

**“The Simplicity of Faith”**  
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East Cobb United Methodist Church  
June 27, 2010

Scripture: Mark 10:13-15  
Prayer

Show the video, “Logan, the Angel Cowboy,” (2:24 minutes)  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zCdZwitrNoY&feature=related>

Logan Henderson is a 13-year-old boy from Whitman, Nebraska for whom the nature of God seems to be clear. His Dad was roping a calf - Logan's calf - and in the process, the calf's back was broken because of its brittle bones, and it has to be put down. Logan loses something special, but he gains something even more special. He understands how much God loves him. He gets it, and simply states the faith in 2:24 minutes. I wonder if our concept of God is that simple. How do we so complicate this message of faith that many are reluctant to believe and follow because they think it will be too hard to understand?

**The Context** - At the end of Mark 8, Jesus announces to his disciples for the first time that he must die, and that his disciples too must lose their lives in order to save them. They must give up their own desires, plans, and hopes. When they do so, they will become what God intends them to be. In Mark 9, the disciples are arguing about who is the greatest. (They just don't learn, do they?) Jesus does not reprimand them but instead teaches them that the way to true greatness is different from what they believe. One becomes great, in part, through service to others. Mark 9:36-37 says:

Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me. (NRSV)

Jesus uses this little child as an example of the type of person the disciples should serve in Jesus' name in order to become great: someone who is unlikely ever to pay them back, someone who is weak and powerless, someone who will do nothing for their social standing. This is one way we maximize our faith, and show that God dwells in us.

Our text for today, Mark 10:13-15 says:

People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, “Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it. (NRSV)

Jesus was greatly displeased. The disciples told people not to bring their children to Jesus. Jesus has more important things to do than to spend time with children. But Jesus was unhappy with the disciples for doing this. “The kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.” What more needs to be said? There is a difference between childlike faith and childish behavior. Childlike faith brings up in us a desire to please the one who has blessed us with such great love. Childish behavior rebels because it refuses to receive what has been freely offered. This behavior is the response of the one that demands that God act as we want him to. There is no trust. There is no obedience. There is no desire to please to one that lavished his love upon us.

Listen to what the Apostle John says: “But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God...” (John 1:12 NRSV) By God's power and love, we adults can become *children* too. If we are to belong to God, we must come to him as if we are children. Adults also must receive God's kingdom just as a child does, or we don't receive it at all.

The very heart of the gospel is Jesus' mandate for child-like faith. The bottom line to salvation is being able to say three words: I need Jesus! The only thing standing between man and God is

pride. Humbling ourselves, admitting, believing, confessing...It's all about Jesus.... When we stand before our God we never want to hear: depart from me for I never knew you. That word: *knew* should be underlined and highlighted. It's a *Knowing*...relationship not *Religion*.

We can never advance to a higher plain in Christianity. This is where we must stay: like a little child. If we ever think we have arrived, we're in trouble. This is why Christianity and Pride don't mix. This is why we cease to represent Jesus well when we begin to think of ourselves as anything more than a sinner saved by grace. The know-it-all, the snob...the "religious rigid," the "frozen chosen" are the ones Jesus was really contemptuous of (contemporary Pharisees). When the head becomes larger than the heart, we are in danger. It's all about Love, Knowing Jesus, Trusting Jesus...like a little child.

To children, the world is full of surprises, full of things that they don't understand. They know that they don't understand everything, so they are frequently lost in wonder. How do these characteristics apply to the way we receive the kingdom?

1. Start with wonder: We need to be overwhelmed with the wonder of his love and power. He created this world around us. He can do anything. And he came for me. He loves me.
2. Second, we need to be straightforward with regard to our sinfulness – not rationalizing truth and distorting it into self-serving lie.
3. Third, we need to trust in Jesus, believe him with the simple faith of a child, knowing he is so far above us that we will never understand him – but we can trust Him.

**Children Have a Sense of Wonder** - The church needs to embrace wonder again. There is a lot I don't know. Many things I do not understand. Friends struggle with death, pain, hurt, suffering and ask why? Please hear me: God doesn't need excuses. People don't need pat answers. The questions this world raises many times just do not have answers. Many times there just aren't words. The pat answers like: God must have needed her more than us. Any cliché will do, and the church is full of clichés. They always fall short. They always fail us sooner or later.

Robert Peterson tells this story:

"She was six years old when I first met her on the beach near where I live. I drive to this beach, a distance of three or four miles, whenever the world begins to close in on me. She was building a sandcastle or something and looked up, her eyes as blue as the sea. "Hello," she said. I answered with a nod, not really in the mood to bother with a small child. "I'm building," she said. "I see that. What is it?" I asked, not caring. "Oh, I don't know, I just like the feel of sand." That sounds good, I thought, and slipped off my shoes. A sandpiper glided by. "That's a joy," the child said. "It's a what?" "It's a joy. My mama says sandpipers come to bring us joy." The bird went gliding down the beach. "Good-bye joy," I muttered to myself, "hello pain," and turned to walk on. I was depressed; my life seemed completely out of balance. "What's your name?" She wouldn't give up. "Robert," I answered. "I'm Robert Peterson." "Mine's Wendy... I'm six." "Hi, Wendy." She giggled. "You're funny," she said. In spite of my gloom I laughed too and walked on. Her musical giggle followed me. "Come again, Mr. P," she called. "We'll have another happy day. "The days and weeks that followed belong to others: a group of unruly Boy Scouts, PTA meetings, an ailing mother. The sun was shining one morning as I took my hands out of the dishwasher. "I need a sandpiper," I said to myself, gathering up my coat. The ever-changing balm of the seashore awaited me. The breeze was chilly, but I strode along, trying to recapture the serenity I needed. I had forgotten the child and was startled when she appeared. "Hello, Mr. P," she said. "Do you want to play?" "What did you have in mind?" I asked, with a twinge of annoyance. "I don't know. You say." "How about charades?" I asked sarcastically. The tinkling laughter burst forth again. "I don't know what that is." "Then let's just walk." Looking at her, I noticed the delicate fairness of her face. "Where do you live?" I asked. "Over there." She pointed toward a row of summer cottages. Strange, I thought, in winter. "Where do you go to school?" "I don't go to school. Mommy says we're on vacation." She chattered little talk as we strolled up the beach, but my mind was on other things. When I left for home, Wendy said it had been a happy day. Feeling surprisingly better, I smiled at her and agreed. Three weeks later, I rushed to my beach in a state of near panic. I was in no mood to even greet Wendy. I thought I saw her mother on the porch and felt like demanding she keep her child at home. "Look, if you don't mind," I said crossly when Wendy caught up with me, "I'd rather be alone today." She seems unusually pale and out of breath. "Why?" she asked. I turned to her and

shouted, "Because my mother died!" and prayed, Oh God, why was I saying this to a little child?" Oh," she said quietly, "then this is a bad day." "Yes," I said, "and yesterday and the day before and-oh, go away!" "Did it hurt?" she inquired. "Did what hurt?" I was exasperated with her, with myself. "When she died? Of course it hurt!!!!" I snapped, misunderstanding, wrapped up in myself. I strode off. A month or so after that, when I next went to the beach, she wasn't there. Feeling guilty, ashamed and admitting to myself I missed her, I went up to the cottage after my walk and knocked at the door. A drawn looking young woman with honey-colored hair opened the door. "Hello," I said. "I'm Robert Peterson. I missed your little girl today and, wondered where she was." "Oh yes, Mr. Peterson, please come in. Wendy spoke of you so much. I'm afraid I allowed her to bother you. If she was a nuisance, please, accept my apologies." "Not at all-she's a delightful child," I said, suddenly realizing that I meant it. "Where is she?" "Wendy died last week, Mr. Peterson. She had leukemia. Maybe she didn't tell you." Struck dumb, I groped for a chair. My breath caught. "She loved this beach; so when she asked to come, we couldn't say no. She seemed so much better here and had a lot of what she called happy days. But the last few weeks, she declined rapidly..." her voice faltered. "She left something for you ... if only I can find it. Could you wait a moment while I look?" I nodded stupidly, my mind racing for something, anything, to say to this lovely young woman. She handed me a smeared envelope, with MR. P printed in bold, childish letters. Inside was a drawing in bright crayon hues - a yellow beach, a blue sea, and a brown bird. Underneath was carefully printed: A SANDPIPER TO BRING YOU JOY. Tears welled up in my eyes, and a heart that had almost forgotten to love opened wide. I took Wendy's mother in my arms. "I'm so sorry, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry," I muttered over and over, and we wept together. The precious little drawing is framed now and hangs in my study. Six words - one for each year of her life - that speak to me of harmony, courage, undemanding love. A gift from a child with sea-blue eyes and hair the color of sand, who taught me the gift of love.

So will you wonder as a child? Will you admit your sinfulness like a child? Will you open yourself to the pain of the world with the simplicity of a child? That's what Logan did in our interview. He didn't understand everything, but he knew God did.

**Children Are Straightforward** - Sometimes children's statements – well, a little off track but sincere nevertheless:

- God bless America thru the night with a light from a bulb!
- Oh Susanna, Oh don't you cry for me, For I come from Alabama with a band-aid on my knee!
- Give us this day our deli bread!
- Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Whole East Coast.
- We shall come to Joyce's, bringing in the cheese.
- He carrots for you.
- Praise God from whom all blessings flow, Praise Him all creatures, here we go.
- While shepherds washed their socks by night.
- He socked me and boxed me with His redeeming glove.
- Lead On, O Kinky Turtle.
- Love is when your puppy licks your face even after you left him alone all day.

Prayers to God:

- Dear God, In Sunday School they told us what You do. Who does it when You are on vacation?
- Dear God, I think about you sometimes even when I'm not praying.
- Dear God, Did you really mean "do unto others as they do unto you?" Because if you did, then I'm going to fix my brother.
- Love is when your puppy licks your face even after you left him alone all day.
- Dear God, I didn't think orange went with purple until I saw the sunset you made on Tuesday.
- Dear God, I read the Bible. What does "begat" mean? Nobody will tell me.
- Dear God, Are you really invisible or is that a trick?
- Dear God, Is it true my father won't get in Heaven if he uses his bowling words in the house?

- Dear God, Did you mean for the giraffe to look like that or was it an accident?
- Dear God, Instead of letting people die and having to make new ones, why don't You just keep the ones You have now?
- Dear God, Who draws the lines around countries?
- Dear God, The bad people laughed at Noah — "You made an ark on dry land you fool". But he was smart, he stuck with you. That's what I would do.
- Dear God, I went to this wedding and they kissed right in church. Is that okay?
- Dear God, What does it mean you are a Jealous God? I thought you had everything.
- Dear God, Thank you for the baby brother, but what I prayed for was a puppy.
- Dear God, Why is Sunday School on Sunday? I thought it was supposed to be our day of rest.
- Dear God, Maybe Cain and Abel would not kill each other so much if they had their own rooms. It works with my brother.
- Dear God, you don't have to worry about me. I always look both ways.
- Dear God, I bet it is very hard for you to love all of everybody in the whole world. There are only 4 people in our family and I can never do it.
- Dear God, My brother told me about being born but it doesn't sound right. They're just kidding, aren't they?
- Dear God, We read Thomas Edison made light. But in school they said you did it. So, I bet he stole your idea.

Children say whatever comes into their minds. They are not worried about social convention, what others will think, or about what every one else is doing. They are not self-conscious. They say what they think. That kind of honesty is refreshing and faithful. We live in a world where truth is compromised daily in the affairs of church and state, and being disingenuous (lying) becomes a roadblock to personal, spiritual, and national growth.

The mind of a child accepts that there is still much to learn; wonders at every bit of the world; takes nothing for granted; asks endless questions; finds new answers, sees new paths, seeks new solutions. They want to know, but they often are satisfied with simple answers. We should understand the simplicity of the relationship with God before get lost in too many big words and difficult concepts.

### **Children Are Trusting and Clear About What They Need**

David Velazquez wrote a poem entitled: *Faith of A Child*

The father, a well digger, strong was he,  
 And as loving and kind as a father could be.  
 And Mary his daughter, five years old,  
 Was very much dearer than millions of gold.  
 To Mary her father was big, grand and nice,  
 So each had a treasure, beyond any price.  
 One day to the well, little Mary was sent  
 To take daddy's lunch, how gladly she went.  
 But when she looked down, not a thing could be seen.  
 The well, like a pocket, was dark as could be.  
 The father saw Mary and heard her voice, too,  
 But made not a sound, just to see what she'd do.  
 She dropped to her knees, the dear little soul,  
 And called down, "Oh, Daddy, are you down this hole?"  
 "Why yes Mary darling, I'm here at your feet,  
 Just drop my lunch for I'm ready to eat.  
 Just let it go easy, I'll catch it alright."  
 She did and she saw it fall out of sight.  
 "Why Mary," said father, "There's enough here for two,  
 Now this is the thing I would like you to do.  
 You jump down here to me and we'll eat it together,

Down here in the cool and away from the weather."  
"Oh, daddy, I'm afraid, I can't see you at all,  
Be sure now you catch me and don't let me fall."  
'Twas just for a moment she wavered in doubt,  
Then closing her dear little eyes she jumped out.  
In the darkness, yes, that was the test,  
She trusted in faith in her father's request.  
And both were so happy he kissed her and smiled  
Because of the sweet trusting faith of his child."  
Oh, sweet little Mary, you put me to shame,  
How often my Father has called me the same,  
But because it was dark I turned back in doubt.  
Refusing the call, though his arms were stretched out."

The heart of a child: offers love and seeks love; opens spontaneously to others; shares hopes, dreams big dreams, takes chances; trusts more, fears less.

A childlike faith recognizes the desperate need for Jesus in all things and understands that we need one another. We need Jesus! Not a concept of Jesus. Not an understanding of the historical Jesus. Not someone else's account of who Jesus is to them. Three (3) of our Youth found a personal relationship with Jesus Christ at Big Stuf a week ago through the witness of their friends. If I am your friend, and you have a friend I do not know, then your friend is not my friend until we, too, have a relationship. You may introduce us, but we must form the relationship ourselves. Children understand this.

A member of a certain church, who previously had been attending services regularly, stopped going. After a few weeks, the pastor decided to visit him. It was a chilly evening. The pastor found the man at home alone, sitting before a blazing fire. Guessing the reason for his pastor's visit, the man welcomed him, led him to a comfortable chair near the fireplace and waited. The pastor made himself at home but said nothing. In the grave silence, he contemplated the dance of the flames around the burning logs. After some minutes, the pastor took the fire tongs, carefully picked up a brightly burning ember and placed it to one side of the hearth all alone. Then he sat back in his chair, still silent. The host watched all this in quiet contemplation. As the one lone ember's flame flickered and diminished, there was a momentary glow and then its fire was no more. Soon it was cold and dead. Not a word had been spoken since the initial greeting. The pastor glanced at his watch and realized it was time to leave. He slowly stood up, picked up the cold, dead ember and placed it back in the middle of the fire. Immediately it began to glow, once more with the light and warmth of the burning coals around it. As the pastor reached the door to leave, his host said with a tear running down his cheek, "Thank you so much for your visit and especially for the fiery sermon. I shall be back in church next Sunday."

It is important to be the kind of friend who naturally cares and cares enough to reach out. The problem I have with this story is that it became necessary for the pastor to reach out. Where was everyone else during that "few week" period?

Note that the young man in our interview, Logan Henderson, not only got it right, he was intent upon sharing it with a radio audience. He did not say he called to witness. He did not have a formal process in place to reach those who might not believe. This sharing is just a part of who he is, and he did it so naturally and effectively. The radio host told him he was wise beyond his years, but maybe our maturing and sophistication is our problem. Maybe, just maybe we need to see the world the way Logan Henderson does. He understands that Jesus died for a purpose – he died for you and me. As Logan said, "Oh, I just figured I better call and share with you guys.... Love you!" Now that, my friends, is the simplicity of the faith.

Prayer