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August 26, 2018 **Children's Celebration**

1 John 3:18-23

Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him.

And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us.

Matthew 18:1-5

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" He called a child, whom he put among them, and said, "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 in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.

There are times I just sit back and watch my girls... watch them soak in the world around them... learning and trying new things... practicing what they've learned, drawing letters and pictures, trying new rhyming words, using their imaginations. At 4 years old, they have such wonderful imaginations! They see ANYTHING as possible... the boundaries of reality don't limit them.

In our scripture this morning, Jesus says if we want to enter the kingdom of heaven, we need to change and become like children. I look at my girls and I see joy, playfulness, always a willingness to grow and learn and try new things. Even their stubbornness and fits of temper typically come in response to being told they cannot do something that they desperately want to do... reactions to the boundaries that we as adults put on them... of time and appropriateness. I'd like to think it is that child-like joy that brings us into the kingdom of heaven... where hope, no matter what's going on around us... hope wins out.

Where light shines through the darkness, it cannot be extinguished because there are no boundaries that can reign in the possibilities hope.

We as adults get so jaded... we squash new ideas before their possibilities can be fully realized... but children see the world in such positive ways. Everything is a new adventure. Everything can be taken for a playful learning experience, where good is expected just around the corner. And even when they're pouty and frustrating, crying and sad, usually a simple little thing, a smile or a tickle, the mention of their favorite toy, fun plans for the next day, a simple refocusing helps them to see that what's really important is not their sorrow or the brief fleeting sadness about not getting to do exactly what they wanted to do, but what's more important is what is yet to be... the moment of connection, of joy, of laughter... hope for what is coming next!

When I hear Jesus words, "you must change and become like a child," my 21st century mind immediately sees the inherent good of childhood ... the joy, hope, playfulness, and endless possibilities of the imagination. But we see children differently today than they saw them back in Jesus' day. Our society values and protects the rights of children. For us, children count! Children matter! In contrast, a child in the ancient world was without status or rights, seen as mere property of their father or caregiver, completely dependent on the good will of others to care for him or her. Being told to change and become like a child would NOT be seen as such a positive thing in Jesus' day.

But there is something that was as true of children 2000 years ago as it is today. Little ones do not come into the world with an innate desire for status and power. The idea of a two year old wondering how to achieve greatness is absurd. Children come into the world with one job: they are sponges! They are wonderfully made to absorb, to soak it all in, to learn and understand the world around them. This, of course, is why we have to watch them so closely... they live in a state of dangerous wonder. Everything they see and touch and experience is enthralling to them.

How do we achieve greatness? Not the kind of greatness that gets you elected to office, or earns you millions of dollars, but the kind of greatness that finds you a place in God's reign. We become like children... completely oblivious to position and rank, and completely open to a "volatile mix of astonishment and terror, awe and risk, amazement and fear, adventure and exhilaration, tears and laughter, passion and anticipation, daring and enchantment."¹

This is not something that comes naturally to us as adults. Most of us, no matter what our life's work, are caught up in a world that evaluates us, tells us brutally when we're successful or failing, ideally tries to help us improve, to do better, to achieve more. We are so busy trying to be the best, relying entirely on our gifts and the connections we're able to secure, that we forget about the One we're called to be completely dependent upon. Jesus says, "Whoever humbles themselves like this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:4). It is giving up our claims to success, power, and status and knowing one's total dependence on God that counts as greatness in the kingdom of heaven. If we are concerned about our own status, then we have missed the point completely.

¹ Michael Yaconelli, *Dangerous Wonder: The Adventure of Childlike Faith* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1998), 29.

And Jesus takes it one step further when he says, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me" (Matthew 18:5). Here in this church, we have a history of welcoming children, not only in worship, Sunday school, and youth group, but through early education partnerships as well. Over 30 years ago, the Learning Tree Preschool was founded, first for the benefit of our church members, but eventually it grew and opened up to the local community as well. We have recognized and celebrated the way early education programs not only help children grow and develop, but also help to support families. This year, as we embark on a new partnership with the Red Bank Public School Pre-K program, we are expanding our ability to serve the families in our community. During the week, this building will be hopping, with little feet stomping, and inquisitive minds racing! It is my prayer that through these partnerships, with both the Pre-K and Learning Tree, we can better serve the needs in our area. Conversations are already underway about new families who might be served by the Backpack Crew's feeding ministry and ways we might open up discussions with, or host seminars for, parents about contemporary challenges of parenting. The opportunities for connection and service are endless... if only we allow ourselves to dream with a child-like imagination.

I pray that as we enter another season in partnership with Learning Tree, and begin our relationship with the Red Bank Pre-K, that we do so with the heart and excitement of a child, ready to imagine new things... to learn and grow together. May we seek out ways of serving our community better each day, remembering always that that we depend on one another.

And may each of us in our own lives tap into our child-like heart, and live completely open to that "volatile mix of astonishment and terror, awe and risk, amazement and fear, adventure and exhilaration, tears and laughter, passion and anticipation, daring and enchantment."² May it be so... Amen.

² Michael Yaconelli, *Dangerous Wonder: The Adventure of Childlike Faith* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1998), 29.