

TO A DANCING CHILD
MATTHEW 18:1-6
DECEMBER 14, 1986

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Why did Jesus come into this world as a baby? We have just heard our children sing a delightful anthem about the sleeping baby. Why didn't God just appear on the earth as a man or a woman? God could have said to John the Baptist, "You are doing a great job. You really have proved yourself. John, why don't you become the messiah?" Why didn't God choose a grownup and pass over the birth, childhood and adolescent years? Wasn't it a waste of time to wait thirty years for Jesus to grow up before he could begin his ministry? There must be a message there. Evidently, the revelation of God through Jesus also includes those childhood years, and not just his passion, death and resurrection, not just his adult years of teaching and healing, the records of which we have in the gospels.

Can you visualize Jesus--the Son of God, the Messiah, the Lord and Saviour, the coming King--as a child? We are not told much about those childhood years. The Bible is silent, except for his confirmation in the Temple at age 12. Because the Bible is silent, we have tended to discount those years as if they weren't important. But, because the Bible is silent, we can make up our own stories about Jesus. I imagine we will picture Jesus' childhood as resembling our own. Perhaps that is what God intends us to do. Remember your own childhood. Remember the child you once were because that child is yet in you. Most of us are aware of the need to challenge our minds, take care of our bodies, and deepen our spiritual lives; but, there is also a child in you who needs nurturing and encouragement. There is a child in you who wants to dance.

Jesus told us to become like little children. In fact, Jesus said, (Matthew 18:2) "Unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." What is it about a child, especially the child that is in you, that fits you for the kingdom of God?

A child is dependent and trusting--at least until adult unworthiness breaks the trust. A child is open, without pretense, sophistication, or guilt. As Barbara Metcalf wrote in her delightful little book, *For the Child in You, With Love From Rebecca*, "Kids talk to God anytime--big people have to look nice first." A child relates to God directly, open and trusting.

A child is friendly and unconscious of rank or race: a king's child will play with the servant's child, until adult prejudice spoils the friendship. Jesus said, (Matthew 18:4) "Whoever humbles himself like this child is greatest in the kingdom of heaven." The children I know are not necessarily humble, but they are unconscious of rank or race. Also, in Jesus's day, children had no status. They were not "first" as they are in many ways today. My dad used to complain jokingly how his generation got gypped. When he was a child, children were the last to be fed and ate whatever was left over. By the time he became a father, children were the first to be fed, and the adults ate what was left over! In Jesus' day, children were not "first" so Jesus used the humble status of a child as an object lesson. According to Floyd V. Filson in his commentary, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, Jesus is saying, "If you do not change your attitude and become humble instead of ambitious to get top rank, you will have no place in the kingdom." A trustful humility that accepts a place in the Kingdom as a gift is necessary for entrance; scheming for the highest rank is out of place. (pg. 199)

A child is candid. Do you remember the Hans Christian Andersen story of

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the emperor's new clothes? Two rascals sold the emperor a suit of imaginary silk, telling him the clothes were magical and could be seen by discerning, intelligent people. Of course, no one would admit stupidity, so they admired the clothes, fulfilling the "conventions," until a little child said, "But he has nothing on!" A child sees through pretense and hypocrisy.

A child lives in a constant wonder, makes toys out of trash, and finds life a high romance. Thus a child expects great things of life, and finds them. The faith that Jesus prized is instinct in a child.

A child dances. The wonder, ecstasy, and joy of life bubble up within a child and the child dances without inhibition. One evening at the Expo in Vancouver, we relaxed in a Munich-style Beer Hall. I have a soft spot in my heart for German oompah music as I was reared in German country in Minnesota. The band at our school dances was three-piece: accordion, drum and a horn of some sort, and we danced polkas and schottisches. So I enjoy clapping, singing and dancing to German music. At the Expo, a little girl, probably three years old, with long, blond curls, started to dance in the middle of the floor. And no one got embarrassed. No one stopped her. The waiters and waitresses stepped around her. No one told her she was out of order. It was wonderful, contagious, and freeing. How much is missing in your life because the spoil-sports in your childhood told you you were too noisy, or too young, or too small, or "little boys don't play with dolls," or "little girls can't do that; that's for boys." The child in many of us has been squelched and oh, how the child in you would love to dance!

A child is innocent. A little boy asked his grandmother, "How old are you?" She replied, "That's a question you don't ask women." Later, he asked, "Grandma, how much do you weigh?" "Oh," she answered, "that's another question that polite people don't ask." Still later, he came and said, "Grandma, I don't have to ask you those questions now. I looked at your driver's license. You are 66 years old. You weigh 135 pounds. And you failed in sex." A child is innocent.

Rediscover the child that is in you. How we long to return to that first purity! And how impossible it is to recover that innocence by ourselves. But there is redemption. Jesus said, "Unless you turn and become like children." Turning to God means a rightabout-face and a conversion. The pardon of God can do what we cannot do of ourselves. We can once more become childlike. Then we are trusting. As sinful persons who have received forgiveness, we depend now, not on our proved weakness, but on God's strength. Then we are candid and sincere. Then we are expectant. This childlikeness is what is the greatest in the kingdom of God.

Take care of the child in you. Reclaim the child and take care of yourself. Christmas is a special time to reclaim the child that is in you. Christmas is for all children, regardless of age. Enjoy the lights, the music, the food and parties. Give gifts, enjoy, and relish those you receive. The child that is in you needs to be nurtured, cuddled, coddled, embraced, fed, loved. Fortunate are you if you have a spouse or friend who will love the child in you. Barbara Metcalf also wrote, "When I need you most, I don't know how to ask." Blessed are you, fortunate are you, when you have people in your life who know when you are hurting; but, not everyone has such people, and even when we do, they are not always there. Another Barbara Metcalf

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saying: "It feels good when I hide--it feels bad when nobody comes." If you don't have people in your life who find you when you hurt, be good to yourself, be kind, take time to nurture, take time to heal. Let God love you. Don't hide your hurt or cover it up, but open it to God. And, be that kind of person to those around you. Look at others not only with your head, but with your heart. Listen to others not only with your ears, but with the child that is in you. Be sensitive and you may touch the child that is hurting in someone else.

Yes, we are called to bear the burdens of the world. Yes, we are called to take seriously Christ's call to discipleship, to be the body of Christ in this world. Yes, it is an awesome responsibility. Yes, much of what is happening today in the world is frightening and discouraging. Yes, there are many ominous, dark clouds hanging over the future of the planet. Yes, we are expected to take our responsibilities for this world seriously. But, no one can sustain such posture for long without being fed and nurtured, without caring for the child that is in you.

No one can work for long without taking time to play. No one can sustain serious endeavors without time for rest, relaxation, and rejuvenation. Yes, one is expected to make sacrifices; but if you continually make sacrifices, do your duty, and neglect the child that is in you, you will become difficult to live with! A little girl was showing a friend around her new house. "This is the kitchen; here's my bedroom; here's the den. Do you have a den in your house?" "No, we don't," her playmate replied. "My dad just growls all around the house."

You must take care of yourself. If you ignore the child that is in you, your life will become barren. Nurture the child in you. A sense of humor, wonder, optimism, and adventure can tide you over the difficult spots. Take yourself and a loved one out to dine in a lovely restaurant. Your inner child needs candles, soft music, and linen tablecloths. Your child needs art, plays, movies, concerts, musicals. Your child needs to play on the beach, run on the sand, let the waves wash over your bare feet, let the breeze blow your hair, sing and shout. How long since you were really noisy? How long since you shouted, really shouted? One reason for football games is for you to be able to shout without the neighbors calling the police. Let the sound climb from the depths of your being and roar out your mouth. It is healing to shout. It is healing to sing. It is healing to play. It is healing to laugh. It is healing to dance. Let the child within you dance--dance in ecstasy, dance in freedom.

Then, you are better able to take on the cares of the world--the cares of your family, the worries about finances, the problems of your children and grandchildren, concern for the planet, concern for children. Does your heart ache for children today? The children who are living in cars with their parents, the children who are roaming the streets, the children who accompany their parents into the church office to add credence to the begging, the children of the world who are hungry, who cry rather than laugh, the children who can't dance. Jesus calls us to take care of the children, the child that is in you, and the children of the world, the children of all ages.

Christmas is a time to share. Many charity groups and churches are in financial trouble this year. You receive many requests. As you give,

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remember the children. Participate in the Joy of Giving and the Ministers' Discretionary Fund which we use for direct aid. It is easier to raise money for obvious needs than for church deficits; but, don't forget the church's budget. If the institution isn't here, needs of people can't be met. We must have buildings, staffs, offices in order to provide services. This week the water heater in our education building rusted out. We had a flood! Would you like to guess how much the new unbudgeted water heater cost? \$2,200! You might feel that a water heater is hardly the work of Christ, but the little children who are in the daycare center, and the little children who are in the nursery and preschool program this very minute, need hot water to wash their hands, and the teachers and custodian need hot water to wash the children's tables, wash their dishes, and scrub their floors.

Christmas is for children of all ages, including the child that is in you. Jesus calls you to take care of the children. Remember the needy children and give generously and sacrificially. Give your most; then you can enjoy Christmas without guilt. Do your best to enable children to dance! Take care of the child in you. Nurture, encourage the child in you to dance in ecstasy, joy and freedom.