

Proper 20, Year B[Jeremiah 11:18-20](#)[Psalms 54](#)[James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a](#)[Mark 9:30-37](#)**Childlike Faith**

“How do lizards mate?” That’s what Bishop Gray got in chapel two weeks ago for asking the children if they had any questions. “How do lizards mate?” Without missing a beat, Duncan looked at the boy and said, “They stare deeply into each other’s eyes.” That answer was enough. As someone pointed out to me recently children don’t need complex answers to questions that make us uncomfortable, just simple plain answers are enough. Being with children is an adventure because you’re never quite sure what they’re going to ask or what they might say. Children are unafraid to ask questions when they don’t understand something, and they’re infinitely curious.

Children also are not terribly self-conscious. They’ll walk out of the house wearing two different colors of rain boots, a Disney princess costume, a Ninja Turtle sword, and a fireman’s helmet. And they’ll think they’re awesome! They don’t care what people think about them. I watch the little ones in our school every day who are unafraid to love on one another. Boys will hug other little boys, walk hand-in-hand with each other down the hall. Totally unselfconscious, totally open to appropriate displays of affection, totally loving and filled with life.

And kids will be friends with anyone! I remember as a little kid walking up to another boy and saying, “Hi! I’m Robbie! What’s your name? Will you be my friend?” “Sure! I’m Sean! Let’s play!” That was it! No other qualifications required. You’re a kid, I’m a kid, let’s do this! Children are completely open to each other, and don’t focus on

differences that easily divide adults.

Children are always willing to help one another and they look out for one another. If one is crying the other will put a hand under her chin and say, “It’s okay! Don’t cry! What can I do for you?” They will run to an adult for someone when she needs help. Children love to help each other, and they love to help adults. They want to serve. They’re compassionate. And when you ask them what they want to be when they grow up what do you hear generally? Doctor! Nurse! Firefighter! Policeman! Teacher! Astronaut! Artist! Superhero! They want to be people who help others, who serve the community, who explore and create. Children are filled with hope and a desire to be part of something larger than themselves.

Now, don’t get me wrong. Children certainly have their moments. They can be pouty, selfish, sometimes infuriating. Generally, though, they are a joy, and have a way of looking at the world that can disarm an adult instantly. As we’ve just noted they’re curious, observant, and can cut through an adult’s boloney with their simple, probing questions. They’re not as self-conscious as we adults who are always worried about how others perceive us. Children will befriend anyone without judgment. They’re totally open, always desiring to be helpful to others. They don’t spend their lives comparing and wondering if they’re good enough. If they live in a loving community they know they’re good enough. It’s only when we get older that we start to obsess about being good enough. We don’t even want to be *good enough* as adults. We strive to be great! And that’s where we get into trouble.

Come to think of it, it says a lot that when Jesus wanted to point his disciples to an example of how to be truly great he would point to a child. He uses a child as a stand-

in for himself as a way of laying bear what I would call, ironically, the disciples' *childishness*. Right after the disciples hear again a prediction of Jesus' Passion, a prediction that he will be betrayed, killed, and will rise again three days later, Mark says the disciples "did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him." They just didn't get it, so they just shut down out of fear of looking dumb. Or maybe the "competition for power, wealth, and prestige [that] infected all of the cultures in the Roman Empire (as it does the cultures of the modern world)," was so much a part of their values, that they just decided not to take him seriously, even if this was a subconscious decision.¹ Whatever the case, as they walk along the road, they argue with each other over who is the greatest. They started comparing and arguing *childishly*, as we adults can do. As letter of James we heard read earlier says, "Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts." Jesus' words did not fit their worldview, and they wanted something else. They wanted the kind of prestige, power, and success that the culture says we should want. They start acting *childishly*. To snare them in their childish behavior Jesus points them to a child.

There is a difference between being childish and being childlike. When I looked up the two words in the dictionary it even noted that the two words can be confused. It said childish can mean weak or silly. Childlike, however, denoted innocence and frankness. I asked Dr. Jeanne what she thought the difference between the two was, and

¹ Sharon H. Ringe, *Feasting on the Word*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, vol. 4, *Year B Volume 4: Season after Pentecost 2 (Kindle Edition)*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), Loc. 3481.

she said, “I think when we say someone is being childish we really can’t be talking about children. We always use it to describe how an adult is behaving!” She’s right! We never tell a child they’re behaving childishly. She pointed out that we say it about adults when they’re not living up to their adult status. To be childish is to be pouty, selfish, bratty—which, of course, children can sometimes be. But to be *childlike* is to have all the virtues of children that we talked about earlier: to be innocent, trusting, caring, loving, joyful, and hopeful. This is something like what our patron Paul meant in 1 Cor. 13. In describing the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love he tells those Corinthian adults who are not living up to their adult status, “When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.” In other words, stop your childish fighting, and be childlike by loving.

Jesus never says in our gospel reading that we shouldn’t strive to be great. In fact, in this reading, after the disciples argue, he says “whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” *Whoever wants to be first*. He didn’t say we shouldn’t strive to be great. He admits some of us want to be great, and said in order to be great we have to be last and to be a servant. Then he shows them a child, who in Jesus’ world was next to nothing. Children were seen and not heard. One writer explains, “A child did not contribute much of anything to the economic value of a household or community, and a child could not do anything to enhance one’s position in the struggles for prestige or influence. One would obtain no benefit from according to a child the hospitality or rituals of honor or respect that one might offer to someone of higher status or someone whose

favor one wanted to curry. Children and servants were of equally low social status.”² The Middle Eastern world of the first century did not view children the way that we do today, so perhaps you can see that this was not some sappy scene—to the disciples it would have been totally shocking. He tells them, “To be great you must be of no value to the society around you. You must be something different. Don’t be childish like those who participate in a style of petty, shallow competition. Be childlike in virtue of being loving, open, compassionate, joyful, and respectful of all.”

Today, we bring two beautiful children into our Christian community, and through the sacrament of baptism we make them children of God. They are already made in God’s image, already of surpassing value in God’s eyes and their parents eyes, already plenty good enough. One day, because it’s the nature of this world, they will not feel so valuable. They will feel like we feel sometimes. They will worry. They will compare themselves to others. They will wonder if they are good enough. They will want to be great. They will sometimes try to find greatness in all the wrong places. It’s our job to show them how they can be truly great. We will answer a set of questions together that we call our Baptismal Covenant. Two of those questions apply especially in this context: Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself? Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being? The virtues these questions point us to are childlike virtues, and they are the stuff the truly great are made of. Moms and dads, godparents, extended family, church: as our children grow we have to show them, by our actions, the difference between being childish and being childlike. We have to encourage them to strive to be great, just as

² Ringe, Loc. 3493-3495.

Jesus did. And that means we, too, have to remember for ourselves what greatness truly is. When you forget, look down at the little person asking you how lizards mate. Because Jesus tells us that to welcome such a one is the same as welcoming God.

WORKS CITED

Ringe, Sharon H.. *Feasting on the Word*. Edited by David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor. Vol. 4, *Year B Volume 4: Season after Pentecost 2 (Kindle Edition)*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.