Sunday, February 29, 1976
THE IMPORTANCE OF A SECOND CHILDHOOD
Mark 10:13-16

Often when we as adults are accused of being in our second childhood, we take it as an insult, and that's the way it's usually meant. But there is a kind of second childhood that many of us as adults need. Jesus Christ said it this way, "Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child, shall not enter it." To better understand what Jesus meant with this statement, let's look again at the incident which prompted it.

One day as Jesus was going about his teaching and healing, some parents brought their children to Jesus to be blessed by him. But before they could get near him, the disciples tried to turn them away. The Gospel of Mark says, 1'the disciples rebuked them! "The rebuking disciples! Even though they had been with Jesus for some time, they had a remarkable skill in missing his spirit!

It's been a problem with Christian disciples through the years. We so easily become "rebukers," people who want to restrict the loving-kindness of Jesus Christ to those whom we think deserve. it. Jesus has no time for children. Besides children aren't serious enough. Christianity is a serious business — don't smile or have fun in church. That's the message we sometimes give. We become "rebukers" like the disciples and keep people from the joy and happiness of the Christian faith.

We rebuke children in so many ways. If one visits a first-grade class in most schools you will find that the children are bright-eyed and eager, warm and responsive, direct and spontaneous. But often if you visit a sixth-grade class, you can find a distinct difference. The students by now have become wary; their reactions are calculated; their answers are based on what they think the teacher--and society generally — wants to hear, not on what they themselves think. This happens at all levels of education.

In a sermon some time ago I told the story of the college student who didn't give the answer the professor wanted on a physics test but gave another answer that could be considered correct. The question was — "Show how it is possible to determine the height of a tall building with the aid of a barometer." The student had answered, "Take the barometer to the top of the building, attach a long rope to it, lower the barometer to the street, and then bring it up, measuring the length of the rope. The length of the rope is the height of the building."

Of course, that was not the answer the professor wanted. The student was allowed in the dispute to take that test question again. He was given six minutes to answer. At the end of five minutes, he had not written anything. The person in charge asked if he wished to give up, but he said no. He had many answers to this problem; he was just thinking of the best one. In the next minute he dashed off his answer which read: "Take the barometer to the top of the building and lean over the edge of the roof. Drop the barometer, timing its fall with a stopwatch. Then using the formula S = 1/2 at 2, calculate the height of the building.

But the student also had other answers to the problem. The professor asked what they were. "There are many ways of getting the height of a tall building with the aid of a barometer. For example. you could take the barometer on a sunny day and measure the height of the barometer, the length of its shadow and the length of the shadow of the building and by the use of a simple proportion, determine the height of the building."

And said the student there is a very basic method that you would like. You take the barometer and begin to walk up the stairs. As you climb the stairs, you mark off the length of the barometer along the way. You then count the nurr1ber of marks and this will give you the height of the building in barometer units, a very direct method.

There are many ways of solving the problem. Probably the best is to take the barometer to the basement and knock on the superintendent's door. When the superintendent answers you speak to him as follows, "Mr. Superintendent, here I have a fine barometer. If you will tell me the height of this building, I will give you this barometer."

The student of course also knew the answer the professor wanted to the question. But he also wanted to show that our creativity can be stifled or rebuked by insisting there is only one right answer.

We can rebuke children by killing their natural curiosity and desire for learning. At its highest level, the purpose of teaching is to inspire the desire for learning.

When JESUS saw th.at the disciples were rebuking the children, he was indignant. If we want to know what things Jesus cared deeply about, one sure clue is to be found in the tiii11gs that roused his indignation. On the whole, when Jesus was angry or indignant, it was over a wrong done to people or over some blindness to human welfare.

So, Jesus said, "Bring the children to me, do not hinder them!" Note carefully the word "hinder." Most of us would not be callous enough to forbid children or anyone else from coming to Jesus, but the word "hinder" is a different matter. For the hindering may be unconscious, it may come simply from neglect to take some positive action. All the time we can be hindering people, adults as well as children.

I am constantly surprised at the number of parents who train their children negatively, rather than positively, without ever realizing what they are doing to cripple the child's confidence.

Last summer in one of the city parks, I heard a mother keep saying to her young son, "No, you're too little for that slide — you're too weak to lift that rock — you're too small to walk that fence." The point she should've made was that soon the boy would be bigger and stronger and older and able to do these things.

This is not only a positive approach, but also helps the child look forward to growing up as well as accepting his present age. Even a child of two or three can be imbued with the idea that someday he will be able to do what the bigger children are doing; that everybody was once a baby and grew into adulthood; that life is a constant process of growth. A child needs to be taught to look forward to the future. Better to say, "Next summer you can go into the water alone, not" Little boys like you can't go into the water alone. "The first statement holds forth a bright promise; the second merely creates frustration and resentment.

Not only are we not to "hinder" children, but Jesus went on to say — "Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it."

In childhood, Jesus found the perfect analogy for membership in God's kingdom. Look at this child in my arms, he said, "To such belongs· the kingdom. They already have the spirit of its citizens."

Jesus was saying that all of us. need some of the characteristics of a child to be able to enter God's kingdom. That means that some of us need a second childhood because we have become frozen and stiff in our outlook on life.

What are some of these characteristics which children have and which we also need to have no matter what our age.

1. First of all, a child knows the meaning of dependence and trust. A child looks to the parent for all that he or she receives. There is trust that what is needed will be provided. Life is a gift. The world is a gift. Love is a gift.

Furthermore, for the child, neither social convention nor money, nor status, nor ownership count. They have a different kind of understanding because their perception has not yet been blunted by compromise, fatigue, rationalization and the mistaking of mere respectability for morality.

In the giving and receiving of gifts what counts for the child is the spirit in which something was given or received. For the adult, the expensive gift is often proof of deep love. But for the child, until he or she learns differently from us, judgment is from a different point of view. Love's proof is intuitively perceived in the inspiration which has guided the giver.

2. Secondly, Jesus invites us to become like children because of their sense of giving. From the earliest years, the child shows his joy in giving. He or she gives what they are able to, a smile, a look, a kiss. As soon as the little hand can seize an object, a toy, the child holds it out and offers it to us. He or she may withhold it from someone who would keep it jealously. But the child will give generously to anyone who will get into the game of reciprocal giving.

The child will give all that he or she finds. It is an act of regal love to pick a pretty flower and offer it to the father or 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 as they come out of their hiding place or are found. We grab them and hug them. The proof is in their happy outbursts. The supreme gift is the giving of oneself as the child instinctively knows.

3. A third characteristic of a child and which can be ours in a second childhood is that of spontaneity, impulse and openness. As we grow older, we become less spontaneous. Rather we become much more cautious and afraid. We become prisoners of a point of view. A child, on the other hand, 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 pay with a ragman's child. But we adults often believe that we can improve on God's ways.

Some of us get so set in our ways so early in life. Nothing is sadder than a person who only in his or her thirties has not been open to a new idea for years. And then our idea patterns become so difficult to change.

Sometime ago I was talking with a man that I had known off and on for years. I knew that he had ha.cl trouble with his marriage so I asked him how that was going. "It's a curious thing," he said sadly, "About six months ago, I decided to reconcile myself to the situation and live out my life with my wife as peacefully as possible. I make every effort to be nice — but I've been nasty to her for so long that I find it impossible to change."

His situation reminded me of the old story about the vaudeville knife thrower who had used his wife as a targ.et for years, outlining her body on the board with only a hair-breadth between her skin and the knives.

One day he learned that she was unfaithful to him and decided to kill her during the evening performance, when it would look like an accidental slip of the knife. He tried for a week's performances and couldn't hit her. He had practiced just missing her for so many years that his reflexes wouldn't allow him to come any closer. That was a good habit and good that it couldn't easily be broken.

But many of us are in the emotional position of the knife thrower. Our attitudes toward those around us tend to congeal with time, and even when we want to change them, we often find that fixed habits of mind and outlook make us revert to the old and easy attitudes.

When Jesus calls us to be like children so that we can enter God's kingdom, he is asking us to be open to new ways, to new ideas. We are to have the freshness of mind which is evident in a child. He is also asking us to 6. have a sense. of mystery about life, a sense that we do not know all there is to know about anything.

So, Jesus calls all of us adults to have a second childhood, for "whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it." Amen.