(3) Book 3 Sunday December 16, 1973

"CHRISTMAS IS / IS NOT FOR CHILDREN" John 1:9-14

Sometime ago, I came across an article in a magazine entitled, "Christmas Is For Children!" The article said in part, and I quote, "Christmas is for children because the days are filled with the surprise of snow." As I read this my mind began to wonder: 'What about all the children who live in climates where there is not snow at Christmas time--is Christmas not for them?'

And the article continued -- "Christmas is for children because of the mystery of hidden gifts." Again my mind took off--what about those children who get no gifts, or just a very few, and those gifts aren't hidden and there's no mystery about them. And again the article continued, "Christmas is for children because of the promise of rewards for good behavior." Well, maybe, I thought. It might've been more truthful if the writer had said, "Christmas is for parents because it gives them a lever to try to get their children to behave and follow orders for at least a few weeks each year. I suppose more threats are made during the weeks preceding Christmas than at any other time of the year. I don't know whether or not it is really a very effective lever, although many parents certainly try to use it. Anyway in a deeper sense, it really destroys the inner meaning of giving. If a gift has to be earned, or if it is a reward, then it really isn't a gift at all.

Furthermore, God's coming to us at Christmas was not a reward for our obeying God for following his rules. Jesus Christ was not something we earned! But maybe I'm getting off the subject.

The article in the magazine went on to say, "Christmas is for children. All the senses tingle. Gayest are the sounds of Christmas; the triumph chorus of the hymns, the brass clanging bell of the Salvation Army worker, the squeals of the children in the early morning."

Well, is Christmas for children? We know it is for parents. Christmas is also for business. I guess it all depends on how we mean it when we say,"Christmas is for children."

If we mean when we say, "Christmas is for children," something like what that magazine article meant, then Christmas is not really meant for children at all.

More than that, the problem is that when we usually say -- "Christmas is for children," we may forget that if we understand the message of Christmas rightly, it is also just as much for adults, for people of all ages. I know that we all mean well when we say "Christmas is for children," but it can obscure the deeper meaning of the holiday.

Of course the story of Christmas as we usually think of it begins with a little baby, and some have said that this is why Christmas is for children. "You will find a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger."

Ah, but the story of Christmas begins long before that. The story of Christmas begins with the creation of the world. It is continued with God's covenant with Abraham and with the people of Israel. It is continued through the prophets and breaks forth into Christmas. It is the story of a people, including all of us, falling away from God's intended purpose for us and for his creation and of his calling us back and showing us the way.

The story of Christmas does not begin with Bethlehem nor does it end with Bethlehem. Not long after the birth of Jesus. something happened which made the Christmas event very hard on children. Herod the king tried to kill the infant Jesus and to do so had all the male children under the age of two killed in that area.

Later on as Jesus grew up and became a man, his life was short-lived and ended on a cross between two thieves. The story continues through the resurrection and through the giving of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost when Christians are sent into all the world to continue the work of Christ. So Christmas it not just for children, it is for adults too, for people of all ages and races. It is for the whole world. God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son.

Actually, as we saw last week in the Magnificat, Christmas in its fullness is hard to take. The fact that God has come among us, to seek us and to save us is a frightening and terrifying thought. The presence of God in our midst demands a response that most of us would prefer to escape.

For us when we say, "Christmas is for children," it may be a way of hiding from the fullness of the Christmas message. It's so pleasant to think of Jesus as a baby; to think of his loving little children. But to follow Christ demands' giving of ourselves, taking up our cross and following him.

And yet, Christmas is for children, although not in the way we usually mean that phrase. The saying has a deeper meaning. God's word is hidden in it. Let's see how!

Listen to what Jesus had to say about children and us in another part of the New Testament. You remember the incident. People were bringing little children to Jesus and his disciples did not want him to be bothered with them. They were sure that he had more important things to do. But Jesus said, "Let the children come to me; do not hinder them; for to such belongs the Kingdom of God."

Notice he said, to such belongs the kingdom of God. Here he was not just talking about little children only, but about all of us. For then Jesus went on to use the example and incident of the children for a very important illustration and lesson. He said, "Truly I say to you whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it." Jesus was saying that to truly understand God and what he is doing, we all need to be like children in certain ways.

Now what is there about children, about the childlike spirit that Jesus senses is so needed by all of us, not only at Christmas, but all through the year. When Jesus asked us to receive the Kingdom of God like a child, he meant at least these things.

1. First of all a child has a fresh kind of candor and openness that we all need, but which we somehow lose as we grow older. When a child is asked, "How old are you?" He will give an instant answer and perhaps add, "How old are you?" The adult does not reply with the same openness as the child for we adults have becom sophisticated in defensive pride.

As we grow older, many of us somehow lose an openness and honesty and we are often lead astray because of that loss. In a book called, the HUMANITY OF WORDS, the author tells about a test she gave to thirty top-ranking executives of a large industrial company. The purpose of the test was to determine whether or not these men could make the distinction between facts and opinions. Their average grade was only 35--only 7 correct out of 20 questions.

The same test was given then to a ten-year old girl who made a grade of 95. The girl apologized for her failure

to make 100 by saying she didn't know the meaning of the word, "prestige," and therefore couldn't answer one question correctly.

Here are two statements that were part of the test given to the executives: (1) Last year the records show a loss of $20,000 on the Alaska project." (2) That was a lot of money to lose.

Everyone called the first statement a fact, which it is. But only four of the 30 executives called the second statement an opinion, which it clearly is. We talk disparagingly of the "ten-year old mentality" which popular entertainment is supposed to be aimed at. But the mentality of a ten-year old, while poor in experience, is rich in clarity. It has not yet been clouded or blunted or perverted by adult prejudice. No wonder Jesus chose a child as an example for all of us. Thus a child, being unconscious of rank or race, until he or she is taught differently, will not worry about color of skin or anything else. A king's child will gladly play with a ragman's child. But we adults think we can improve on God's ways.

As we grow older, we do acquire more information--but we also run the grave risk of losing the candid gaze of childhood. In our daily business we pretend to worship facts, but often we cannot distinguish a fact from an opinion, because we are defending a position instead of defining a situation.

As adults, it becomes emotionally necessary for us to believe that what we are doing is right, whether it is right or not. In order to believe it, we must hypnotize ourselves into acceping our opinions, or the opinions of our superiors as facts. This is why Jesus tells us we need to become like little children who play their games more honestly than we play ours.

2. Secondly, not only are little children candid and honest, but the child is always seeking new ways and new answers. A child asks endless questions, especially about God. A child many times instinctively knows the real issues, whereas we often get sidetracked in secondary inquiries.

3. Thirdly, Jesus tells us that we are to become like children because the child lives with a sense of mystery, wonder and awe. As we grow older and more cynical, we lose this, and Christmas is not for the cynical and the practical.

We all know how a child with his imagination and wonder can make toys out of trash and in his play the child can make life a high romance. Maintaining this sense of wonder and of play is essential to adulthood. In fact, recent research shows that in order to create, one must have a sense of adventure and playfulness. Creativity does not come as a flash of genius; rather, it comes from long years of early childhood playing, of looking at a problem from unusual perspectives, of "upside-downing" a situation.

Incidentally many of the new Christmas toys that we give children do not allow for enough imagination. Not all toys stimulate ego and creativity. The structure of the toys available to the child has a profound effect on the level of his make-believe. Materials that develop creative play are what educational toymakers define as "unstructured" playthings. An unstructured toy has no preconceived goals engineered into it, no adult-imposed objectives. Often it has no instructions. It is then that creativity can emerge.

Jesus calls us to be more like children in our creativity, and in having a sense of wonder, mystery and awe.

4. Fourthly, Jesus tells us that we are to be like children because of the sense of dependence and trust that is present in a child. The child looks to the parent for all that he receives. He trusts that it will be provided. He has no sense of achieving things himself. Life is a gift. The world is a gift.

Furthermore, for the child, neither social convention nor money nor ownership count. What does count is the heart-given impetus. For the adult, the expensive gift is often proof of deep love. But the child, until he learns differently from us, judges from a completely different point of view. Love's proof for him is intuitively perceived in the inspiration which has guided the giver.

In a related sense, Jesus tells us we are to be like children because of their sense of giving. From his earliest years, the child shows his joy in giving. He gives what he is able to, a smile, a look, a kiss. As soon as his little hand can seize an object, a toy, he hods it out and offers it. Now he may well withhold it from someone who he suspects would keep it jealously to himself. But he will give it generously to anyone who will get into the game of reciprocal giving.

The child will give all that he finds. It is an act of regal love for him to pick a pretty flower in a public park and offer it to his mother. And in the game of hide and seek which children enjoy so much, they pretend to hide only for the pleasure of giving themselves away again by coming out from their hiding places. We grab them and hug them. The proof is in their happy outbursts accompanying their discovery after such a brief time of hiding. The supreme gift is the giving of oneself as the child instinctively knows.

So happy are those who maintain throughout all of life this kind of childlike sponaneity and love of giving. Thus Jesus said, "Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a little child shall not enter it." And perhaps when Jesus said that we are to be born again, he was referring to our becoming like children in fresh ways.

Yes, Christmas is for children, which means that Christmas is for all of us for Jesus tells us we are to be like children. Hopefully, like a child we will understand that all is grace, that the whole world is a gift from God, a completely generous gift. Then we will see each flower, each drop of water, each minute of our life as a gift. God gives them to all, both to those who know him and to those who are ignorant of him.

And most of all, the message of Christmas is that the great gift, the unique and living gift, is not a thing, but a person. It is God giving himself in Jesus Christ. It is not a reward, it is truly a gift.

Christmas is certainly for children, for children of all ages from one minute to the time of our death. God calls us to be like children again this Christmas and always--to have that kind of openness, the sense of wonder and mystery and awe of God's creation, and the sense of giving and receiving which children have. When we are like children in these ways then truly we are also children of God.