

The Eyes of a Child
(Matt 11:16-19,25-30)

July 9, 2023
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You may notice that this morning's worship is designed partly to celebrate children and baptism. But there were complications in timing that led to postponing the baptism. Still, there is never a bad time to celebrate children (and the young at heart). So, I'm going to go ahead and do that now and then again later.

In this morning's Gospel reading, Jesus draws our attention to little children in a way that flips our usual understanding. Usually, we think of children as needing to learn from us. But Jesus flips this on its head.

You can imagine all the serious minded grown-ups standing around thinking about grown up things and listening to Jesus. They are probably a bit surprised when he directs their attention to some children playing in the marketplace. It is as though he is saying, "Look at these children. See how things look through their eyes." And he goes on to describe the way to his kingdom, not in terms of serious and weighty concerns, as grown ups often do. But instead as the lifting of a heavy burden from their shoulders.

It is as though he is saying, and I am paraphrasing here: “Look, You live as though your life is full of nothing but insecurities. You hear the words of John the Baptist and my words and you condemn us, because you would rather be bound by your insecurities, than experience the freedom we offer you. Look at these children and see how naturally they react to life. When they hear music they dance. When something sad happens they cry. Look to them for understanding, so that you too may glimpse the kingdom I am offering you and be unburdened too.”

And I think it is true. Sometimes we need children more than they need us. We need them because we become so captive to our own agendas and judgements, so burdened by our sense of responsibility, that we become twisted up and unable to respond naturally and trustingly to what is happening in this wonderful creation around us. And in times like that, as Jesus points out, it is children who can bring us back to our senses.

For example, grown ups in the past tended to push away our Old Testament reading from the Song of Solomon. They found that book far too sensuous and playful. “Come away”, it says,

for now the winter is past, the rain is over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land. The fig tree puts forth its

figs, and the vines are in blossom; they give forth fragrance. Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.

You can just see the pilgrim ancestors looking grimly at us from their portraits and saying “What’s all this frolicking among the fig trees? There is serious work to be done! There are goals to be achieved and mouths to feed. Jesus had a whole countryside’s worth of people to heal and so do we, and all he did was take a few precious hours to be alone. No, no! If Jesus did not give himself over to “frolicking” then neither should you!

God bless our ancestors for taking their responsibilities seriously in a way that is sorely missing today. But that no-nonsense and practical approach to life, cut off from our natural inclinations is something we too have internalized, in ways that are often necessary and but also destructive. (Because God didn’t create beautiful spring days so that we would ignore them. God created them for us to delight in them and be restored in them).

Fortunately, in the time before we adults impress the hard realities of life upon them, this “no nonsense” approach is unknown to children. They are able to live fully through their bodies and emotions, crying real tears and feeling really sad, and laughing real laughter and “running like gazelles”, on the playground, full of joy and expectation.

They live in an Eden where no fig leaves are necessary for concealment, because they have not yet experienced the injustices and betrayals that make us cynical and judgmental. They have not yet learned to hide behind a poker face and holding their cards close to their chests to protect themselves. They are not yet confused in their ability to respond naturally to the world around them.

And even as those of us who are grown ups place this yoke of responsibility on our children, we sense that our own lives are more confused and that the weight of the yokes we bear is a source of suffering for us. Perhaps at times, we feel twisted in such a way that we can identify with Paul, in the reading from Romans when he says, "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but what I hate, I do.

In my inmost self, I delight in the law of the Lord, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched person that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?

Ae Kamali'i

Way back when I was a minister in Hawaii, the church I served had a preschool. Once a week I would go into the classrooms and tell them a Bible story. And I always found it interesting that, as I approached the

school, my weighty thoughts would be somehow replaced by anticipation and joy, like Jesus sneaking in the back door.

The children would rush me and grab onto my arms and legs, and I would drag them across the playground toward the classrooms until a teacher came out and shooed them off. It was very amusing and heartwarming to be received with such unconcealed trust and open affection.

I remember also occasions where, for example, one child hit another and there would be crying and the teacher would go to work, turning it into a learning situation. So it is not as though the children were all perfectly behaved. But there was a straightforwardness to them. They expressed themselves in an unveiled way and I felt as though I could feel their happiness, their anger and their sadness very directly. And perhaps most refreshing to me was the absence of hatred.

A Sobering Contrast

One of the things that struck me most was the difference between the way I experienced those kids and many of their parents. Later in the day, the parents would arrive to pick up their kids. Some would wave, but most basically ignored or avoided me and the church altogether.

They often looked tired and weighed down. They kept their poker faces and they came and went quickly. Wow! I thought to myself. What happens to us that turns us from such joyful children into such sullen adults?

I knew that life was not easy for working families on the island. Most of the parents were Hawaiian's or other locals who worked in the service industry and hotels, where the big money is sucked off the island and into the hands of investors. So most lived on modest incomes. Hawaii legitimately has a wonderful "Spirit of Aloha". But it's also complicated. The Aloha Spirit can wear thin, for those who sense that they are being exploited.

Somewhere between childhood and adulthood, these parents were shaped in a way that made them more serious and gloomy, untrusting and sometimes bitter and discriminatory. They had learned to carry the weight of their responsibilities. But they were also carrying the weight of the bitternesses and hatreds that they were nursing; a weight their children didn't carry.

I understand that betrayal is a constant fact of life in this world. There are all kinds of situations in which people pretend that they are acting in your best interest, when they are very clearly throwing you under the

bus. And we know that it is not a good idea to naively trust everyone who comes along and that making everybody your best friend right away is dangerous.

But somehow the child in us has to survive as well. Somehow both our responsible adult selves and the inner child have to exist together in a way that doesn't push that child out of sight and into the background. Because without that inner child, I think we would probably lose sight of our connection with the heavenly existence God wants for all of us; where the garden is there for us to enjoy, the weight of bitterness and hatred is lifted, and we won't need "fig leaves" to hide behind.

"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest (says Jesus).... For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

Maybe in some cases, it's not such a bad thing that we many of us will become like children again as it comes closer to the time to go home.