

Like a Child

A meditation given by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on March 6, 2022
Friendship Presbyterian Church

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. (Matthew 18:1-5, NRSV)

I'm sure you all have had your share of fun in your lives, joy along the way, but *everyone* should have the experience that I do just about every Wednesday at 9:45 AM, here in this Sanctuary – at least now that we're holding Preschool chapel in here again after two years.

All the children in the 3 and 4-year-old classes gather – close to 50 kids in all – for singing and a bible story and a prayer. I know the *kids* love it, and I know that it's the highlight of *my* week, because it's a weekly reminder for someone like me, who can live in his head so much of the time, to let go and remember what it was like to be a child.

The children can turn *anything* into something to celebrate – and they *do*! One of our favorite start-off songs is "Rise and Shine!" –

*Rise and shine and give God the glory, glory,
Rise and shine and give God the glory, glory,
Rise and shine and give God the glory, glory,
Children of the Lord!*

Aside from it just being fun anyway, it's what the kids spontaneously do while singing it that just gets me every time: they start jumping up and down, dancing! I don't have to ask them to – they just do it on their own and give themselves (and me and their teachers!) a workout! They don't care how silly it all may look ... they don't give it a passing thought. They simply give themselves to the dance.

I have to believe that Jesus loved this about little children. In our scripture passage this morning, he tells us that if we are to see the Kingdom of Heaven, we must *become* as children, to become "humble like a child."

Now it's important that we don't import too much sentimentality into this. From the context, it's clear that what Jesus has in mind is the place of the child in the society of his time. In their extremely hierarchical, stratified world, children were at the bottom of the totem pole – a condition lower than even that world in which my grandmother was raised in which, as she often said, children were "to be seen and not heard."

Jesus speaks of being *humble* ... being humble “like a child.” Now we may sometimes think of being humble – humility – as self-effacement, of thinking and speaking of yourself as lower than you may actually deserve. For instance, saying that you’re not really good at something when you and everyone else knows perfectly well that you are. But that’s not what this is about.

To be humble is to be modest, unpretentious, unassuming. Its opposite is arrogance, having an exalted view of one’s self at the expense of others. And so, to become “humble like a child” is to let go of the need to be somebody important; it’s to let go of self-seeking and pretension. And it’s to take up a way of life marked by simplicity and the willingness to serve, not really caring how silly that might look to others.

Maybe it shouldn’t be surprising that our words “humble” and “humility” ultimately derive from the Latin *humus*, meaning *earth*, or *ground*! Humble people are earthy, grounded people who live a grounded way of life. ... a way of life that recognizes our place in the scheme of things ... recognizes that we come from the earth, that we live off the bounty of the earth, and that we return to the earth ... that “We are dust, and to dust we shall return,” as we are reminded in this season of Lent

Such a way of life calls us to delight in the simple things, to cherish them while we can, thankful and appreciative of what we are given, in the time we are given. This path may not sound like such “good news” if we are implacably committed to our own ego, to our own image, our own walls and defenses which would demand to be guarded at all costs.

But what if we could learn to let go of all that? What if, little by little, we could learn from those preschool children something about simplicity and about letting go of the need to look respectable or to prove anything ... something about giving up our obsession with appearances, and simply giving ourselves to the dance. Would that not be Paradise? Would that not *be* the Kingdom of Heaven?

And so, on this first Sunday of Lent, as we celebrate “Simple Gifts,” may we hear the call of Jesus again –

*Dance, then, wherever you may be,
I am the Lord of the Dance, said he,
And I'll lead you all, wherever you may be,
And I'll lead you all in the Dance, said he.*

To the Glory of God! Amen.