

THE FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL

And they were bringing children to him, that he might touch them; and the disciples rebuked them. But when Jesus saw it he was indignant, and said to them, "Let the children come to me, do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it." And he took them in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands upon them.

(Mark 10:13-16, NRSV)

I remember my first day of school just like it was yesterday. I can remember how my Mom dropped me off at the front of the school and she waited until I went inside giving one backward glance before she pulled away with tears in her eyes. No, wait a minute. I think that occurred in a Toyota commercial. That didn't happen to me at all.

Okay, now I remember. Dad watched me get on the school bus. I was so nervous. I had to sit in the back of the bus because I didn't know anyone and no one shared their seat with me. I looked out the back window and I realized Dad was following us. He followed me all the way to school, so I would know he was there and wouldn't be afraid. Oh, wait a minute...that came from a Honda commercial. Why do carmakers have all the best first day of school stories?

The truth is I don't remember my very first day of school. It's all sort of foggy. I guess that's why I keep substituting TV commercials for my own memories. I'm sure, however, that like everyone else, I was nervous about leaving home and going to a place with new rules and new people. I was probably also excited about this new step of independence.

I do remember lots of first *days* of school. The first day of school is always filled with nervousness and excitement over what is new. We grow up, however, and eventually we do not have any more first days of school. Suddenly, it's as if we're supposed to know everything, right?

The painful truth in life is that we never stop needing to learn new things. There is a never-ending supply of first days of school, in the sense that we continue to experience that mixture of nervousness and excitement as we deal with new situations and people. Technology changes. Relationships change. Businesses change. Families change. We change. There is always something new to learn. Perhaps, we never get too far away from that original first day of school.

Today on Christian Education Sunday, we celebrate children going into new grades, graduates finishing high school and what our children have done and have learned over the previous year. It is very easy for us to think that since we're adults and have finished school, we do not need to learn more about the Christian faith. That's kid stuff after all. What a frightening thought—the idea that we were supposed to get everything

there is to know about God, Jesus and being a Christian by the time we graduate from high school. If that's the case, I don't know about you, but I missed a few things.

In reality, we are all still learning about life, ourselves and most importantly about God. Whether we know it or not we are continually facing that first day of school when it comes to our faith. If we are honest, we can admit to the feelings of nervousness because we may fear that everyone else knows this stuff but us, and excitement because we may find out something new that can radically change our lives.

Jesus confirms the idea that if we want to be a part of the Kingdom of God, we must be like children. In today's Scripture Lesson, we see the story of Jesus welcoming children. It occurs in the Gospel of Mark. I love this Gospel because it could practically be a TV sit-com. Instead of "Friends" with its twenty-somethings hanging around a coffee shop making witty remarks, we have "Disciples" about a bunch of twenty-something Jews hanging around Galilee trying to understand what Jesus is talking about. The comedy comes because Jesus is continually explaining things that the disciples just don't understand. By the end of the half-hour, Jesus has taught them something, they have misunderstood his teaching and made a mess of things, and Jesus has to explain things all over again.

In the chapter previous to the one read today, the disciples are arguing about who is the greatest among them. Jesus hears them arguing and asks them what's going on. They shuffle their feet and look anywhere else but at him. He gives them a knowing glance and declares that "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." (Mark 9:35 NRSV). To illustrate his point Jesus calls a child to him and says:

"Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me." (Mark 9:37 NRSV)

In Jesus' day, children were considered a blessing, but they were also meant to be "seen and not heard." Greco-Roman and Jewish writers of the day considered children to be essentially the lowest on the totem pole. They were to be cared for by servants/slaves until they were of a suitable age to join society. So, to care for children and to welcome them meant risking looking like a slave, the lowest of the low.

But as this week's episode of "Disciples" rolls on, the disciples quickly forget the instructions of Jesus regarding children. When some parents bring their children to Jesus, the disciples "speak sternly to them" and tell them to buzz off. Jesus sees this and gets "indignant"—ticked off is more like it. Once again, the disciples are clueless in regards to Jesus' instructions.

He brings the children to him and says,

"Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." (Mark 10:14-16 NRSV)

Jesus declares that children have a special claim on God's Kingdom. Furthermore, he makes the radical claim that whoever does not receive God's Kingdom—the Gospel, God's work in the world—like a child does not get it at all!

It's a stark warning to churches that fail to make children a priority. It's also an indictment of cultures like ours that fail to value their children. For a nation as rich as ours, it is a tragedy that so many of our own children go hungry. It's just as great a tragedy that children around the world suffer in spite of the fact that resources like food and basic medicine could be provided if only people cared enough to make it happen. Our culture looks a lot like the disciples pushing children away. Unfortunately the suffering of children in our world is far from a sit-com.

Jesus' words about children are about more than just welcoming them. He declares that we must become like a child in order to receive God's work in the world. I believe that Jesus wants us to be like children for the following reasons:

1. Children are trusting—as a child trusts her or his parent, so must we trust God.
2. Children have faith—have you ever noticed how children can believe things and simply take things as fact that we as adults are taught to disregard? We are supposed to know better. Because no one has told them that it is immature to believe in crazy things like miracles children still believe.
3. Children are loving—there is nothing greater than a hug from a child or when a child slips her or his hand in yours. It is a simple gift—one that we as hardened adults have forgotten about.
4. Children have a sense of wonder—one of the joys of working with children is watching them discover something new. They possess the ability to be excited and impressed by things adults rarely consider.

In contrast, I do not think that Jesus was saying that we should be immature, bratty or selfish. There are some things that we must grow out of. Paul speaks of this idea when he writes:

"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." (1 Corinthians 13:11)

His words come at the end of the famous chapter on love, 1 Corinthians 13, that you always hear at weddings. ("Love is patient. Love is kind, etc.) This description of love reminds us that Jesus teaches that we should be *child-like* rather than *childish*.

Jesus' statement that we must become like children means that we must recapture the sense of trust, love, faith, joy and wonder that children possess and that we lose as adults. In the movie "Hook," put out by Steven Spielberg, we meet Robin Williams playing a grown-up Peter Pan. This Peter Pan left Never Land and returned to London, married Wendy's daughter and had kids of his own. He has become just another middle-class businessman trying to pay the bills with no time to play with his children. When

Captain Hook kidnaps his children, Peter has to return to Never Land in order to rescue them. He has to remember how to fly and to be young. In the end, he rescues his children and returns to his life as an adult but also keeps the joy and wonder of Never Land with him. The movie's message is that you can be a responsible adult and still believe in Never Land.

Jesus' statement also includes the idea that we have more to learn. However old we are, there is still room to grow in the Christian faith. First days of school remain for us. We can grow closer to God and experience more of what it means to follow Jesus. These are not ideas best left to children. If we leave the learning about God up to kids, then we have done ourselves a disservice.

This summer as you prepare for your vacations, I hope that you will make time to rediscover those childish things like love, faith, trust, wonder and that you will bask in the joy of realizing that you don't know everything. There is more to learn—especially about yourself and God. As you pack your summer reading, throw in along with John Grisham, James Patterson or Danielle Steel something to read that helps you to learn about God. Whether it's a book of prayers, a book by a Christian author or the Bible, take some time to nurture your relationship with God. Also, as you sit on the beach, the boat or wherever, stop and pray. Make sure to stop talking and listen too. God may have something to say to you.

I want to leave you with an example of someone we are going to really miss around here. This is the last Sunday for Marilyn and Gary Piccione. They're moving out to Greenport to officially retire. They are a wonderful couple and we are richer for having had them among us. I will always cherish my experiences with Gary who, even though it's been years since he retired from being a doctor, still manages to take care of a lot of people. On days when he would volunteer at the church, I commonly found Gary reading the latest medical journals to keep up with what's going on with his field. Just as often, I found Gary reading his Bible trying to puzzle out some question about God. Gary is living proof that each one of us, no matter what our age, still can have another first day of school.

Chase Peebles
The Congregational Church of Manhasset
June 9, 2002
Third Sunday After Pentecost
Family Sunday/Christian Education Sunday/Graduation Sunday

PASTORAL PRAYER

God of wisdom, we praise and thank you for all of the people in our lives who have taught us about you: ministers, Sunday School teachers, parents and friends. Thank you for speaking through them to our very souls. Help us to be the kind of people that share your wisdom with others. Remind us that each one of us can experience a mixture of nervousness and excitement just like our first day of school as we seek to learn more

about you. We are nervous because it is hard to admit we do not know everything. We are excited because we believe we can know you better and be better people. Use all of these feelings to mold us into the kind of people that always learn and always teach.

Amen.