

“Assuredly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God as a little child will by no means enter it”. What strange words these are from our Savior this morning. But more than being strange, we need to hear them as offensive, for that’s exactly how they would have been heard by Jesus’ audience. It’s hard for us to do that, I know, because in our time, children are considered the center of the family and the whole world revolves around them. But this was not the case in Biblical times. In the ancient world, children had virtually the same status as slaves. In fact, the Greek word that is used in our text for ‘children’ can either mean a child or a slave. By way of example, consider how in Roman times the father acted as judge and jury over his own family, and could even execute his own children if the crime or insult warranted it. St. Paul, picking up on this line of thought, said that a child, even if he is destined to inherit all things, is no different from a slave until he reaches the age of maturity. Knowing all of this, Jesus still insisted we become like children. And to make matters more complicated, it wasn’t just any type of child Jesus had in mind, but a *little* child—a barely walking, barely speaking, toddler. But how do you suppose we do that? How do we become like children? In preparation for this sermon, I looked at how others in the past have interpreted this passage. Here’s some of what I discovered: to become like a child means to return to our innocence; to become like a child means to be open and honest; or better yet, to become like a child means to approach life playfully or whimsically. I think each one of these interpretations contains a kernel of truth, but I’d like to throw my hat in the ring and offer a few more ways to think about this text.

To get us started let’s retrace familiar ground by asking ourselves: What is it about a child that so closely resembles the life of faith? I suppose the most obvious answer would be a child’s dependance on another. Small children can’t survive without constant help and supervision. They are dependent on their parents for everything. Food, clothing, shelter—they receive everything by grace without having ever earned or deserved any of it. Small children show us what it means to trust, for we too receive all things by God’s grace. Everything that we have, everything that we are, is borrowed from God Himself and none of it is ours.

A little less obvious answer might be that children reflect God’s eternity. Children have no concept of time, which is often to the chagrin of their parents who try so hard to work a daily schedule. Children live in the now; they have very little awareness of the past and almost no awareness of the future. Tell a child that they will be going to Disneyworld in a month’s time, and they will be overjoyed by the prospect, but have no way of

conceptualizing how long a month really is. In fact, it's dangerous even to do such a thing. Tell a child too far in advance and as a parent you set yourself up for endless badgering: "Is it time...is it time...how about now, is it time?!" So, in this way, small children show us what it is to live in the eternal now of God's Being. Excited about the moment, not worrying about the next. Tomorrow isn't promised. "This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it."

The least obvious answer to the question might just be the best. Children have this wonderful ability to exult in monotony and find something extraordinary in the ordinary. As we get older, our patience runs thin, and we lose our ability to take pleasure in the simple things of life. The world becomes a chore, and we can't help but slog our way through the daily grind. Sin has aged us. It's made our bones brittle and our minds bitter; our world gets smaller and smaller with the passage of time. You would think that with age would come this reckless abandon to suck out all the marrow of life before time runs out, but I find it's just the opposite. Life becomes the "be all-end all" to be preserved at all cost. Life becomes an idol, and we cling to life so tightly that we almost choke out God. But to a child the world is new and grand. To lose the world would mean nothing to them, but to have it is everything. Each day comes as a surprise. There is nothing more joyful in this life than seeing the absolute thrill on the face of child who has just woken up; It's like they almost didn't expect it to happen, but now that it has, they're excited about it. Our Lord is eternally youthful. Like a child, He exalts in the everyday precisely because He is perfect and hasn't been aged by sin. To bring on the seasons, to call down the rain, to bring up the flowers, to shine forth light and life, these aren't predictable or mechanical certainties, but creative miracles. God exults in monotony not because He is boring or lacks imagination, but because, like a child, the world is satisfying to Him in all its repetitious rhythms. Only God and children can find joy in doing the same thing over and over again. What God and children do with ease, though, we adults struggle to understand, that this life of ours is not lived in recollection with all of its past human inevitability, but in repetition with all of its present Divine possibility. The repetition of God and His world is a hopeful reminder that life is not doomed, after all. In Christ, we can live again for the first time. This is our child-like hope: this world we occupy can be better, we can be better, if not now then soon in the new creation of God's Kingdom. Amen.