL HELP YOU, PASTOR!” AND RAN AND GRABBED THE PARROT?
- KEVIN.
- SPONTANEITY. TRANSPARENCY. HEART-FELT CONCERN. NO SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS. NO FEIGNED DIGNITY TO DEFEND.
- “UNLESS YOU BECOME LIKE LITTLE CHILDREN YOU WILL NEVER ENTER THE KINGDOM OF GOD.”
- LEFT TO ONLY OUR ADULT MIND, WE LUTHERANS, “GOD’S FROZEN CHOSEN,” REMAIN GLUED TO THE PEW.
- DURING A CHILDREN’S SERMON, A PASTOR WAS TALKING TO THE KIDS ABOUT THE WONDERS OF NATURE. SHE SAID, “I’M THINKING OF SOMETHING BUSHY, WITH A LONG TAIL THAT LIKES TO STORE NUTS FOR THE WINTER. WHAT DO YOU THINK IT IS?”
- ONE LITTLE BOY SAYS, “I KNOW THE ANSWER’S SUPPOSED TO BE JESUS, BUT IT SURE DOES SOUND LIKE A SQUIRREL.”
- GENUINE. HONEST.

- BUT YOU CAN SENSE THAT THIS CHILD IS ALREADY LEARNING THAT SPEAKING THE TRUTH MIGHT NOT BE AS ACCEPTABLE AS GIVING THE ANSWER THE ADULTS CONSIDER CORRECT.
- LONG AGO, WHEN MY SONS WERE YOUNG, WE WERE BEING SHOWN A HOUSE BY A GIGANTIC REAL ESTATE AGENT.
- MY OLDEST SON, JAKE, CALLS OUT TO ME, “BOY, DAD, HE’S REALLY FAT!”
- THE CHILD TELLS TRUTH TO YOUR FACE.
-
- “HOW DO YOU LIKE THE PEAS?”
- THE CHILD SAYS, “YUCK.”
- AUTHENTIC. NO GUILF.
- “UNLESS YOU BECOME LIKE LITTLE CHILDREN YOU WILL NOT ENTER THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN.”
- AND LET’S BE CLEAR. JESUS IS **NOT** REFERRING TO SOME DISTANT HEAVENLY DESTINATION.
- JESUS’ FIRST WORDS ARE THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN—AND HERE THE GREEK IS AMBIGUOUS—SOMETHING LIKE “FALLING ON YOU, IN YOUR MIDST, WITHIN YOU.”
- THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN IS SOMETHING JESUS OPENS TO US AS A WAY OF LIFE NOW. IN THIS MOMENT AND THE NEXT AND THE NEXT. IF YOU CAN ONLY GET IT WHAT HE’S SAYING—LIKE A CHILD.
- AFTER CHURCH, A LITTLE GIRL COMES UP TO THE PASTOR AND SAYS, “WHEN I GET MY ALLOWANCE THIS WEEK, I’M GOING TO GIVE IT TO YOU.”

- THE PASTOR REPLIES, “THAT’S SWEET OF YOU, BUT WHY WOULD YOU GIVE ME YOUR ALLOWANCE?”
- “BECAUSE DAD SAYS YOU’RE THE POOREST PREACHER WRE’VE EVER HAD.”
- ADD GENEROUS AND SINCERE TO THE TRUTHFULNESS OF CHILDREN.
- “UNLESS YOU BECOME LIKE LITTLE CHILDREN YOU CANNOT ENTER THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN.”
- DURING THE SHARING OF THE PEACE, COLIN AND JACOB RENDA HAVE SAID THINGS LIKE, “PEACE, BROTHER,” AND CALLED ME “PASTOR GRANDPA.” WHEN I PRAYED WITH THEM PRIOR TO HAVING THEIR TONSILS OUT, “JACOB SAID, “THANK YOU, GOD.”
- LIGHT-HEARTED, PLAYFUL, AND INNOCENT.
- “UNLESS YOU BECOME LIKE LITTLE CHILDREN YOU CANNOT ENTER THE KINGDOM OF GOD.”
- WHEN I WAS IN THE THIRD GRADE, MY BEST FRIEND, GARY BONTEMPO AND I ARE RIDING BIKES AROUND THE NEIGHBORHOOD. GARY’S OLDER BROTHER, GREG, COMES UP TO US, PULLS A GOLD COIN OUT OF HIS POCKET AND SAYS, “LOOK WHAT I FOUND IN THE HAYLOFT OF THE OLD BARN.”
- “WOW, A GOLD COIN.”
- “YEAH, AND THERE’S A WHOLE BUNCH MORE UP THERE UNDER THE HAY.”

- WE RIDE OFF TO THE BARN THAT SITS ON A CORNFIELD ADJACENT TO OUR NEIGHBORHOOD. WE PARK OUT BIKES AND RUN UP TO THE HAYLOFT WHERE WE BEGIN SEARCHING THROUGH THE BALES OF HAY.
- SUDDENLY, WE HEAR BOOTS ON THE STAIRS. WE RUN TO THE BARN DOOR, SWINGING DOWN OFF THE ROPE HANGING THERE TO HIDE AMONG THE CORN STALKS.
- IT DOESN'T TAKE TOO LONG FOR THE OLD FARMER'S TWO TEENAGE SONS TO FIND US AND DRAG US BACK TO THEIR OLD MAN.
- HIS SONS GRIN EAR-TO-EAR AS HE SPITS TOBACCO JUICE AT OUR FEET, TELLING US HE WILL BEAT US WITHIN AN INCH OF OUR LIVES IF HE EVER FINDS US IN HIS HAYLOFT AGAIN.
- THE BOYS THROW US TO THE GROUND, WE GRAB OUR BIKES, AND RACE HOME, GLAD TO BE ALIVE.
- FROM A CHILD'S POINT OF VIEW, THOUGH, THE WORLD REMAINS A MAGICAL PLACE WHERE GOLD COINS JUST WAIT TO BE FOUND.
- EVOKING THIS PARABLE OF JESUS, "THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN IS LIKE A TREASURE HIDDEN IN A FIELD WHICH SOMEONE HAS FOUND; HE HIDES IT AGAIN, GOES OFF HAPPY, SELLS EVERYTHING HE OWNS AND BUYS THE FIELD."
- AS ADULTS, IF WE CONTAIN CHILD-LIKE ENERGY, WE STILL FIND THE WORLD A PLACE OF WONDER, AMAZED AT ALL THAT AWAITS US IN AN EVER-CHANGING UNIVERSE....
- PARENTS OF A LITTLE GIRL ARE WORRIED BECAUSE SHE IS ALWAYS SO OPTIMISTIC. TOO FRIENDLY, THEY THINK. TOO PLAYFUL. THEY DEEM IT

NECESSARY TO TOUGHEN HER UP TO MAKE IT IN A WORLD THAT CAN BE CRUEL AND COLD.

- FOR HER BIRTHDAY THEY FILL HER ROOM FOR HORSE MANURE, THINKING THIS WILL TEACH HER A LESSON ABOUT THE WORLD NOT ALWAYS TREATING YOU RIGHT OR WELL.
- ON HER BIRTHDAY, SHE RUNS TO HER ROOM TO OPEN HER GIFTS AS THEY FOLLOW HER UP THE STAIRS TO HER BEDROOM.
- THEY ARE PUZZLED AS SHE ENTHUSIASTICALLY DIGS DOWN THROUGH THE MANURE.
- “WHAT ARE YOU DOING?” THEY SHOUT.
- “WITH ALL THIS MANURE, I KNOW THERE IS A PONY IN HERE SOMEWHERE!”
- OUR CHRISTIAN ANCESTORS WERE FOND OF SAYING, “THE WAY UP IS THE WAY DOWN.”
- “UNLESS YOU BECOME LIKE LITTLE CHILDREN YOU CANNOT ENTER THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN.”
- INSTEAD OF GROWING UP, PERHAPS WE ALSO NEED TO GROW DOWN.
- THE BIRTH OF A CHILD TURNED THE WORLD UPSIDE DOWN. THE CHRIST CHILD FOREVER TRANSFORMED RELATIONSHIPS, CULTURES, SOCIETIES, ART, MUSIC, ETHICS, ARCHITECTURE, SOCIAL PROGRAMS. YOU NAME IT. IT WAS TRANSFORMED BY THE CHILD JESUS.
- JESUS REMAINS CHILD-LIKE AS HE BECOMES AN ADULT: FRIENDLY, NON-JUDGMENTAL, ACCEPTING, INTUITIVE, SINCERE, AUTHENTIC,



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SPONTANEOUS, TRUTHFUL, GENEROUS. JOYOUS, FULL OF FEELING,
SIMPLE, HUMBLE, AND TRUSTING.

- IF THE CHILD REMAINS ALIVE WITHIN US, WE REMAIN EVER FILLED WITH HOPE FOR THE FUTURE. THAT LIFE CAN REMAIN NEW AND EXCITING AND POSITIVE NO MATTER THE STAGE OF LIFE. THE CHILD'S PLAYFUL INNER SPIRIT CAN BALANCE THE DEMANDS AND SERIOUSNESS OF BEING AN ADULT. NEW BEGINNINGS REMAIN EVER POSSIBLE.
- THE BIRTH OF THE CHRIST CHILD CARRIES THE ENERGY TO TRANSFORM ENLIVEN, AND GIVE US HOPE WHETHER WE ARE TWO OR NINETY-TWO.
- BEIN' GREEN BY KERMIT