Sunday, October 6, 1991
INVITATION TO A SECOND CHILDHOOD
Mark 10:13-16

If, as adults, we are accused of being in our second childhood, we frequently take it as an insult, and sometimes that's how it's meant. And if we are teenagers and told that we are acting like a child, we especially resent it. But according to Jesus, there is a kind of second childhood that all of us need. He 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 by this statement, let's look again at the incident that prompted it.

One day, as Jesus was going about his teaching and healing, some parents brought their children to be blessed by him. But before they could get near him, the disciples tried to turn them away. The Gospel of Mark says, "The disciples rebuked them!" A new translation says, "The disciples spoke sternly to them," but I prefer the word "rebuke." It's a word we don't use very much these days, but it's very descriptive. "The rebuking disciples." Even though they had been with Jesus for some time, they had a remarkable skill in missing his spirit.

It's an easy habit to acquire — to be a rebuker, especially in our religious life. To be a rebuker is to scold, to find fault, to censure, to berate, to criticize. There are always those among us who want to restrict the love of God to those we think deserve it and to rebuke others. The disciples were saying that Jesus had no time for children, only for important people. Besides, children aren't serious enough. Christianity is serious business, therefore 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, both children and adults.

When Jesus noticed that the disciples were rebuking the children, Mark says he was indignant. If we want to know what things Jesus cared deeply about, one sure clue is to be found in the things that roused his indignation. On the whole, when he was angry or indignant, it was over a wrong done to people, especially people considered unimportant by society, or over some blindness to human welfare, or an attempt by someone or a group of people to decide who was worthy of God's love and who was not.

In this story, Jesus did more than become indignant; he said, "Bring the children to me, do not hinder them." Note carefully the word "hinder." Most of us would not be callous enough to absolutely 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 neglecting to take some positive action.

All the time, we can be hindering people, adults, and children. For example, for years, we have been hindering the differently-abled from our church buildings and other places as well. We don't do it on purpose. We aren't even aware of it unless we have a relative or friend in a wheelchair. We wouldn't think of locking all the restrooms in our church building on Sundays, and yet because they are inaccessible to some people, they are the same as locked to them. One of the main reasons we're going to be adding a needed addition to this building is to make all of it accessible to all people. And we're building more space for children of all ages. Right now, we're hindering children because of a lack of space.

We can also hinder people in their learning without being aware of it. Not all people learn in the same way. Over the past 20 years, we have begun as a society to recognize that learning disabilities affect millions of people. And yet we often rely only on the written word. As a church especially, we need to recognize that while all people learn, they do not learn in the same way or at the same speed. If we only recognize one form of learning, we are hindering people.

So the first point that Jesus makes in this story is that we are not to hinder people in any way, children and adults, from coming to him and learning from him and about him.

The second point is this. Jesus said, “Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.” Here is our invitation to a second childhood. Here’s another way to be born again — to become like a child. It can truly be a spiritual rebirth.

In childhood, Jesus found a wonderful analogy for participating in God’s Kingdom. “Look at this child in my arms,” he said, “to such belongs the Kingdom. Children already have the spirit of its citizens.” Jesus was not talking about being “childish,” but about being “childlike.”

What then are some of the characteristics that children have and which we are to have in order to truly experience the Kingdom of God in our lives?

First of all, children have an active and creative imagination that helps them to see things we do not see. Children have an instinctive spirituality. I especially like children’s spirituality, which is shown in their creativity and imagination concerning God. A little paperback book, Dear God: Children’s Letters to God, illustrates their imagination. A few samples:
“Dear God, You and I have something in common. We both have a lot of names. You have Lord, God, Jesus, Father.” Signed, Rodney William Peter Johnson, Junior (age 8) A footnote: “Please look, I also have a nickname. It is Rodent. What’s yours?”
“Dear God, I saw the Grand Canyon last summer. Nice piece of work. Love, Alan.”
“Dear Ms. God: I believe you are a woman. In fact, I am sure for sure. I think that is why the rivers and sky and birds are so beautiful. If by some fluke you are a boy, please do not take it out on me. Boys should not hit girls. Trisha.”
A teacher describes an experiment she frequently used. “If I held up a sheet of white paper and put a black dot near the center with my pen, what would you see?” She has used this demonstration with thousands of adults in seminars and invariably gets the same answer: “A black dot.” When she does the same thing with kindergarten children, a lot of hands go up and the answers are many and varied. “A Mexican hat,” said one child. “No, that’s a burnt hamburger,” said another. “A squashed bug,” observed a third youngster.

As children, we’re more naturally creative because we let our minds run free. But as we’re taught to follow the rules, our thinking narrows. This is not all bad. There are rules and guidelines that are very helpful and important. It wouldn’t do to create a new way of going home from work if it meant driving down the wrong side of the street in trying to be creative, or going the wrong way on a one-way street just to be different. We have to learn when it’s okay to be out-of-bounds and when it’s necessary to stay in bounds.

But there are plenty of areas in all of our lives where we can continue to use our imagination and creativity, but instead, we lose or forget or put down the natural creativity and spontaneity we had as children. To be creative is to be in touch with God, the ultimate Creator.

The biggest temptation as adults is to become prisoners of a point of view, and to be afraid to consider any new idea or try anything different. I loved the story in the newspapers a few

months ago that told of an 88-year-old woman claiming the record as the oldest woman to ever skydive. Hazel Stout, of Portland, Oregon, parachuted from a plane 10,500 feet over central California. She said her late husband had “never let me do anything even close to this when he was alive.” If her jump is accepted by the Guinness Book of World Records, it would shatter the mark set by an 80-year-old Briton, Sylvia Brett, in 1986.

Parachuting is only the most recent of numerous adventures Hazel Stout has tried since her husband died 11 years ago. In recent years, she’s gone ice-fishing, broken a foot while body surfing in Hawaii, and slid along waterfalls that tumble over granite shelves in New Hampshire. She said she wasn’t scared before her parachute jump: “I figure when you’re 88 years old, how many years have you got to lose?”

This is not to suggest that all of us who are adults need to try skydiving or body surfing or ice fishing in order to be like a child, but it is to remind us that we can get so set in our ways in life and refuse to consider any new idea, and we become afraid of anything out of the ordinary. We lose the curiosity and creativity of being like a child.

When Jesus invites us to a second childhood, we are being asked to be open to new ways, to seeing the world and other people with new eyes. We are to have the freshness of mind that is evident in a child. We are to have that sense of mystery and wonder about life.

Secondly, Jesus invites us to a second childhood because a child knows the meaning of dependence and trust. In loving families, a child looks to the parent for all that she needs and receives. There is a basic trust that what is needed will be provided. Life is a gift. Love is a gift. It’s the kind of dependence and trust we are to have in God. That’s what makes child abuse and incest such a deep tragedy. It’s a betrayal of trust, and the child cannot understand it.

Thirdly, Jesus invites us to a second childhood because of a child’s sense of giving. From the earliest years, children show their joy in giving. They give what they are able to give — a smile, a look, a kiss, a hug. As soon as the little hand can seize an object, a toy, for example, 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.

Children will give all that they find. It is an act of regal love to pick a pretty flower and offer it to Mom or Dad. 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 places 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. Today, you are being invited to a second childhood. It’s an invitation to being as open as possible to God’s Spirit in your life. That Spirit is always present in you whether you are aware of it or not.

The good news is that when you are open to that Spirit in becoming like a child, then something remarkable happens. You discover an inward source of power that overcomes fear and reinforces courage. Your priorities in life are rearranged, and you are equipped for living life joyfully, hopefully, and creatively, trusting ultimately in God who makes all things new. Amen.