

## **The Childhood of Eternal Life**

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Trinity Church in the City of Boston

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Oh God, We are your children. Help us to be the children we are and to be unashamed and unafraid. For the sake of your love and the good of your beloved world. Amen.

From the reading, The Wisdom of Solomon, “They made a covenant with death. They did not know the secret purposes of God.” And then from the Gospel, “Jesus took a little child and put it among them.”

Did you catch what was going on in the Gospel just now? Jesus, their friend, their leader, had just told them that He will be betrayed and killed and then rise again three days later. And it says they did not understand and were afraid to ask. Usually scholars say it was the resurrecting part they did not understand but I wonder? Maybe they did not, could not understand the dying part as well. For who can understand death? Especially the death of someone we love dearly. Especially the death of someone who is so vitally alive to us and whose live and love are so life giving. Who can face death, who can understand it? Unlike children with their endless curiosity and questions, the disciples were afraid to ask. And so are we. So often, as we face death and the other shocks of life, we are afraid to ask anything about them. We’d rather avoid the whole subject, change the subject entirely. In effect, by so doing, we assert to ourselves, if only unconsciously, and to those around us, “Oh, death isn’t real, death won’t happen to you, death will not happen to me.” We can’t take it in and so we’d really rather change the subject. No curious questions.

A little child would have been interested in exploring, as the lesson from Wisdom put it, whether there might be some secret purposes of God in what Jesus has just said, in His impending death and in whatever it means to rise again. But not the disciples, they’d rather do anything than explore what Jesus has said. They are afraid to ask, the poor dears, and so are we. They’re afraid of death, afraid it has no meaning, afraid there might not be any secret purposes of God in it and so they’re afraid to explore, afraid to find out.

And so they change the subject. And you caught how they changed the subject, didn’t you? They begin to debate among themselves who is the greatest. In other words, they begin to debate that once Jesus is gone, who’s going to lead. Now lest we think that this is macabre in the extreme and that we would never do such a thing, that certainly hasn’t been my experience. Remember that time honored tradition of proclaiming, “The King is dead, long live the King!” We’re so afraid of death and the ending that it’s supposed to entail that we want to plan in a very adult way for what’s going to come afterwards, even as we’re avoiding the subject. I think of the many families I have encountered in my lifetime who begin arguing with one another about who gets what once Mama dies. The arguments begin even in the hospital room as Mama is dying. Mama gets to listen in. We

can't face death and so we'd rather do anything else. Including debating about who is going to lead once our father is dead or our mother or our friend, Rabbi Jesus, is gone.

When they came to the house in Capernaum, where they often stayed, Jesus gives them another chance. He asks them, "What have you been arguing about along the way?" But they blow it yet again. They fail to take Him up on His offer. They fail to ask a question. They don't want to engage Him yet on this whole subject of death and resurrection, because now they are ashamed of themselves, for their debate about who is going to be the greatest. But Jesus seems to know what they were arguing about along the way and He addresses their desire first. Jesus, that wisest and most intuitive of human counselors, the deepest psychologist who ever lived, knows that we human beings have a desire to get ahead, to be first. And notice, He doesn't reprimand them about that, it's a natural desire. But with His deep wisdom, He turns their desire to be first on its head and says to them, "OK, if you want to first, if you want to be the greatest, here's how to do it. Be last of all and servant of all." And He knows whereof He speaks, because this is the same Jesus, who Himself, since the beginning of His journey of discipleship has been the last one, the least one, seeking the last and the least. Remember, going after the lost sheep. Remember how He goes after the ones who need healing, the ones who need welcoming, the ones who need to be loved and defended against the hyper-righteous, self-assured religious authorities. And yet, more stunningly, Jesus not only says if you want to be first here is the way, here's the way to be the servant of all, the last, the least. More stunningly yet, He doesn't begin a long sermon on servant leadership, instead He does something oh so simple, yet oh so radical. He takes a little child and brings it to the center, the center of their circle. This is a child now in the center of what is usually a rabbinic circle of debate and He says, "So you want to be the greatest, you want to be the first? This is how to be the greatest. Welcome one, just one child, and you welcome me and you welcome the One, the Holy One, the God Who sent Me." In other words, Jesus says, if you want to know what I'm like and what God is like and if you want to be like us then welcome a child and you'll find out. If you want to know what true greatness is, welcome just one child in my name. If you want to know what to do when your best friend tells you that He's dying and will rise again, then ask a child. Be like this child."

Now we're on thin ice here. We could duck around Jesus' hard words by romanticizing how wonderful children are even if we know better. To avoid that let me remind you about the status of children in Jesus' day and the status of children still in many parts of the world in our day, and yes, even in parts of the United States and even here, in civilized Boston. Children were the last and the least. They were the lowest of the lowly in Jesus' society. They existed purely for the sake of others. They were the ones who waited on their elders. They were the ones who learned the family trade, which was usually farming, and became an extra set of hands to do the families work. They were always subservient, they had no rights, they were the social security system for their parents, they were property, property. So if Jesus isn't waxing romantic about children, then what is he saying to us. How can children be an example to us of a different way, a better way, to be disciples, than debating about who is the greatest? Three pictures. These are pictures that I call "Coming to us from the 3-4 foot perspective."

First of all children are dependent by their very nature. And because they are dependent, they are naturally relational. They know their need of others because they know if they are alone, they are weak and they will die. They have to rely on others and so they reach out for help and in response forgetting help, they want to reach out to help others. I saw a very perfect example of this in Copley Square this week. You know how windy it is in Copley Square? A little child, a little girl, was walking along next to her father and she began gesturing up, up. She wanted her father to pick her up and so he did. He lifted her up and put her on his shoulders. Now he was wearing a hooded sweatshirt and as they walked along the wind blew his sweatshirt hood back and quick as she could be, she leaned around kissed him on the ear and put the hood back over his head. She needed help, she needed to be lifted up so she could see better, but she also wanted to be of help. Perhaps Jesus would like us to realize that this is what He Himself was like and what He would like us to be like. Children of God, dependent on God as mother and father, but also eager to be lifted up, to be held close, and oh so eager to be helpful as we have been helped. Just like a little child. We could do worse, couldn't we, as disciples? And the world could do worse to have such disciples. Disciples like this, like that little child, who leaven the lump of this earth's dusty, daily life by giving and receiving help.

Second picture. When we pray for those who have just been baptized, one of the several things we ask God to give them is the gift of joy and wonder in all your works. I often think that it is really for ourselves that we are praying as much as for the baptized. Because we know that we tend to lose, maybe have completely lost track of joy and wonder. And so ask for it to be lifted up and preserved in these children who are being baptized or the adults who are being baptized and we want it for ourselves, to relearn how to be joyful and awed to wonder. Perhaps some of you, like me, are lovers of the novels of Robertson Davies, the great Canadian novelist. In his Cornish Trilogy, named for the main character, Francis Cornish, he tells the story of Francis growing up to become an art collector. In an early scene we see Francis as a three or a four year old child utterly captivated by a camellia bush. You've all seen children in that kind of state haven't you? Utterly captivated. Davies goes on for pages describing the child's diving into the camellia, utterly present, awed to joy and wonder, mesmerized. Children have the capacity to be natural contemplatives, to see the gift of all that God has given. Delighting to be caught up in it and falling silent before it sometimes, like Francis Cornish, and other times exuberantly celebrating the joy and wonder of all God's works. The amazing impossibility of the shades of color in one blossom, intoxicating fragrance. The complexity and simplicity at the same time of the sheer beauty of its design. And they don't mourn the shortness of its bloom, they just celebrate in joyful wonder that it is. Wasn't this what Jesus was like and isn't He asking us to be like that too? Remember this is the Jesus who welcomed a rich young man who was very self-assured about his righteousness and a very short child-sized tax collector named Zacharias who was cheating everybody. This is the Jesus who delighted in all sizes, shapes, all sorts and conditions of human beings. Who was Himself, born of a virgin, we say, but who seems to have had the companionship of many prostitutes. This was the Jesus who was wise beyond telling Himself, but welcomed the bumbling stupidity of His disciples. He was the one who delighted in feeding the hungry and healing the sick, but Himself, delighted in those who were willing to feed Him, like Martha and Mary, and those who were willing to heal

Him, like that unnamed woman who broke into the Pharisee's dinner party, washed His feet with her tears and anointed Him ahead of time for His burial. Jesus delighted with sheer joy and wonder in the great variety of everything and everyone that God had made. That means you, me, everyone. We could do worse than to be disciples awed to wonder at the wonder of what God has made. To have such unsophisticated joy and wonder that doesn't pick and choose between better or worse people, and better or worse things that happen to us. Maybe this is what true discipleship is like, not to mention the source of true joy, true wonder.

Third and final picture. In that same prayer after baptism we pray, give them an inquiring and discerning heart. Remember back to the beginning of this sermon? The disciples and their fear to ask Jesus what He meant about having to die and rise again? What would it have been like to have a child there, along on that journey instead of the fearful disciples. A child walking along the way with Jesus, the journey to the cross and to resurrection. Think what a child would have been like with its inquiring and discerning heart. Why Jesus? Why do you have to die Jesus? Tell us why? Why Jesus? We don't want you to die Jesus, what will we do without you Jesus? What will we do? Why do you have to go away? We'll miss you Jesus? What do you mean by "rise again" Jesus? What will that be like Jesus? Can you show us Jesus? Can you, huh? Can you? Can we go with you to find out what it will be like? Can we? Will you take us along? Can we be more like them? Can we give freer reign to our naturally inquiring hearts so that we might be able to ask the questions we need to ask? Can we be unafraid to ask? Can we have the eager knowledge and desire to know? To inquire about even what we are afraid to inquire about. Like, is there some secret purpose to death and loss and change? And is new life really possible? Can we have the trust in Jesus? And you know that faith really means trust. To bring all our questions, all our doubts, all our wonderings, all our joy and ask what we need to ask? Why do you have to die Jesus? Why did the one I love have to die? Why do I have to die? And what is this resurrection thing, this rising again? Like a child can we ask to go along the way, to find out? Can we ask and wait for His answer? You know His answer don't you? It's the answer He gave so often, if we ask can we go along the way, He'll say, sure, come follow me. Come follow me into death. Come follow me into resurrection. Here, now, not just at your last breath. Be like a little child and maybe you will find that your life now, as you approach your dying, is like the childhood of eternal life. Is that what it will be like Jesus? Will you be there with us Jesus? And He will answer; Yes, I am with you always, even to the end of your life, to the end of this age and to the beginning of the joy and wonder of what lies beyond. Amen.