Sunday, March 28, 1993
THE EXAMPLE OF A CHILD (No. 2 in a Series: Lord's Prayer)
Matthew 18:1-7

Sometimes, when we as adults are accused of being in our second childhood, we take it as an insult — and frequently, that's how it's meant. But maybe there's a way we can turn it into a compliment.

One day, the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" He called a child, whom he put among them, and said, "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me."

It was a surprising and shocking answer to the disciples' question, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" Why did Jesus choose a child as an example of who is the greatest? And why did Jesus go on to say, "If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea"? I think Jesus knew that in any family, society, culture, or nation, if the child is safe, everyone is safe. He also wanted children to be safe for their own good.

Now let's look more carefully at Jesus' use of a child as an example for all of us, no matter what our age. In childhood, Jesus found an almost perfect analogy for membership in God's community. While it's true that there's much that children need to learn from us as adults, it's also true that as adults, we can learn much from children.

First of all, children have an active and creative imagination that helps them see things that we no longer see as adults. A teacher described an experiment that she frequently uses: "If I hold up a sheet of paper and put a black dot on it with my pen, what would you see?" She has used this demonstration with thousands of adults in seminars, and invariably, she gets the same answer: "A black dot." When she tries the same thing with a kindergarten class, a lot of hands go up, and the answers are many and varied. "A Mexican hat," piped one youngster. "No, that's a burned hamburger," said another. "A squashed bug," observed a third child.

When we're children, we are more naturally creative because we let our minds run free. But as we're taught to follow the rules, our thinking also narrows. This is not to deny that for much of life, this can be a blessing. There are rules and guidelines that are very helpful. It wouldn't do to create a new way of going home from work if it meant driving on the wrong side of the street or going the wrong way on a one-way street just to be creative.

But in so many other areas of our lives, we lose or forget or suppress our natural creativity and our ability to be in touch with God, the ultimate Creator. We all have within us a large amount of natural creative ability. It is a gift to each one of us from God. It is built in. We can cover it up, hide it, or suffocate it.

Unfortunately, as we grow older, many of us tend to become overly cautious or afraid. We become prisoners of a point of view. A child, on the other hand, being unconscious of rank or race until taught differently, will not worry about the color of skin or anything else. A king's child

will gladly play with a ragman's child. But we adults often believe 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 is only in their twenties, thirties, or forties but has not had or been open to a new idea for years. And the longer we live, the more our idea patterns become harder to change. No wonder Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." I think Jesus also meant, "You will not even recognize the kingdom of God even though it is all around you."

So when Jesus calls us "to change and become like children," he is asking us to be open to new ways, to fresh ideas, to seeing the world and other people differently. We are to have the freshness of mind evident in a child, the curiosity, the love of exploration, the questioning attitude, the joy of learning new things. He is also asking us to have a sense of mystery and wonder about life, a sense that we do not know all there is to know about anything.

Someone described being open and creative this way: "Discovery consists of seeing what everybody has seen and thinking what nobody has thought."

Secondly, Jesus calls us to "change and become like children" to recognize and enter God's community because a child has a deep sense of dependence and trust. A child looks to the parent for all that he or she receives. There is a trust that what is necessary for life will be provided. Life is a gift. The world is a gift. Love is a gift. It's the kind of dependence and trust we are to have in God. This does not mean an abdication of our own responsibility.

Furthermore, for the child, neither social convention, money, 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 young child, especially, is the spirit in which something is given or received. For the adult, the expensive gift is more often proof of deep love. For the child, until taught differently, judgment is from another point of view. Love's proof is intuitively perceived in the inspiration that has guided the giver.

Thirdly, Jesus invites us to become like children in their joy in giving. Even in their earliest years, a child shows his or her joy in giving. Children give what they are able to give: a smile, a look, a kiss, a thumb or finger to suck. As soon as the little hand can seize an object, a toy, the child holds it out and offers it to you. The child may withhold it from someone who would keep it jealously but will give it to anyone who will get into the game of reciprocal giving and receiving.

The child will offer all that he or she finds. It is an act of regal love to pick a pretty flower and offer it to the mother or dad. And in the game of hide and seek, which children enjoy so much, they pretend to hide only for the joy of giving themselves away again as they come out of their hiding place and are found. We grab them and hug them. The proof is in their outbursts. The supreme gift is the giving of oneself, as the child instinctively knows.

No wonder Jesus said, "Unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

And as mentioned earlier, Jesus also went on to say, “If any one of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea.”

Isn’t Jesus saying here that we are to treat the children of society with special love and tenderness? It has been said that the final test of a society, culture, or country is what it does to its children.

Think of some of the many stumbling blocks we put in the lives of these little ones, whom God loves so much. I could give you abundant statistics about what is happening and will happen to the children in our country during the next four years, not to mention the starvation and other problems that are afflicting children around the world.

For example, during the next four years, at least 1,080,000 American babies will be born at low birth weight, multiplying their risk of death or disability.

143,619 babies will die before their first birthday.

Two million babies will be born to teen mothers.

15,856 children 19 or younger will die by firearms.

All of us have noted the increasing reports of child abuse of all kinds. For Jesus, child abuse of any kind was one of the most reprehensible kinds of sin. Why? Because children rely on adults to protect and defend them.

Sexual abuse is not the only kind of abuse adults perpetrate against children. Some parents and other adults verbally abuse their children by cursing them, calling them names, and making them feel stupid and worthless. What is worse, some parents teach their children to be violent, passing down their anger and hurt, leading the boy or girl to act violently toward others. Why is it that as parents and teachers, we so easily get into the habit of being critical of children and spend so little time praising and complimenting them?

Furthermore, as I said in a sermon last October, what worries me equally as much are not only the children of all colors and walks of life that we are losing to too-early parenthood, poor health and education, and child abuse, but also the children of all classes who are drowning in the meaninglessness of a culture that rewards greed and guile and tells them life is about getting rather than giving. We live in a time that too frequently defines success by consumption rather than character, a culture that values things and wealth over relationships and service.

I worry too because, despite the fact that in this church we offer some of the best programs anywhere in the country, from early childhood education all the way up through youth ministry, participation in many of these programs is sporadic. For example, in our Sunday morning program for infants through 6th grade, over 700 children are enrolled, yet only 450 of these participate at least once a month. Thus some Sundays we will have 250 children here, then on another Sunday 350, and on the following Sunday 225. There is no continuity.

Religious education is seen by too many families as a part-time activity over which many other activities take precedence. At the same time, our children and young people are bombarded with all kinds of cultural messages about what they must buy and how they must act to be “with it.” There are many stumbling blocks that are put in the way of our children and young people.

So today, as we celebrate children and youth in our church, I hope all of us recognize that while Jesus calls us to “change and become like children” in order to be a part of God’s community, we must also remember that we have a big responsibility to be good role models and leaders for our children and to build institutions and communities that care for and nurture all children. Only then, according to Jesus, can we be considered great according to God’s measure of success. Amen.