

## We Are the Children

Romans 8:12-17

Luke 18:9-17

One of the most difficult assignments I ever received, one of the biggest challenges I have ever taken on was ... coaching my ten-year-old daughter's softball team.

The hardest part was not losing. We finished the season with a perfect record. We were 12-0. Unfortunately, the 0 was victories and the 12 was losses. We were so accustomed to losing games, that wasn't the toughest part.

Nor was it difficult to teach the girls the basics of the game. They were enthusiastic learners. We did have our moments. It was the next to last game of the season. I told one of the girls to play left field, and she looked up at me sweetly and asked, "Coach, I forget. Where's left field?"

The most difficult part was not even the parents. I had been warned about little league parents. The moms and especially the dads did get a little restless after we had lost our tenth straight game, but I must say they were remarkably supportive. I think they were just glad it was me out there on the field, not them.

Do you know what was most difficult for me? It was letting the girls teach me. They had a wonderful approach to the games. While I agonized over dropped balls, missed tags, and stranded runners, they seemed intent on enjoying themselves. After we lost our first game by 18 runs, the girls were more interested in getting one of the snacks a parent had brought than they were in the final score, or even if they had won or lost. That bothered me at first. Why didn't the girls care more? Why weren't they taking the games more seriously? Then it hit me. They were children, acting like children, with that wonderful ability to enjoy the moment without agonizing as we adults do about who's winning and who's losing, who's succeeding and who's failing.

Jesus never coached a girls softball team, but he did know that children have some important insights about life, lessons we adults too often forget ... if we ever learned them. One day, as he was preparing to go Jerusalem where he would face death on a cross, Jesus was teaching people about how to prepare for the coming Kingdom of God, that time when we will know fully what we know now only in part ... God's peace, love and justice in our lives and in the world. Jesus had just told a parable contrasting those who were ready for the kingdom and those who were not. In the parable two men went to the temple to pray. One was a Pharisee. Pharisees were known for their commitment to follow God's law to the letter and lead pious lives. The other was a hated tax collector, not the kind of person good, religious people like the Pharisees associated with. As Jesus often did in his parables, he turned people's expectations upside down. Who was ready for God's kingdom of peace and righteousness? It was not the one they expected, the overtly religious person, the pious Pharisee. Why? What was he doing wrong? He was making a display of his religious faith, praying loudly so all could see how righteous he was, and he was arrogantly putting down those he considered morally inferior, like the tax collectors. No, the one ready to enter God's kingdom was not the self-righteous Pharisee; it was the one the hearers of the parable did not expect--the tax collector, who did not make a show of being religious, but humbly acknowledged to God his sinfulness and dependence on God's mercy.

Just then some in the crowd brought their children to Jesus so he could bless them, but his disciples rebuked them sternly. Their master was busy. He should not be bothered with such distractions. However, when Jesus saw what was happening, he said, according to the gospels, "Let the little children come to me, and 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."

As he often did, Jesus left his hearers to figure out for themselves the meaning of his teachings. What does it mean to receive the kingdom of God as a child? If you are feeling overwhelmed by all the things you have to do—by a mounting burden of work and worry, by the feeling that no matter how hard you try, you always seem to fall short of meeting others' expectations and the expectations you have placed upon yourself, in other words, if you are an adult—then you should be asking: What do children have to teach us about receiving the kingdom of God?

I know what the girls on my softball team taught me that summer.

First, the girls taught me about finding joy in the moment, even when everything seems stacked against you. In our third game, we were down 15-1 in the second inning. The other team had already hit a half-dozen home runs. We had a couple of singles. But then one of our girls hit a ball that dribbled to the pitcher. The pitcher picked it up and overthrew first base. Our girl ran to second. The first baseman made an errant throw to second. Our girl scooted to third. The second baseman threw the ball into the dugout, and our girl danced home. It was not pretty, but it was our first, and nearly last home run of the season. Before I had time to think, I had run from the third base coach's box to home plate where I found myself jumping up and down with a group of screaming ten-year-olds. I'm sure I looked silly, but for a moment I didn't care. I felt fantastic.

Children, you know, have a delightful spark of spontaneity. That spark tends to fade as we grow older and become more and more serious about life. Even when the score is 15-2 against them, kids can get ecstatic. And ecstasy is one of the characteristics of those who would receive the kingdom of God. To live in God's kingdom is to experience joy even in the face of the worst life can dish up. Children know that instinctively. When we forget the ecstasy of the Kingdom, children can teach us again how to experience it, if we let them. I learned that years ago from a girls softball team. Now my daughter's children, my grandchildren, are reminding me of living with spontaneous joy each day. The alternative is either to lead lives of quiet desperation, as Henry David Thoreau put it, or to turn to some artificially induced high to fill the void left when the natural ecstasy of life fades.

The second lesson about receiving the kingdom of God the girls on my softball team taught me was perseverance. Not a single member of our team quit, despite our dismal season. They could get distracted. More than once an outfielder didn't see a fly ball because she was picking a dandelion or watching a bird flying by. But when they saw the ball, they always ran after it, even when by the time they reached it the runner had already arrived at home plate.

For Jesus the road to the kingdom was full of disappointment and rejection. Most of his own family and those among whom he had grown up turned from him, embarrassed because he stirred things up too much and reached out to people others considered morally inferior. But he persevered, to the end. As he said, the way to the kingdom is narrow (Matthew 7:14). Only those who refuse to give up in their determination, as the Letter to the Hebrews (12:1) says, to run with endurance the race set before them, will enter God's Kingdom.

The girls on the softball team taught me about joy and about perseverance. The final lesson I'll share with you this morning that they taught me about receiving the kingdom of God is hope. After a particularly discouraging loss, when it was apparent that our team would probably not win a game all season, one of the girls said to me, "Don't worry, coach. We'll win the next one." Sensing my adult skepticism, she quickly added, "And if not that one, the one after that!"

Hope is another instinctive quality children have, which it is easy to forget as life's disappointments pile up. The Spring before the softball season, my father-in-law died. He was a truly wonderful granddad to our two children, who expressed his love for them in countless ways. When he

died, they lost a very special friend. At the funeral home, my son, then eight years old, went up to the casket and looked at his granddad's body for a long time. Then, with tears in his eyes, he said, "Dad, I'd give my whole heart to have my Grandpa back." Later that day, as he climbed into bed, he repeated his feeling of loss, then added, without any prompting, "I'm going to miss my Grandpa, but I know that God will take care of him now." In the space of a day, he was able to do what is so hard for us as adults to do ... to trust a loved one who has died to God's eternal care, or to surrender some other loss or trial to our heavenly parent. As adults it is often very hard for us to let go and let God, as the saying goes. Somewhere there's a child around us or perhaps a child within us trying to teach us the Easter message, to hope, even in the face of death.

According to the Apostle Paul, if we live by the Spirit of God, we are children of God. When we were baptized, God adopted us as his own. The Presbyterian service of baptism (citing First John 3:1) says, "See what love the Father has for us, that we should be called children of God, and so we are." Every time we come together for worship, we reaffirm the truth of our baptism. Here touched by God's Spirit, we know we are God's sons and daughters. As God's children we are set free to live with joyful spontaneity. As God's children we are set free to live with determination and perseverance. As children of God we are set free to live in hope. Children, when they see their earthly fathers, cry out "Daddy! Daddy!" Paul says, in the same way, the Spirit causes us to cry out to our heavenly Father, "Abba! Abba!" the Aramaic term Jesus himself used to express his intimate relationship with God.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. ended his "I Have a Dream" speech with these words: "all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual: 'Free at last. Free at last. Thank God Almighty, we are free at last.'"

Note, however, the condition Paul places upon our status as children of God. We are God's children; we are, with Christ, heirs of God's promised kingdom, provided that we suffer with Christ. To suffer with Christ means taking upon ourselves the burdens of others as Jesus did. The girls on my softball team seemed instinctively to grasp this teaching. When our short stop was knocked down trying to field a pop fly and started to cry, all the girls left their positions and came to comfort her. Near the end of the one game we had a chance to win, the girls uncharacteristically put on their game faces and became quite serious. None wanted to blow what might be our only opportunity for a victory. However, with the game tied, in the bottom of the last inning, our third baseman let a ball roll through her legs and allowed the winning run to score. As she left the field, her head hanging, several of the other girls put their arms around her shoulder, and without saying a word, let their teammate know she was not suffering alone.

Do you remember the song, "We are the World"? Written in 1985, it was performed by a group of the most popular musicians of the time, calling themselves USA Africa. It raised what would today be \$150 million dollars for famine relief. I'm not sure if the authors of the song, Michael Jackson and Lionel Ritchie, were motivated by the Christian gospel in writing "We are the World," but its chorus reflects the message of today's texts:

We are the world!

We are the children!

We are the ones to make a brighter day, so let's start giving.

There's a choice we're makin', we're saving our own lives;

It's true we'll make a brighter day, just you and me.

Thirty years later a song entitled "All God's Children" was written to commemorate the visit of Pope Francis to the Philippines. Here's the chorus of that song:

We are all God's children, we are all the same.

He is calling us by name to help the poor and lame,  
And learn what life is really for.  
It's to know and love and serve the Lord.

Today, let us remember that we are the children, the children of God. Let us remember that Christ suffered and died for us, so that, if we, like the tax collector in the parable, humbly acknowledge our sinfulness and our utter dependence on God's mercy, we may enter into God's kingdom and know both now and forever more the peace of God that passes all understanding. Let us resolve to live each day as God's children, with joy, with perseverance, and with hope. Let us show that we are God's children, not with self-rigtheous displays of piety and arrogant claims of moral superiority, but by willingly bearing the burdens of those who suffer in our world.

After the last game of the softball season, the girls and I went to McDonald's. As I stood at the end of the line, watching the girls talk excitedly about what they we're going to have, enjoying the moment, I thought about what they had taught me. Lessons I am trying hard not to forget as I get older and life becomes more challenging. Then one of the girls asked me what I was going to order. I thought for a moment about how hungry I was and how good a big, extra value meal would taste. But not today, I realized. I smiled and said, "You know. I think I'd like to have a happy meal."

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