

## 1 Sermon, September 12, 2010

Texts: Matthew 18:1-6, 1 Samuel 3:1-20

Title: "Becoming Like Children"

Imagine you live in the ancient Middle East, and you are a woman forty-five years old. You have stopped bearing children. You have given birth to seven children. Four died young.

You have a husband (and you're lucky, because half of the women your age are widowed), but when your husband is gone, your twenty-eight-year-old son is in charge. He is respectful, but he is in charge.

That's the way it's supposed to be. You've had children in order to carry on your husband's name. You are blessed to have a son who will provide for you, give you a home and take care of you as you age. Whether or not he loves you — that's not so important. It's a plus when he takes time to listen to you.

Your twenty-six-year old daughter is married and living in her husband's home. You don't see her much anymore. She lives ten miles away. When she has children, it is not your place to go and help; that is their mother-in-law's place.

And your fifteen-year-old son is already engaged to a thirteen-year-old-girl from a good family. You look forward to this young girl coming under your roof. You hope your younger son will treat her well, because he does have a temper.

You think about children. You give so much of your life to have them, and then they're gone. Half of them die young. Half of the ones who survive join another family and you don't see much of them. And the sons who survive are soon bearing adult responsibility, and really don't listen to their mother anymore.

As a woman, if you *don't* have children, you're nothing. If you do have children, you have to train them to work, or the family will have nothing. So you spend time training them to do their duty, and then they're gone, or don't pay you much mind anymore.

No wonder children in the ancient world had a lowly status. They, too, were there for the perpetuation of the father's family name. They were not so much persons, as means to an end. If you had an adult slave, you could expect the slave to be with you for years. Not so a child. So children had much the status of slaves until they reached adulthood. Then the girls might be married off in a way that was favorable to the family, making a strong connection with another family who could help provide that safety net. The boys upon reaching adulthood could be expected to carry on the family name and care for their parents.

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This is the context for Jesus saying, "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me. "If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea."

Change and become like children!

That doesn't mean that we become innocent: it means we become *invisible*. It must have been a shock to the disciples to hear this. Become like a child, with no rights, living in the background to the lives of adults.

We might think that to become like a child would be to adopt an attitude of openness and wonder. But that's not what Jesus meant. We might think that to become like a child would be about the easy joy that children have. But, no, back then children did not have easy joy.

We, in our modern conscience think of children as precious, so the legislature makes sure that children have Badgercare, even if the parents don't. Any number of charities try to make sure children have gifts at Christmas. Other charities invite you to "adopt" a child in a far away place.

But Jesus had a very different background. Children were the lowliest on the socio-economic ladder.

To serve someone as lowly as a child took an act of extreme humility. Unlike our Western societies that honor and esteem children, ancient societies honored the elderly in one's clan. Reflecting this outlook, St. Thomas Aquinas once answered the question, "If there was a fire, whom should I rescue first?" Thomas listed in the order of importance: one's parents first, one's spouse second, one's children last of all. Children were the least important.

Jesus said that if we want to be great, we should become like children, whose future was uncertain, who had few rights, who had few advocates.

It is really just reaffirming what Jesus said in other ways: that the last would be first in the Kingdom of God, that those who give up their lives for Jesus' sake would *find* their lives.

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Jesus said that "Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."

Becoming humble speaks of humility: not drawing attention to oneself, intentionally giving the glory to God and to others.

But humble also means lowly in status: we talk about humble origins, born in humble circumstances. This kind of humble is more like the word humiliated. It's not something we choose – but it comes on us from outside. This kind of humble refers to those who are poor, whose clothing is patched, who eat a lot more beans than meat, because they can't afford meat.

"Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."

Becoming humble can also mean admitting you're wrong. You made a mistake, so you'll start over and try to do it right. Jesus was often talking about seeing and hearing anew. He said:

"Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear? And do you not remember? When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you collect?" They said to him, "Twelve." "... Then he said to them, "Do you not yet understand?"" Mark 8:18-21, NRSV.

Whether it's giving the credit to others, being poor, or seeing anew – Jesus was certainly talking about not thinking you're the greatest. He was certainly talking about respecting others, being ready to learn, open to God's leading.

Which brings us to the story of Samuel.

Samuel was from humble circumstances, his mother originally being looked down upon by the priest, Eli. Samuel was given by his mother into the service of the temple – to live with strangers and serve them much as a slave would.

Samuel, as a child, knew his place. He did what he was told, and tried to do the right thing. He was humble in all the senses of the word.

And when Samuel, on his little sleeping pad in the temple, heard the voice of God, he did what an obedient boy would do. He went to Eli and asked him what he wanted.

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He did that three times, until Eli realized that *the Lord* was speaking to Samuel, and so he told Samuel to say, "Speak, Lord, for your servant listens."

Jesus was telling us to be like Samuel, who was humble and who listened. Samuel listened even to the bad news that the Lord had to tell him. And when Eli commanded him to reveal the Lord's message, Samuel told Eli the bad news about himself and his sons.

Jesus said we should change and become like children!

And He also said that we should *welcome* children. He dramatized his point by taking a child into their little group. Here we had Rabbi Jesus and his students, serious students. There would have been no room for small children in the ordinary gathering of a rabbi and his followers. So it was a really discordant note, a real double-take moment, a really jarring thing when Jesus put a child in their midst.

The disciples may have thought that Jesus was insulting them to say that they should welcome children – welcome children into the ranks of those learning from Jesus. They may have thought that children weren't important enough to learn from Jesus.

But Jesus said, "Let the children come to me, because the Kingdom of God belongs to them and others like them."

Welcoming children means that if children are the invisible ones, we should start seeing them.

If children are the weak ones, we should *assist* them.

If children are the forgotten ones, we should *remember* them.

If children are seen as only there to perpetuate their father's name, we should *remember* that the name of God is imprinted on their being.

It is really about more than children. It is about welcoming the least and the last and the lost into our midst and valuing and cherishing them.

Today is the official beginning of Sunday School. So we welcome the children. We rejoice that we have a growing children's ministry. We know that Jesus would have us reach out to more children.

Amen.

**Matthew 18:1-6 (Contemporary English Version)**

1 About this time the disciples came to Jesus and asked him who would be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. 2 Jesus called a child over and had the child stand near him. 3 Then he said:

I promise you this. If you don't change and become like a child, you will never get into the kingdom of heaven. 4 But if you are as humble as this child, you are the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. 5 And when you welcome one of these children because of me, you welcome me.

6 It will be terrible for people who cause even one of my little followers to sin. Those people would be better off thrown into the deepest part of the ocean with a heavy stone tied around their necks!

**Matthew 18:1-6 (The Message)**

1 At about the same time, the disciples came to Jesus asking, "Who gets the highest rank in God's kingdom?"

2-5 For an answer Jesus called over a child, whom he stood in the middle of the room, and said, "I'm telling you, once and for all, that unless you return to square one and start over like children, you're not even going to get a look at the kingdom, let alone get in. Whoever becomes simple and elemental again, like this child, will rank high in God's kingdom. What's more, when you receive the childlike on my account, it's the same as receiving me. 6-7" But if you give them a hard time, bullying or taking advantage of their simple trust, you'll soon wish you hadn't. You'd be better off dropped in the middle of the lake with a millstone around your neck. Doom to the world for giving these God-believing children a hard time! Hard times are inevitable, but you don't have to make it worse—and it's doomsday to you if you do.

**1 Samuel 3:1-20 (Contemporary English Version)**

1-2 Samuel served the LORD by helping Eli the priest, who was by that time almost blind. In those days, the LORD hardly ever spoke directly to people, and he did not appear to them in dreams very often. But one night, Eli was asleep in his room, 3 and Samuel was sleeping on a mat near the sacred chest in the LORD's house. They had not been asleep very long 4 when the LORD called out Samuel's name. "Here I am!" Samuel answered. 5 Then he ran to Eli and said, "Here I am. What do you want?"

"I didn't call you," Eli answered. "Go back to bed."

Samuel went back.

6 Again the LORD called out Samuel's name. Samuel got up and went to Eli. "Here I am," he said. "What do you want?"

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Eli told him, "Son, I didn't call you. Go back to sleep."

**7**The LORD had not spoken to Samuel before, and Samuel did not recognize the voice. **8**When the LORD called out his name for the third time, Samuel went to Eli again and said, "Here I am. What do you want?"

Eli finally realized that it was the LORD who was speaking to Samuel. **9**So he said, "Go back and lie down! If someone speaks to you again, answer, 'I'm listening, LORD. What do you want me to do?'"

Once again Samuel went back and lay down.

**10**The LORD then stood beside Samuel and called out as he had done before, "Samuel! Samuel!"

"I'm listening," Samuel answered. "What do you want me to do?"

**11**The LORD said:

Samuel, I am going to do something in Israel that will shock everyone who hears about it! **12**I will punish Eli and his family, just as I promised. **13**He knew that his sons refused to respect me, and he let them get away with it, even though I said I would punish his family forever. **14**I warned Eli that sacrifices or offerings could never make things right! His family has done too many disgusting things. **15**The next morning, Samuel got up and opened the doors to the LORD's house. He was afraid to tell Eli what the LORD had said. **16**But Eli told him, "Samuel, my boy, come here!"

"Here I am," Samuel answered.

**17**Eli said, "What did God say to you? Tell me everything. I pray that God will punish you terribly if you don't tell me every word he said!"

**18**Samuel told Eli everything. Then Eli said, "He is the LORD, and he will do what's right."

**19**As Samuel grew up, the LORD helped him and made everything Samuel said come true. **20**From the town of Dan in the north to the town of Beersheba in the south, everyone in the country knew that Samuel was truly the LORD's prophet.