Sunday, October 20, 2002
CHILDREN AND JESUS
Matthew 18:1-7,10

When people asked Jesus questions, they frequently received unexpected responses. Sometimes, he would not directly answer their question, but would instead ask a question in return. Other times, he would tell a story instead of giving a direct answer, and still other times, he would give an indirect answer by using a concrete illustration.

The story from Matthew's gospel read today is one such example. One day, the disciples asked him, "Who is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?" I'm convinced they had an answer in mind when they asked the question and were looking for confirmation of their opinion. Maybe they even hoped he would say, "You, my closest disciples, are the greatest." But he surprised them when he called a child, put the child in the middle of the group, 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."

In other words, who is the greatest? All of you can be the greatest. There is no permanent hierarchy in God's community. Little children, until they are taught to think about it, do not even ask the question, "Who is the greatest?"

Why did Jesus choose a child as an example? Because of a child's trusting attitude toward life and toward God. In addition, children have an active and creative imagination. They are open to new ideas and alternative ways of seeing things. Children are not conscious of race and rank until taught differently. A king's child will gladly play with a ragman's child until someone tells them it's not the thing to do.

No wonder he said, "Unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven." He was saying that you will not even recognize the Kingdom of Heaven, even though it is all around you and within you, unless you have the openness of a child — the curiosity, the love of exploration, the questioning attitude, and the joy of learning new things. To truly know God, you need to have the sense of wonder, mystery, and natural humility that you find in a child.

Not only are you to become like a child, but it's also helpful to be able to see the child in people who are adults, especially in those people you find difficult to accept and love. Try it! Particularly when you see a person who shows unattractive traits or who is offensive to you for whatever reason. In your imagination, see that person as the child he or she once was. Try to picture that individual as a tiny baby being held lovingly in the arms of his or her mother or father. Then see them as a smiling, happy two-year-old.

See the person as the child he or she was. Behind the pomp or rudeness, beneath the crust of meanness or coldness that has developed in adulthood, begin to see the wistful little boy or girl who has been hurt or disappointed and determined to strike back at the world.

You might see the adult as a little child who was given too much too soon, or was given things instead of love, and now can only clutch their power or their purse the way they used to clutch their doll or teddy bear because they had little else to hold onto as a child.

I believe Jesus often saw people as the children they once were. He could see through their outer surface and discover the little child in them, especially in the people he met who were hurting. He could see beneath their surface as God sees beneath your surface. He could see the child-like spirit that needed to be reawakened. That's why he invited them to become again like the children they once were.

But then in this same story from Matthew's gospel, he went on to say, "If any one of you puts 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."

And for special emphasis, he added, "Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones; for I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven."

Here and in other Bible stories, it is obvious that Jesus had a special love for children, just as the God he revealed does. He knew that in any family, society, culture, religion, or nation, if the child is safe, everyone is safe. No one is more defenseless than a child. It has been said that the final test of a society, church, culture, or nation is what it does to its children. That's what makes the stories of the sexual abuse of children and young people by priests, ministers, teachers, parents, or any other adult so horrible.

In addition to sexual abuse, there are other kinds of "stumbling blocks" we put in the way of children. Here are some examples. Earlier this month, all of us saw on television the mother, Madelyne Gorman Toogood, who was charged with felony battery of her daughter. A surveillance camera taped this mother striking her daughter after putting her in a van in a store parking lot in Mishawaka, Indiana.

Before and after that incident, I've been collecting news stories of child mistreatment. Here are some of the recent headlines from my collection: DAD USES STUN GUN TO DISCIPLINE 8-YEAR-OLD; CHILD DIES AFTER BEING LEFT ALONE IN CAR; COUPLE ACCUSED OF LOCKING SEVEN-YEAR-OLD DAUGHTER IN ROOM FOR MONTHS; 8-MONTH-OLD BABY LEFT ALONE IN BATHTUB DROWNS; 20-MONTH-OLD ABANDONED IN CAR DIES; MIAMI WOMAN SENTENCED TO 50 YEARS FOR SETTING DAUGHTER ON FIRE. I have 74 headlines like this, all collected within the past few months. These stories come from people of all types of social backgrounds. The abuse of children in this country takes place in all social classes — rich, middle class, and poor.

When children are abused, they tend to abuse others. Remember the story earlier this month from Milwaukee? A mob of boys used everything from broomsticks to strollers to bludgeon a man to death, then ate chicken and got rid of evidence. They left behind a horrific scene — a blood-spattered porch littered with bloody sticks, boards, rakes, chairs, and beer cans. Charlie Young, 36, was unconscious on the porch, bleeding to death. He died two days later. The boys, ages 10 to 18, gave graphic details of the beating they inflicted on Young. Thirteen children were charged in the assault and death. The background and upbringing of these young people is a horror story in itself.

As followers of the way of Jesus, the church has a special responsibility for being advocates of children. We are to treat children as he treated them. The good news is that the early childhood weekday program here at First-Plymouth, which is comprised of what we formerly called our "Parents Day Out Program" and our "First-Plymouth Preschool," is doing an

outstanding job in removing stumbling blocks from children so that they can grow into responsible, mature adults.

Add to this our Sunday morning church school classes and our Wednesday evening program for children and young people. Research shows that for every one dollar spent on early childhood education of the kind we offer, seven dollars are saved later.

But there is still so much more to be done, and churches like ours are in a unique position to do it. Nancy Rosenow, our early childhood program director, tells me that because of Nebraska state budget cuts, necessitated by a shortage of revenue, one of the programs that had to take a big cut — which affects young children — is the state funding subsidy for childcare for working low-income parents.

Here's one example that can be multiplied many times over: A young single mother with one child needing daycare so the mother can work is earning $1,800 take-home pay per month. The father of the child deserted the family and cannot be located. Before the recent Nebraska state budget cuts, this working mother's daycare cost was $200 per month because it was subsidized. Now her daycare cost is $720 per month. Remember, her take-home pay is $1,800 per month. So after paying for daycare, she has $1,080 left per month, out of which she has to pay rent, buy food, clothes, and other necessities. Unless something changes, she will have to quit her job and go back on welfare, which will cost the state more than if her daycare subsidy had not been cut.

There is no easy answer to this dilemma. What we try to do in our church's early childhood program is to provide as much subsidy as our budget will allow for such family situations, so that children can participate as fully as they need.

We could provide more if we had more money for that kind of help, so we are going to do our best to increase our tuition assistance for working parents like this young mother.

Our church is also doing its best to remove other stumbling blocks for children and young people. Too many of our children today are growing up in an ethically polluted culture where instant sex without responsibility, instant gratification without effort, instant solutions without sacrifice, and getting rather than giving are too often the signals given by our mass media, business, and political life.

We are trying our best to do what Jesus asked us to do: to welcome children in his name, to remove as many stumbling blocks as possible, and to let each child know that he or she has been created in God's image and can experience the love of God through the people and programs of this congregation. Parents, all by themselves, cannot shut out completely the pollution of our airwaves and popular culture, which glorifies excessive violence, endless consumption, easy sex, and greed, and depicts deadly alcohol and tobacco products as fun and glamorous.

At the same time, we are in short supply of true heroes and heroines in our private and public life. Too frequently, the measure for success in popular culture is how much money one makes and what luxuries you spend it on.

Fortunately, we have many true heroes and heroines in this congregation who are excellent role models for our children and young people. Think of the many people who volunteer to teach Sunday church school classes and confirmation groups. There are also those who help

with the children's choirs, with our youth orchestra, and with our Wednesday evening program for young people. In addition, we have many adults in this church who volunteer in the many good public school programs to help those young people who need special attention. We also have people leading Girl Scout and Boy Scout programs and volunteering in countless athletic opportunities for young people throughout our community.

So today, as you celebrate children in our church and our community, remember that as followers of Jesus, you are asked to do three things. First, if you want to be one of the greatest in God's realm, become humble like a child. Second, see the child in other human beings, not only in those who are children, but even in those crabby adults with whom you have difficulty, and welcome them in the name of Christ. Jesus said, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me." Third, support and work with those people and institutions in our society, such as this church, that continue to remove stumbling blocks so that all of our children can grow into the responsible, loving human beings that God intends. Amen.