

Season after Pentecost [Proper 22B]

October 3, 2021 Haven Lutheran Church, Hagerstown MD

Readings: Psalm 8; Mark 19: 13-16

“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen”

When author Anne Lamott taught a Sunday School class of very young boys, they always did this ritual called “Loved and Chosen.” She would sit “on the couch and glance slowly around in a goofy, menacing way, and then said, ‘Is anyone here wearing a blue sweatshirt with Pokémon on it?’ [They would all look down at their chests and the one wearing the sweatshirt] looked astonished to discover that he matched the description — like, what are the odds? He raised his hand. ‘Come over here to the couch,’ she would say. ‘You are so loved, and so chosen.’ [He would beam] like a beauty pageant finalist. Then she asked if anyone that day was wearing green socks with brown shoes, a Giants cap, an argyle vest? [How amazing!] Each of them turned out to be loved and chosen...”¹

Each of those boys in Lamott’s class were learning what the disciples in the gospel were still struggling to get. No one was to be excluded from God’s grace and kingdom — not the fevered, leper, paralytic, tax collectors, the man with the withered hand, the demon-possessed, 12-year hemorrhaging women, 5,000 hungry people, the deaf, the blind, slow-to-learn disciples OR children and babies. This is at the core of the will and kingdom of God. EVERYONE is a child of God and welcomed. It would be among the reasons Jesus would be killed and at the heart of why he would give up his life. That is why Jesus gets testy with the disciples who were trying to keep the parents and children away. He found himself needing to teach, yet again, that it is God, not us, who sets the conditions for entering into the Kingdom of God. For it is such as these — the powerless and little, those who are without resources or prestige, utterly dependent — that the kingdom of God belongs. (10:14b) As Jesus had been demonstrating all along — NO ONE is to be pushed aside. In God’s kingdom, EVERYONE is among God’s loved and chosen. Even if their diapers are soggy, their hands are sticky, their tummy’s upset, their manners still a-work-in-progress... let the little children come unto me.

But Jesus wasn't done with the lesson. "Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." How do children receive the kingdom of God? What are the qualities of children that Jesus is pointing to as he takes them in his arms and blesses them?

In most sermons I preach at funerals, I mention that those who believe and trust in God and God's promises are freed to live simply extraordinary lives of love, strength and service. When you trust God's love and goodness in all kinds of circumstances, you not only can persevere, you can thrive. Before they learn not to, children trust the adults who care for them. Children don't ask for proof of insurance and qualifications when Dad throws them in the air or Mom swings them. They grin and giggle because they trust their Dad will catch them and their Mom will hold tight. "When the teacher tells them that 2 plus 2 equals 4, they don't demand empirical evidence to back it up, they simply believe it to be true because the teacher knows best and wouldn't lie to them."² As we grow older and have experience with the untrustworthy, we become more cautious and discerning about people and information. Jesus reminds us today that such caution and hesitation does not apply to God. When we trust God and God's promises without reservation, we live more freely, fiercely and confidently.

One of the things that amaze parents and grandparents is a child's enthusiastic openness to wonder. The first time a baby grabs their own feet, it's like a new discovery — what's this...attached to me... well, I wonder what it tastes like..." When you're with a child, you get to see the world anew. Tony Campolo tell about a "friend who has a five-year-old daughter. He ran upstairs to see her one day because there was a thunderstorm -- lightning, thunder roaring, light flashing. When he got to her room, his little girl was standing on the window sill, leaning spread-eagle against the glass, lightning, thunder flashing, roaring outside. He said, "Jennifer, what are you doing?" She said, "I think God is trying to take my picture."³ You see their wonder in their questions as they try to understand: Where does the sun go at night? Why can't we go pick a dog off a tree like we

do apples? Do my toys come to life like those in the movie Toy Story? Where does God live? Wonder opens up our hearts and minds to be curious and appreciative of the vastness of creation. That's one of the things happening in the psalm we read this morning. Its author is utterly amazed by the Lord and all that God has made and the partnership God made with humans to oversee and care for creation. That wonder is a gateway to yet another child quality --- creativity and imagination.

The first disciples of Jesus were not any more dense than we are when it comes to understanding God's ways and dreams. They were adults, like many of us, who have grown to be very practical and realistic. How else do you function in the world and provide for your family? But there was a time when our minds were wide open to the impossible. There was a time when it was perfectly reasonable to think a purple dinosaur or a big, yellow bird could talk and walk, or there was a school for wizards or super heroes who used their power for good. The range of possibilities was not limited by physics, biology or "the way we've always done it."

We might likely say that's because adults are more sensible than children, more in touch with reality. Yet what kind of mental leap beyond the ordinary did it take to imagine training dogs to be guides for the blind and assistants for the disabled? ⁴ What kind of creative hop did it take to imagine voices sent through wires or towers.... or electricity that can come through a plug in the wall? Who went beyond common sense to think that information could be stored on a chip smaller than a fingernail?

That imagination that fuels a child's world and drives scientists and inventors is the same imagination disciples need to fully grasp God's Kingdom dream of a world where love and compassion are more important than money or being number one where communities welcome everyone — even those others would reject. It takes an imagination rooted in faith to begin to see that it's possible to care as much about others and their well-being as about ourselves... and to believe God is present and will be victorious even when we can't see how that can possibly be in our current situation. It takes the open heart and

spirit of a child to live in the wildest of truths — that we are so unconditionally and eternally loved by God... that living gratefully, fearlessly and full of expectation is really the only imaginable way to live. It all wouldn't seem the least bit possible without a child-like wonder, imagination and trust in the goodness and power of God.

Jesus says, "Let the little children come to me.... receive the kingdom of God as a little child." No one is excluded. Regardless of age, we are all God's children. A child-like, faithful is not being a Pollyanna or ignoring reality. Rather, Jesus shows us, faith in him allows us to tap into the divine imagination that created an amazing world and came up with the unthinkable idea ---- to come down as a vulnerable baby that we might know the depth and passion of God's love. The love and Kingdom of God is our Lord's gift to us. Imagine continuing to accept and open that gift with the gusto of a child. In wonder and trust, dare to imagine how God can use each of us and Haven Church to make God's kingdom a dream come true. Hold this picture in your memory — Jesus, praising our trust, dependence, wonder, and enthusiastic imagination, who then takes *us*, his loved and chosen, up in his arms, to bless beyond our wildest imagining. Come to me, Jesus says, no matter your age. Receive the kingdom of God as a little child. Amen.

Linda M Alessandri 10/2/21

ENDNOTES

1. Ann Lamott, Grace (Eventually): Thoughts on Faith, New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2007 pp 28-29

2. Pastor Schreiner, "Jesus Loves the Little Children," May 8, 2016 posted at mountoliveappleton.com

3. Tony Campolo, "If I Should Wake before I Die," as posted on <https://www.preachingtoday.com/sermons/sermons/2005/august/124.html>

4. Adapted from a sermon by Julie Adkins, "Behaving Like Children.... of God" posted on www.goodpreacher.com