

Growing Up

Jesus telling his disciples they must receive the Kingdom of heaven like little children might seem to be the wrong place to start considering what it means for this congregation to turn 40. After all, even though people are living longer, and they say that 50 is the new 40 and all of that, 40 is still one of those life milestones that we both dread and celebrate. I even had a birthday party when I turned 40 a few years ago, and that's not really my thing. When you're 40 you're about halfway through the average lifespan for folks in the Western world. Your kids think you're old, and there are still some people around who are old enough to be your grandparents who don't think you've seen anything yet. You have come to a point where you see the sense in going to bed at a reasonable hour and not putting yourself at unnecessary risk. Like last winter when we went ice skating, the only thing I could picture was the bills for the ER when I broke a wrist, so whatever fun I might have had was not worth it when weighed against the consequences, that's a 40 decision. Knowing that you are one hard sneeze away from a back injury is 40 type knowledge. Sensing that Snap Chat and reggaeton are not really for you is also a thing that happens when you are in your 40s. There's a lot of wisdom that you have at this point, but the really important thing that you probably realize in your 40s is realizing how much you don't know yet.

Younger people seem to know a lot more than me somehow. And older people's bemusement with things like Snap Chat and Reggaeton doesn't seem as cranky and confused as it might have 15 years ago. See I think there's this lie that we believe as we grow up, and it's a lie that we certainly don't believe as little children, but at some point we become convinced that we know enough to do anything and everything. Looking back on my teens and twenties and even my early thirties, I definitely knew a lot more back then. As Bob Dylan said, "I was so much older then, I'm younger than that now." I'm now a parent of two official teenagers and they will gladly tell you that they know everything there is to know. I just try to warn them that someday they'll be 40 and have to deal with the fact that they forgot it all somehow. I'm not sure how exactly the experience of being a 40 year old person translates to being a 40 year old congregation, but I think it definitely has something to do with figuring out exactly how much you don't know and putting aside some of our adolescent nonsense, while grasping the kingdom of heaven, as Jesus said we must, like a child. Paradoxically, I think that the kind of child-like grasp of the Kingdom that Jesus talked about, is actually a description of spiritual maturity. Let's look at why that is.

Jesus' teaching about being Child-like comes in the wake of a dispute with the Pharisees, who came to him with a question about something very serious, with broad implications: Divorce. It is a very grown up argument, but it is brought for a rather immature reason. The Pharisees are trying to get him to admit to being a rule breaker, they're trying to get him to take a clear side. They are threatened by him in the way that members of a high school clique might be threatened by a new kid who seems to be getting popular. Their question actually has very little to do with marriage and divorce and has everything to do with trying to get Jesus cornered into taking a position that they can then use against him. It's the kind of thing that immature minds think is supremely important: who is right? What is best? The immature mind seeks to always justify itself, always feel superior, always be important. I mean that's why so many teenagers can be sort of boorish, that's why 20 somethings keep inventing new forms of social media to get the validation of their peers while avoiding the approbation of their parents and grandparents. The Pharisees represent an immature form of religion that seeks a legal ruling from Jesus. They want him to tell them what to make of a contentious debate among the people.

Here, I think it's worth a brief moment of explanation about the institution of marriage, lest any of you whose lives have been touched by divorce think Jesus is slamming you with a legal charge. In fact, he is making a rather different point than the many Pharisaic types who weep and moan about rampant divorce and the "decay of the family" or some such thing. Marriage and divorce in that day and age were not about love or relationships, they were about property. Namely assigning the property (women) to the rightful owner (either father or husband). Divorces were essentially broken leases, the only way a woman could rightly divorce her husband was if she was able to prove he was an adulterer. Given the fact that women's testimony was always given less weight than that of a man, if it was even heard at all, this could be pretty tough. Meanwhile, at least one school of thought in Jewish law said that a man could divorce his wife for pretty much any reason at all, the famous example is for burning his soup. A woman whose husband divorced her was shamed and sent back to her father, if he would take her back, if not her prospects were even dimmer. Jesus' answer to this question about divorce, even though it seems harsh to us in a world where people get divorced for all sorts of reasons and the proceedings are mostly equitable even when they're not enviable, is actually a moral answer to a legal question. Jesus' answer to this question implies that it is not moral, even if it is legal, to treat people like property, which is a rather different answer than the Pharisees expected.

That moment where Jesus defies expectations about what he was supposed to say is immediately followed by another example of him breaking with "norms." As Jesus is teaching, some people are bringing children to him, again we see the tension between Jesus the teacher and Jesus the miracle worker. The disciples, being the supposed grown-ups, are trying to keep them away, because this is serious talk here, an adult conversation. Just like the Pharisees were blinded to the truth about marriage by their obsession with the mechanics of the law, Jesus' very disciples display that profound ability to miss the point for which they are well known. Jesus knows that the only way to enter the Kingdom is like a child, like the ones who are trying to get to him and be with him, not trying to test him and trap him, not even like the ones who are "doing their duty" as disciples. Jesus sitting there in the midst of children is undignified.

I think that it would be good for us, as a forty-something church, to consider what it means to grow up, without losing our child-like ability to enter the Kingdom of God. Maturity is knowing what the really important things in life are. An immature understanding of marriage treats the other person like a trophy or a piece of property. The goal is to "win," "acquire," and sometime even dominate, it is unhealthy in the extreme, and too much of our social history holds this view of marriage. Understanding marriage as a covenant bond that cannot be broken, understanding that it is a deep connection between people who love each other, where two become one flesh, that it is not something that can be recorded by the Clerk of the Court, or created by any human authority, understanding that by the time a divorce actually happens the marriage has already been over for a while... well that takes a deeper, more mature understanding.

As for what it means to be both mature and child-like, it mirrors the understanding of marriage as something that is both common and practical, but also mystical and spiritual. If we were all to revert to true childishness we might recover our ability to see things with awe and wonder, but we would also bring back our petulance, impatience and extreme short-sightedness. We might get energy, but we would sacrifice wisdom. One of the important things about growing up, is learning to respect the stages that you go through. You might be embarrassed of your seventh grade school picture where you had braces and bad skin, but awkwardness can help us develop self-worth that is more than skin deep, and it

teaches you compassion if you let it. You might regret that you had bad relationships, maybe even bad marriages, in the past, but if you learn from the mistakes you grow in wisdom. Do not despise your scars, do not reject your stumbles. Learn to accept them with that child-like innocence, for that is where the Kingdom of God happens. Fear, anger, regret, these will keep you from seeing it, and might even lead you to push it away.

“Truly I tell you, whoever will not receive the Kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.”