

## Like a Little Child (Part One)

### *Unless you change and become like little children*

Reflection 16 in the series “The Last Great New Command”

Learning to live a life of love, part of being a place that helps us live a life of love, is re-acquiring some wisdom we knew as children. Children of course do the darndest things. Not all of them are good. When our youngest grandson with a gleam in his eye readies himself to swipe off my glasses, that’s not good. Or when he picks up a block and takes dead aim at the TV on the wall, that’s not helpful either. He does have a great arm for a three-year-old. What he aims at, he hits. And breaks. And one day the New York Giants may appreciate that. Us, now, not so much.

But now I want us to go back the true greatness of children – to the value not being childish but of being childlike. So I offer some reflections on being “Like a Little Child,” drawn from a text in Matthew 18:1-9, where Jesus teaches this truth: “Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” He’s answering the question – his disciples’ habitual question, the one they asked all the time – “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” And his answer is to call a little child and have him stand where all could see him, and to say to those following him, “I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. It’s the one who humbles himself like this child who is greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” And then, “Be careful that you do not cause one of these little ones to sin. If you do, it would be better to have a huge millstone [one of those great wheels for grinding grain that it takes oxen to turn] hung around your neck and be drowned in the sea. Because, Jesus goes on (now in verse 10), “their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven.”

But it’s that one thing I focus on: verse 3 – “Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” Jesus is saying, “Unless you make this remarkable change you’ll never participate in heaven’s reign on earth.” That’s what kingdom of heaven means. You’ll never be a part of this kingdom of love – this way of love – that Jesus came to create on earth, where the knowledge of the Lord fills the earth, and love and trust reign, and absolutely desperate parents don’t have to risk everything to get their kids to safety, and nations and ethnic groups do not keep replaying centuries of hostilities, like some kind of obscene cosmic Groundhog Day.

Jesus is saying, God’s reign – this reign of love – depends on people, on men and women who become like little children again: spontaneously friendly; naturally joyful; who don’t care what ethnicity or class or gender another person is, who’ll play with anyone of any religion, any background, any skin color; who forgive and forget, for whom each new day the world starts over and yesterdays get left behind; who are open to trust, find it easy to trust, naturally feel the world is a friendly place. There’s a Monkeys tune that keeps haunting me: “Remember the feeling as a child when you woke up and morning smiled. It’s time you felt like you did then.”

God's reign depends on people who, like little children, have a sense of wonder and curiosity and adventure and expectancy. There's another song, an old John Denver song called "Rhyme and Reason."

"Though you speak to me in sadness,  
and the coming of the winter,  
the fear that is within you now  
that seems to never end,  
and the dreams that have escaped you,  
and the hope that you've forgotten.

...

And you wonder, "Where we're going?  
Where's the rhyme and where's the reason?  
And if you cannot accept,  
it is here we must begin  
to seek the wisdom of the children  
and the graceful way of flowers in the wind.

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Though the cities start to crumble  
and the towers fall around us,  
the sun is slowly fading  
and it's colder than the sea,  
it is written,  
From the desert to the mountains,  
they shall lead us.  
By the hand and by the heart  
they will comfort you and me.  
In their innocence and trusting  
they will teach us to be free.

...

And the song that I am singing  
is a prayer for nonbelievers:  
Come and stand beside us.  
We can find a better way.

In fact, in this teaching of Jesus, something very deep is going on, deeper than we at first imagine, something primal that goes to the core of our being. The truth is – and many psychologists now tell us this – there is still a little child inside all of us, whatever age we are. We meet that child in life's strangest moments, in those "What-the-heck-was-that-all-about" moments, when we do these things we can't understand: we feel a sudden blinding rage, or some crazy burst of spontaneity, or some sudden shudder, maybe a sense of panic, or an instant of irrepressible joy, or a moment you inexplicably freeze or lash out.

Here, I think, is what's going on. Inside each of us is still a little child – needing desperately to be wrapped up in a love we can trust, a love that comforts us, heals us, assures us, adores us, a love that puts us ahead of things, that doesn't give up on us when we are weak or even wrong, that tells us we matter, that we are taken seriously, that we are still somehow loveable.

– Dale Pauls

*Part Two (of two) next week*