

Sermon 22b 2021: Living in Faith as a Little Child in God's Kingdom

*"Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child;
Will never enter it."*

Introduction: We are called to live by faith

I remember a good friend of mine many years ago

Going on and on about how wonderful children are;

How they are born good and loving and gentle;

And how Jesus' words made perfect sense to him;

As the image of who we are called to be;

As who we need to be to receive and to enter the kingdom of God.

Then he and his wife started having children of their own;

And he was singing a slightly different tune;

Oh, he loved their kids and saw them for the gifts that they are, still does;

But any of us who have spent time with our own children or others';

Know that it's a little more of a mixed bag of good and not so good

And perhaps Jesus had some other point he was making;

In this remarkable invitation into God's kingdom.

Children in Jesus' day were very similar to children in our own day;

Full of life and potential, good moments and not so good moments, just like kids today;

The one major difference was that children in Jesus' day had very low status;

They were essentially the property of the family;

They were seen for their potential to support the family;

And provide a retirement plan for the parents one day.

So Jesus drawing a child to Himself and pronouncing that unless we become like a child;

We can neither receive nor enter into the kingdom of God;

Presents an interesting challenge for His listeners, then and now,

A challenge about the nature of being a child

And how that allows us to receive and enter God's kingdom or not.

Certainly Jesus is not talking about becoming younger, because that's not possible;

Though we spend billions of dollars every year to try and at least look younger.

Surely Jesus isn't calling us to be a mixed bag of good and not so good;

Jesus loves everyone, including sinners;

But He also had a very high standard for how people are to live their lives;

Thus the challenge about staying soft hearted and in our marriages;

And any number of ways of living that are a challenge to us;

Like loving our enemies and praying for them; keeping our thoughts pure;

Or giving to God all that is due to God in our lives.

Being of low status and serving the needs of those around us does fit into Jesus' call to greatness;

That the greatest will be the servant of all;

But even with this call to service throughout our lives;

There's a still deeper quality of life that Jesus is lifting up here;

And that is the sense of openness, trust and faith that most children have;

And that we lose as we grow older and certainly when we become adults.

I taught a class here a few years ago involving the spirituality of aging;

And one of the findings for us as we grow older is that because we've seen things before;

We lose our sense of openness and wonder.

A couple of papers I came across pointed out that we have between 60 and 70%

Of our first time experiences in life by the time we are fourteen years old;

Our brains register the wonders and experiences of everyday life

As every day and not really worth paying attention to because we've seen it before.

But think about the first time you stood at the ocean or under the vast expanse of stars at night;

And the sense of wonder it brought and may still; children have that sense every day.

The other quality of children that we lose and that keep us from the life in God is trust

Children in healthy families learn trust from their parents who love them, feed them;

Offer a safe place to grow up, and help them learn and experience life's wonders.

But as we get older and have the challenging experiences that come for all of us;

Our sense of trust can be broken by life or at least tamped down;

And the openness and trust we know as little children slips away.

And what's true of our physical and emotional lives becomes true in our spiritual lives;

In our lives with God;

Perhaps the challenges of life make us wonder how open we can be to God;

Because God is often silent to our prayers or seemingly absent from our lives.

Or we wonder whether God is trustworthy as challenges happen in our lives;

And in the lives of people we love and the lives of people we see on the news;

The hurricane in Louisiana brings rain to Pennsylvania, sometimes a little too much;

But can be devastating to people more directly affected.

But how our lives would be changed and enriched if we chose to be open and trusting with God;

Or, better yet, if we asked God to break us open and deepen our trust and faith in Him;

So that we could more readily receive and enter the kingdom of God in our daily lives;

And live our lives as though our faith matters in good times and in challenging times

The Faith of Job (whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child)

We're beginning a three week sweep through the Book of Job this Sunday;

This play raises the challenges we wonder about as to why bad things happen to good people;

And why good things happen to bad people;

And how we are still called to live our lives in openness and trust with God.

It's a great read, though a little shadowy and repetitive at times;

And this Sunday, we see the Biblical writer's explanation

For why bad things happen to good people – God let Satan attack Job's life;

That's a whole other sermon and teaching series;

And, briefly, reflects a heavenly realm that's not accurate;

But made sense to the Biblical writers from their cultural perspective;

Certainly troubles happen in this life, but they are not sent by God.

What's more interesting to me and to us, I hope, is Job's response to his troubles;

His response to the worst losses in family, wealth and personal health that anyone could endure;

He loses his children, he loses his flocks, and he is broken physically;

And yet Job persists; Yet Job is open to God; Yet Job trusts in God;

Job is like the little child Jesus is calling us to be.

We heard this morning Job say, "Shall we receive the good from God and not the bad?"

That's a statement of faith and trust that God is still involved and overseeing his life;

And later, in the play, though we won't read it this month, Job proclaims

And this is hundreds of years prior to Jesus' death and resurrection;

"I know that my redeemer lives and at the last he will stand upon the earth;

After my awaking he will raise me up and in my body I shall see God;

I myself shall see, and my eyes behold him who is my friend and not a stranger." (19:25ff)

Here is the hope. Here is the faith that is ours when our lives are falling apart;

Here is a faith that matters when we are in desperate straits, in the midst of a pandemic;

In the midst of the challenges of life and death;

In a time of sorrow and shadow, with little sense of what is coming next.

Job believes and though he is an adult, he remains open to God and trusts in God;

Just like the child Jesus is calling us to be in our lives today.

Lifting our hands in Prayer to God, Like a Child

Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.

I had the good fortune of speaking with a good friend this week in my office;

Someone I have known and loved for years.

He came to see me because he was troubled in his spirit, as many of us are;

Wondering about the state of the world we are living in;

What's happening in our country and community;

How this pandemic has knocked us back and taken away parts of our lives

What the future might bring;

And how we can stay open and trusting in God.

We covered a lot of subjects and it's not the only time I've had a conversation like that

With some of you or on my own in my prayers and conversations with God;

Because like you, I have little to no idea of what's coming next;

And there are times when the troubles of the world and our lives feels overwhelming.

As we were coming to the end of our time together I offered a prayer practice

That I have found so helpful over the course of my life;

When I don't see the way forward and especially when I am anxious, afraid,

Or seeking the presence and sense of hope that only God brings.

I lift up my hands;

Like a little child reaching to be picked up and hugged by their mom or dad;

Reaching for that person with whom they can be open and trust in;

I lift up my hands to God and offer my concerns and cares;

My hopes and loves and thanks into God's hands.

I lift up my hands, name my concerns and give them all to God and ask God to take them;

And God does.

I often take them back and have to offer them again, but pretty soon I let go.

It may be a psychological trick that frees my mind to live more in the present,

Assuming that God will take care of things;

But I believe it is something more; I believe that God receives our prayers;

Like a parent who can and will take care of us;

When we are open and trusting in God.

And like a little child I receive and enter into the kingdom of God;

And so can you when you lift up your hands in whatever form that takes;

In openness and trust in God.

In this year when we as a community and as individuals are focusing on *Faith Matters*;

I invite you to lift up your hands in prayer and thanksgiving to God;

Allow your faith to become the force it can be because faith matters;

And whatever comes in this life or in the life to come, God is here;

And when we receive and enter into God's kingdom as little children

We will have life in God now and always.

Amen.