

LIKE A CHILD

You heard the scene referenced twice already this morning, as one of our Scripture readings and as part of the order for baptism. The scene is that important--Jesus clearly admonishing his disciples and seeming to stick up for kids. "Let the little children come to me," he directs, "do not stop them" (Mk 10.14a).

While it pleases us that Jesus has a soft spot in his heart for our children, what stands out in that ancient memory is precisely why he holds them in such high regard. "It is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs," Jesus explains (10.14b).

As further evidence for the importance of this old story, both Matthew and Luke--who use Mark's account as their primary source--include it in their own gospel narratives [see Matthew 19.14 and Luke 18.16-17]. Remarkably, they do so with virtually no change in the language. That is not usually the case, meaning that in these two later Gospels the original message remains intact--there is a correlation between children and the capacity for receiving the kingdom of God (or the "kingdom of heaven," as Matthew prefers).

Of this, Jesus declares, ". . . Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it" (10.15).

Presumably, Jesus is not saying that, as a literal reading of the text would have it, only persons under the age of, say, 10 are eligible to enter the kingdom of God. That sort of leaves the rest of us (which is most of us gathered here this morning) completely out of the equation. So, if this literal understanding is rather silly, how else can it be read with positive results for everyone over the tender age of 10?

Let us begin to respond to that by recognizing that, surely, there are all sorts of "down sides" to being a young child--like having a world that is as large as only the few houses around one's own, or having a completely undefined sense of who one is, or of being physically weaker, emotionally less stable, intellectually less developed, or being relatively helpless and always needy. Replaying Jesus' words, it seems improbable that he has any of this in mind. Why, were we to carry such matters into our adult years, it would be generally thought that there is something wrong with us.

These are all aspects of what might be characterized as "childishness." When the apostle Paul says, "When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; [but] when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways," he is thinking of these things (1 Cor 13.11). He is thinking of things that we do well to outgrow.

What Jesus is thinking about, then, must be something else entirely. But what? What are the "up sides" to being a young child that they should factor so prominently as spiritual positives? What is there about children which not only distinguishes them from adults but which affords them easier access to "the kingdom," that gives them the advantage of a certain proximity to God?

These are good questions, and let me respond to them by sharing an experience I had recently.

I had occasion to be visiting with some friends who happen to have a young child. While we talked, the child played on the floor. On the one hand, I was attending to the flow of the conversation with the adults while, on the other, I continued to watch with great interest this child at play, being specifically reminded of this morning's story from the New Testament. What I saw, you have probably seen for yourself on any of those times where you actually paid attention to the children that are there, left just to being themselves, doing what

comes naturally.

What I observed was that this young boy was securely in his own imaginative world. He wasn't trying to do something, or say something, or be something aimed at impressing or pleasing the adults in the room. He was just being who he was, simply following his own internal cues to do with his toys the next thing that very-naturally occurred to him. He was as involved in his playful tasks as anyone could be, bringing great energy and focus and animation, to say nothing of spontaneous creativity, to what was unfolding on the floor before me. The little guy was fully in that world, pretty much oblivious to and unconcerned about the three adults who happened to be occupying the same space.

It occurred to me then that this being so in touch with and responsive to your own inner spirits, this being so in the moment and in sync with who you genuinely are, this being engrossed, engaged, absorbed in the experience so naturally at hand--these are things that God can use.

Surely, these are also some of the very things that, being adults, we have lost along the way, some of the things that we have had trained and educated out of us. These are some of the very things that, as adults, have atrophied on us, thanks to our submission to the always-misguided requirement that we "should" be someone else, that we "should" be doing something else, that we "should" be feeling or thinking something else. These very "shoulds" distance us from "the kingdom of heaven," where God is close, where the voices of our angels (and our devils) can be clearly heard, and where our divinely- creative genius is a constant familiar.

These were the things that I witnessed being acted out on that living room floor. These are things that we would do well to grow back into.

So, if what Jesus is not saying is that, quite literally, only persons under the age of, say, 10 are eligible to enter the kingdom of God, then there is still a chance for you and me. What he is saying is that, to the extent that we allow for the cultivation of a certain admirable "childlikeness" about ourselves, the door to the space which God occupies becomes apparent to us, too. As our kids already know, that door is always standing open; to the degree, however, that we are continuously distracted by our own noise and thrashing about, we just don't see that.

"Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it."

The bottom line here is simply profound, profoundly simple: The kingdom of heaven is not a place; it's a state of being.

Whoever does not approach this graced state of being, like a child would , will not be able to find it, let alone gain entrance to it.

It's an all-important question, then, to ask:

Where, then, in your life do you discover this child?

That is to say, where are you experiencing life like a child?