LIKE A CHILD
a sermon by
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A group of expectant fathers were in a waiting room, while their wives were in the process of delivering babies. A nurse came in and announced to the waiting father to be, “You have twins!” “What a coincidence” he responded, "I play for the Minnesota Twins!” A few minutes later another nurse came in and announced to another man that he was the father of triplets. "That's amazing," he exclaimed, "I work for the 3M company." At that point, a third man slipped off his chair and lay down on the floor. Somebody asked him if he was feeling ill. "No," he responded, "I happen to work for the 7-up company."

WC Fields is alleged to have said, "Anybody who hates children and animals can't be all bad." Mark Twain voiced his philosophy about teenage children when he said, "When a kid turns 13, stick him in a barrel, nail the lid shut, and feed him through the knot hole. When he turns 16, plug the hole."

What a contrast with the Biblical concept of children! In the Bible children are revered and numbered among the most profound of human blessings. In the OT, children, especially orphans, along with widows, enjoy special protection and are honored as holding a place of favor in God's eyes. In the NT, over the objections of his WC Fields-like disciples, Jesus insisted that little children be allowed to come to see him. And of greatest significance, Jesus insisted that the proper approach to God was LIKE a child.

In a saying recorded in all three synoptic gospels Jesus says, "UNLESS YOU CHANGE AND BECOME LIKE CHILDREN, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." Unless YOU CHANGE and COME AS A CHILD. What an insight into the human predicament! For if there is one thing our world is NOT, it is childlike. We are cynical and skeptical. Distrustful of others. Looking for ulterior motives. Motivated by just about any conviction OTHER THAN FAITH.

Robert Fulghum wrote in those oft quoted lines, "Most of what I really need to know about how to live, and what to do, and how to be, I learned in kindergarten. Wisdom was not at the top of the graduate school mountain, but there in the sandbox at nursery school. These are the things I learned: Share everything. Play fair. Don't hit people. Put things back where you found them. Clean up your own mess. Don't take things that aren't yours. Say you're sorry when you hurt somebody…When you go out into the world, watch for traffic, hold hands, and stick together. “ In other words, all you really need to know to know how to live, is to live like a child.

The 19th century theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher spoke of faith as the feeling of ABSOLUTE DEPENDENCE on God. The way a young child is absolutely dependent. As Jesus said, "UNLESS YOU CHANGE AND BECOME LIKE CHILDREN, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Now Jesus was not suggesting we need to approach God with the limited understandings of a young child. But he sure is suggesting that HIS kind of faith was like the eager embracing of child and loving parent. The child is the pattern of faith, the model for how any person can and should present one's self to God: With openness, trust, and wonder. Without pretense.
Jesus does not say, "be CHILDISH". He says, COME AS A CHILD. There is a difference. Immature and naive knowledge naturally gives way to critical thinking. But the openness and candor and eagerness for God we see in children can be a lifelong attitude that stays with you long after you have put aside childish ways.

In her 1976 book PASSAGES, Gail Sheehy opened up for many of us a new awareness of the changes and crises of adult life. Human development begins at conception and to middle age and old age.

And so also faith is a developmental process throughout ALL of life. Hearing Jesus' call we come to God with child-like openness and continue to grow throughout all of our lives. But child-like faith becomes childish faith if it fails to grow as WE grow.

Jesus said, "UNLESS YOU CHANGE AND BECOME LIKE CHILDREN, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." And, Whoever welcomes a child in my name welcomes me.

In Jesus' eyes, the way to approach God is LIKE A CHILD, and we welcome Christ when we WELCOME CHILDREN. But note too, the subtlety of the message. Jesus says COME as a CHILD - not STAY a child. How is that Paul put it? 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.

John Westerhoff in a book entitled Will our children have faith talks about four stages of faith development: There is the given faith, which we receive and with which we are marked at baptism. We then move on to affirmative faith when we confirm the faith given us in earlier years. But if we are to continue to grow spiritually, Westerhoff says, we must experience questioning faith. It is only through the questioning experience that we can come to an owned faith - the fourth stage of faith development.

Faith is born in child-like love and wonder before God. Faith takes root and is nurtured the way we nurture children. But there comes a time when the faith GIVEN, and the faith AFFIRMED must be owned as one's own.

In home and at church we are pretty good at nurturing and affirming the faith that is GIVEN. But how good a job are we doing when our children get to the questioning era? How hard are WE trying when WE and our peers enter the questioning passage of faith and life? Yet, Westerhoff has found that only a person who has questioned his faith can come through on the other side to OWNING his faith once given to him. (cf LA3:2:59)

Henry Ward Beecher said, “You cannot teach a child to take care of himself unless you will let him take care of himself. He will make mistakes, and out of these mistakes will come his wisdom.”

I think the hardest stage of parenting is remaining connected to your child when he or she enters that questioning stage of life. That stage when it is important for the youth both to challenge authority, and to begin to act independently – and to make his OWN mistakes – not just the mistakes of his parents. In this reaching for young adulthood, character is born and lifelong personality traits become manifest. This is also the stage when the faith passed down, the faith which has taken root, begins to be the faith claimed and treasured for one’s self.
Supporting and nurturing persons in the questioning stage of faith development is the church’s most difficult, but most important task. For no matter what your chronological age – youth, young adult, middle adult, mature adult – that passage from the faith of childhood to the faith of full adulthood is typically a stormy one. And the challenge of faith is to retain that child-like dependence upon God, while living with the complexities and ambiguities of modern life.

Writer Andrew Vachss asks, "Do you know the difference between an elephant and an alligator?" Neither the elephant nor the alligator has natural enemies. One’s a mammal and one’s a reptile. One lives on land and visits water, and the other lives in the water and visits land. One is a meat-eater and the other is a vegetarian. But Vachss suggests there is a deeper, more essential difference between an alligator and an elephant:

An ALLIGATOR emerges from his egg a perfectly formed predator. It will not GROW, only get larger. It learns nothing. From birth on, an alligator is a fighter. But no matter how big the alligator gets, it will always only be what it was born to be.

A baby ELEPHANT on the other hand, cannot survive on its own. Like human babies, the elephant calf needs nurturing, needs protection. Without love, it dies. Depending how it is raised, a baby elephant grows to be a work animal, or a performer, or a peaceful beast living in harmony with nature. How an elephant turns out depends on how it is raised. (LA2:2:11)

Friends: we're not raising alligators around here. We're nurturing elephants, persons who are growing, trying, failing, trying again, and moving forward. Youthful creations of God on their way to becoming the rulers of the jungle. Young adults finding their way as they move from youth to adulthood. Adults seeking meaning in a life that has become empty of joy and meaning. Questioning persons of every age seeking Christ, yearning for God, reaching for faith’s answers to the vexing dilemmas of daily living.

Friends: Jesus said, unless you become like a child before God, you will not find the full joys of a life with God. Change and become like children! Welcome a child and welcome Christ into your life! And by grace through faith you will enter the kingdom of God. AMEN.

Matthew 18:1-5

1At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” 2He called a child, whom he put among them, 3and said, “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. 4Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. 5Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.

Luke 18:15-17

15People were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them; and when the disciples saw it, they sternly ordered them not to do it. 16But Jesus called for them and said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. 17Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.”
I Corinthianas 13:11

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.