

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time September 10, 2023

Matthew 18:1–7

“Become Like Children”

1. I have a relative who is very smart and creative. He also can be pretty impulsive.
 - a. One time I was with his young son who started talking about his dad (the dad wasn't with us at the moment)
 - i. It was pretty routine stuff, until the son told us dad had gotten in trouble with mom for buying a motorcycle without first consulting with mom (the mom argued the motorcycle was dangerous, in spite of the adult and child helmets dad had purchased, and mom was worried for the dad's – and the son's -- safety).
 - ii. The son had some details of the conversation which I would assume my relative would have found embarrassing.
 - iii. It was clear that the son had been near where the conversation between mom and dad had taken place.
 - iv. It was also clear that mom and dad did not notice their son was there or nearby.
 - b. I imagine we may have similar stories we could tell of our children overhearing things and then sharing them with others.
 - i. The stories may be funny or perhaps embarrassing.
 - ii. What they may have in common is that the adults in the room either did not think the children were listening attentively, or they simply didn't notice the kids were there in the first place.
 - c. The story made me think of a saying which dates back to Medieval England stating that children should be seen but not heard. <https://writingexplained.org/idiom-dictionary/children-should-be-seen-and-not-heard>
 - i. I really dislike that saying. It offers a pretty low view of children, their place in the society, and their possible contribution.
 - ii. It's a terrible perspective to imply that children don't have something important to contribute. I would argue it is an attitude that so disregards children that they become invisible because they are not valued.
 - iii. Those attitudes are similar to how society viewed children around the time of Jesus.
2. The topic of children came up in our scripture because the disciples were talking about power and position.
 - a. Their question is as simple as it is disappointing: who is the greatest in the Realm of the Heavens?

- i. It is disappointing because it shows they had not really understood just how much Jesus had been upending all their expectations of institutions and traditions.
 - ii. Jesus hadn't been wielding his ability to heal or his knowledge of scripture to then build power, to become some sort of ruler.
 - iii. It is a simple question which tells us where the disciples were focused: power and prestige.
- b. As was Jesus' custom, he upended their question and its context.
 - i. He asked for a child to come and stand there in their midst.
 - ii. At the time, children were essentially invisible until they grew up to be able to work and provide for their family or start a new family.
 - iii. Being a child back then was significantly more difficult and dangerous than today just because of illness, food insecurity and warfare.
 - 1. A commentary tells us that infant mortality was as much as 30%
 - 2. Of the live births, 30% died by age 6 and 60% by age 16.
 - 3. Upwards of 70% would have lost one or both parents by puberty.(Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels. By B. Malina, R. Rohrbaugh. 1992. p.117)
 - iv. A child was vulnerable. An orphan was even more so.
 - v. They had no legal standing until they grew up, if they were lucky enough.
 - vi. Now, mind you, children were important culturally because a child meant a family line would continue, and they'd be able to inherit the family's assets.
 - vii. But not until they were grown. Until then, it seemed like they were invisible.
 - viii. And that's not even getting to how a girl was all the more invisible than a boy because of social bias against girls. A woman being married off would come to be part of the husband's family.
- c. And so Jesus said: let me show you who the greatest in the Realm of the Heavens will be
 - i. Here. This girl. She is the greatest in the Realm of the Heavens.
 - ii. Do you want to be valued in the Realm of the Heavens? Be like her.
 - iii. What a contrast for the disciples who perhaps were dreaming of honor and glory for themselves for having been so close to the Messiah!
 - iv. So, on one level, Jesus is telling them: drop your privilege and be as one who is perceived as having a lowly position in this society. Embrace that lowly place.
 - 1. Jesus was showing them the way on that.
 - 2. Jesus didn't seek fame and fortune.
 - v. On another level, Jesus is clarifying that the Realm of the Heavens was going to be the place which welcomed those otherwise rejected, those who had been on the margins.

1. I wonder if that image was actually comforting to them in a strange way.
 2. After all, Jesus hadn't been recruiting for disciples at palaces, but at working places of people not high on the achievement ladder.
 3. It is as if what God values is opposite to what humans value.
 4. At least so it would seem.
 - d. And if they were to become like children, maybe we should think about that would mean.
 - i. For one it would mean that they'd be in a less secure position, in a vulnerable position where they would be at risk of not being valued.
 1. That would instantly put them on par with many in their community they had perhaps looked down upon or had discounted.
 2. It must have been a harsh reality for some of these disciples to consider themselves shoulder to shoulder with those in poverty, with widows, orphans, former lepers, all those people who Jesus saw and invited to follow him.
 - ii. But that isn't to say those would be undesirable companions! It just means that what society couldn't perceive clearly, Jesus was able to.
 1. When the honesty of the child was overlooked, Jesus lifted it up.
 2. When the creativity of the widow was overlooked, Jesus lifted it up.
 3. When the faith of the person healed was overlooked, Jesus lifted it up.
 4. When the hope of the marginalized was overlooked, Jesus lifted it up.
 - e. And woe to anyone, Jesus says, who gets in the way of those now fully known.
 - i. Woe to anyone who tells them they're invisible.
 - ii. Woe to anyone who trips them up.
 - iii. Woe to anyone who leads them astray.
3. The Good News of the Gospel is that through God's grace we are seen, valued, welcomed.
 - a. And the incredible magnetic force of the Realm of the Heavens is that those who were once on the margins of society find themselves at the center of it all.
 - b. Well, let me say it like this: that sounds like really good news to those currently trying to live paycheck to paycheck, and perhaps like annoying or unpleasant news to those currently in the VIP seats.
 - c. But that's the wake-up call Jesus delivers: let every person put themselves in the place of that young girl, and if in their place, then let them begin to truly embrace those around them.

- d. In the place of that child once overlooked by society, feel that shunning from society but feel fully seen by God. And live in that tension, fighting for justice for that child.
- e. In the church I served in St. Anne Illinois, right before I arrived, the church had successfully raised the money to put in an elevator in the building.
 - i. I remember one of the members recounting the struggle to raise the money because some in the congregation didn't think it was a priority.
 - ii. We don't have anyone in a wheelchair! Someone thought.
 - iii. But we all could be one day, whether by age or accident! Remarked another.
 - iv. Suddenly they saw the possibility, saw themselves as potential users, but more importantly, saw the people already in their midst with mobility issues, and those who hadn't been coming to church because they dreaded using the stairs. They saw them.
- 4. To perceive and to be seen is a sign of being close to the Realm of the Heavens.
 - a. Look around and truly see those around you.
 - b. Consider who Jesus would call to stand before us and say: be like her.
 - c. Let your faith be like hers. Your courage like hers. Your forgiveness like hers.
- 5. Remember this week just how much Jesus upends our expectations, how much Jesus leads us to perceive the world differently, and how much his example showed us the way to God and to one another.

Reflection questions

1. Share a story of when a child taught you something.
2. What does Jesus mean when he says "become like children... [to] enter the realm of the heavens" (Matthew 18:1-7)?
3. In today's world, how do we include someone who is virtually invisible in our society?