

Augustana College
Chapel of Reconciliation

Samuel Eisele
20 Nov 2009

Morning! Thank you all for coming and listening this morning, and peace be to you and this community from God, our loving and merciful father in heaven. It's a privilege to be able to share some of my thoughts about life and God and all that important stuff with you. I find it a bit confining that as seniors we get a half-hour service to share what we've learned over four years, or more. Almost makes me feel like I have to give the "perfect sermon"...but I know none of you would expect that, so I won't presume to do it. There's obviously waaay too much to talk about in such a short space of time, so I decided to share thoughts on something that's both interesting to me and, I think, universally applicable to us as people of faith.

You probably surmised from the prayer and readings this morning that I'm going to talk a little bit about kids. I picked this particular story from Mark and the passage Ben read for us from Romans because for a number of years now I've been a little hung up on the phrase "faith of a child." What does that even mean? Where is it in the Bible? It's not, as it turns out. The closest you get is the story I just read, the whole "let the little children come to me" thing, and "whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." Which is actually a pretty cute scene followed up by a serious bit of advice. It would seem pertinent, then, to determine what Jesus is going on about here.

The reason I have such an issue with the "faith of a child" thing is not so much that I don't like the idea; it's the misconstrued assumption that accompanies it that bothers me. I think we often hear this phrase and think, well, Jesus wants me to go ahead and just soak up this religious stuff like a little kid because if I try really hard to understand what's going on here, like a questioning adult, I'll probably just end up confusing myself and the Gospel itself. If that's what you're deriving from this idea, I would ask you:

When was the last time you had a conversation with a little child?

Children are, in fact, positively the most relentlessly inquisitive people you will ever meet. They question everything, and they keep you honest. Several years ago, my family was on a houseboat trip in northern Minnesota with my mom's side of my extended family. My then-three-year-old cousin was with us, and I would say about 80% of what came out of that kid's mouth that week was one word: *Why?* *Everything* you tell him, he wants to know the reason behind it. Why are you fishing? Why are we stopping? Why is it darker outside? Why do I have to go to bed? Why can't I touch that? And no matter how you respond, it's followed up by another "why?", as is your second response, and so on. I am not so persuaded that similar behavior is discouraged by a God who claims us all as his children.

It's not too difficult, actually, to find people in the Bible who do this. Job, of course, demands answers for the tragedy that befalls him. Jeremiah often complains against the Lord. Jacob literally wrestles with God. The Son of Man, Christ himself, cries out from the cross, echoing the words of the psalmist, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

God doesn't always make sense. But if we are to approach Jesus, if we are to receive the kingdom as little children, we are certainly entitled to maintain curious minds and inquisitive spirits. The childlike approach does not leave complexity at the door, it doesn't "simplify" faith in a watering down sort of way; on the contrary, it causes us to reengage the mysteries of faith with renewed inquiry and a reverent wonder. Grown-ups, I find, are prone to questioning budget meetings, social statements, and the benign inconsistencies of daily life. A childlike faith makes me ask: Is there a God? Is the Bible true? Why do bad things happen to good people? What if the Catholics have it right?

And that's OK, to ask such things. I think another distinction we might make, though, is between questioning arbitrarily and questioning while recognizing that it is God we're talking to. I think Jeremiah puts it really well when he says:

"You will be in the right, O Lord, when I lay charges against you; but let me put my case to you."

Or, if I may paraphrase: "God, I know you're God, and you can do this, you can be the way you're being right now.....I'm just saying, I don't understand the logic here. I just don't really get why you would do things the way you do." I think most of us can relate to that. Which brings us back to that bit from Romans that Ben read. "We suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him." As little children, we are heirs along with Christ himself. As little children of God, we receive the privilege to cry out to Abba, to daddy, to tell him all that is awry in the world.

A wise theologian once advised me on how to minister to a friend in need. My friend had suffered something of a family tragedy that left her scarred and bitter against the God she thought would take care of everything. I asked this theologian, "What do I say to the one who is raging against God and cannot hear the answer she needs?" He told me, "Tell her that at least she's sending it to the right address."

That stuck with me. I think it is one of the astounding comforts of the Christian life to know that the God who made the heavens and the earth welcomes and hears our cries, the cries of his little children. That very act of crying out, Paul tells us, reminds us that we live in the grace of God, waiting, Paul says, to receive freedom from our bondage to a sinful and broken world that all too often leaves us without answers.

So, where does that leave us? I think we'll find that the childlike receipt of the kingdom of God which Jesus recommends might not always give us the answers we want to hear. But it does

reveal the lives we need to live. The faith of a child, it turns out, turns conventional living upside-down. A child asks the big questions, wrestles with his or her world, and knows to bring every petition to a loving parent. At the end of the day, however, a child is not concerned with the stock market, the bio test, the insurance bill, or church council meetings. The child has faith in daily bread, not in the potential troubles of tomorrow. And if I die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take. That's faith.

Remember, then, that the mysteries, struggles, and anomalies of your daily life can and ought to be thrown at the feet of your loving Father whose mercy and grace are bigger than all the problems of this world. "Let the little children come to me," Jesus says. God welcomes you to struggle, cry out, and question. And when you do, feel free to bring along the sin and brokenness which got you there in the first place. Our Father who art in heaven promises to strip those things away so that you may engage in the world again and again, as a little child, curious and exploring the mysteries of life and faith that can and will only bring you back to his infinite grace. Amen.

MORNING WORSHIP

Friday, November 20, 2009

Prelude

Susan Rohde

Welcome/Announcements

Invocation

Prayer

L: Father in heaven,

C: Teach us to receive your Word as little children. Instill in us a childlike wonder, not so that we passively accept the mysteries and miracles of our lives as distant or enigmatic, but rather that we might find peace in wrestling with you and our world. Renew in us the joy of living without grown-up concerns that would take us farther from you, and restore to us an engaging faith by which we adamantly inquire while taking comfort in knowing that though we are weak, you are strong. Amen.

Hymn

“Gather Us In”

ELW # 532

Scripture Reading

Romans 8: 14-21

Mark 10: 13-15

Message

Samuel Eisele

Hometown: Sioux Falls, Sd

Majors: Spanish and Education

Hymn

“Children of the Heavenly Father”

ELW #781

Prayer & Lord's Prayer

L: God the Father,

C: Send us out this day and every day with the joy of your salvation, and grant us willing spirits to sustain us. Rekindle in our hearts the astounding childlike capacity to live freely as you would have us be. In our ignorance, grant us wisdom. In our reservations, foster confidence and trust. In our certainty, help us to keep wondering and to never lose the joy of inquiry and the renewal it brings in you. And continue to teach us to pray the prayer your son Jesus has taught us: Our father, who art in heaven...Amen.

Benediction

Dismissal

Postlude

Susan Rohde

