

A Second Childhood

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I Thessalonians 5:14-24

Matthew 18: 1-6

November 3, 2019 | St. Charles Avenue Presbyterian Church

I had been warned about Jane.

Our Vice President for Development, upon hearing that I planned to visit her, told me that halfway through dinner with my predecessor, she quietly got up and left the table. The President and he both thought she had gone to powder her nose, but they realized when they saw the taxi pull up in front of the restaurant and her get in, she had left them in mid-conversation. This perspective was confirmed in a conversation with yet another predecessor who simply said, “She’s weird.”

So I didn’t know what to expect, but I wanted to visit with her. She had informed us many years before, that she had named the seminary as a beneficiary in her will. And, as the new president of the seminary, I wanted to meet her personally to thank her. But, just in case she got bored with me too, I asked the taxi-driver to be on standby.

As it turned out, that precaution was unnecessary. We got on like gang-busters, which probably just confirms that I’m weird too.

Jane was, when I first met her, ninety-three years old. She spent her childhood in Jacksonville, Florida, and went on to attend Agnes Scott College in Atlanta, Georgia. While she was there she met a man who loved to serve in his church. He was some years older than she. He had inherited his family’s lumber business. After graduating, they married. The man ran the family business, after his father retired, and made it even more successful than it had been before he came along. But, although he did his duty to his family, the one thing he had always wanted to do was to be a Presbyterian pastor. No matter how active he was in the church as an elder and Sunday School teacher and youth leader, he longed to be a pastor.

The opportunity came at last when a large national corporation offered to purchase his family business, providing him with a level of wealth he had never before imagined. So he called up Dr. Frank Caldwell, then the president of Louisville Seminary, and asked if he might become a student. Dr. Caldwell arranged everything. The man came to seminary, served as a student pastor, then, upon graduating became the pastor of a small but thriving congregation in Princeton, Kentucky.

There was something else you should know about this man, however. Throughout his life he suffered from Type 1 diabetes of a particularly brittle kind. And, tragically, only a few years after becoming the pastor at Princeton, he died.

Jane, still a young woman, wrote a memoir about their life together with the telling title, *Whom the Lord Loveth*. The phrase comes from the New Testament book from which most of our liturgy was drawn today: Hebrews, chapter 12, verse 6: "For whom the Lord loveth, he chaseth, and scourgeth every son he receiveth."

I read Jane's book. It was warm and sincere and deeply touching, but it also reflected a rather superficial and somewhat cruel view of how God deals with humanity.

As we sat there together in her sunroom, on that first visit, I told Jane, that I had read and enjoyed her book. It reminded me of Catherine Marshall's memoir of her husband and legendary preacher, Peter Marshall, *A Man Called Peter*.

She asked me, "Didn't you find my book simplistic?"

I said, "I've been thinking about that. I don't think your book was so much simplistic, as naive."

She sat, quietly nodding her head.

"Hmmm. I think you may be right. I think that is the word. That's something that has been worrying me," she said. "I've begun writing a sequel, and given the experiences I've had in my life since I was a young woman, I have wondered how to think about my faith. It has changed so much. I've become much more critical in my thinking. I don't accept much of the faith that I believed back then."

So I asked Jane if perhaps she knew the work of Paul Ricoeur, the French philosopher. She said no. I said, he may be helpful.

Ricoeur had the idea that when we are young we have a kind of "naive faith" that fits our naive view of the world. It is rather childlike. Over time, the foundations of that naive worldview and its naive faith gradually get chipped away, eroded, and we tend to lose that naïveté. But, Ricoeur believed, if we are fortunate, eventually, on the other side of that loss, we may come to a second naïveté, a naïveté chastened by experience, you might say, a faith tested in the fires of reality, open toward a larger world of wonder and reverence and God.

Jane and I became friends that day, and were friends until she died not long before I retired. We're still friends, I suppose. And what we learned together, has a great deal to do with our sermon texts today.

Beth Poe recently gave me a book titled, *Gratefulness, the Heart of Prayer*, by Brother David Steindl-Rast, a Benedictine monk. I had it with me at the Men's Retreat a few weeks ago. And it just so happened that the day after Steve Jester and the men at the retreat talked about "prayer without ceasing" I started reading the book.

It was pure serendipity. Or, as John Calvin might say, "providential."

Brother David tells us that one of the greatest hurdles we all face, trying to figure out prayer and just trying to find time to pray, is based on a misunderstanding of what prayer basically is. He says that prayer is a kind of consciousness, a sort of mindfulness; or, maybe better, prayer could be described as “wholeheartedness.”

Brother David says that prayer really comes down to a combination of concentration and wonder.

Those two characteristics don't seem to go together, do they? Concentration requires us to narrow our focus, trim down our field of vision so we can look closely. But wonder implies that we are overwhelmed with the height and depth and width, to whole panorama of vision. In a moment of wonder our breath is taken away with an expansion of vision.

But, Brother David points out that there's a whole class of human beings who can and do almost habitually view the world with both concentration and wonderment at the same time. And we've all seen them do it over and over again: Little Children.

A baby will look at her toes with complete absorption, rapt concentration *and* utter amazement and wonder. And she will do this for the longest time!

A baby will stare at a mobile going round and round above his crib, those little eyes following every movement. For ages!

I love to watch my grandchildren discovering the world: Grace, her nose inches away from a bee diving into a blossom, reaching her tiny finger out to touch and pet it, and the bee letting her to do so; Clara, tasting a chocolate malt for the first time, sipping on the straw, her eyes closing in complete rapture; Anderson, swinging on the jungle gym in his back yard, seeming to feel everything (motion, wind, sunlight, the trees swirling above him) all at once and laughing from his belly.

One of Thich Nhat Hanh's students remembers rushing to Plum Village, his home in France one day, because she heard that their communications director was sick and they needed help *immediately* to get the newsletter printed. When she got there, her beloved teacher was standing (much to her distress) in the garden, not waiting in the press room. She approached him, and, somewhat impatiently, she said, “Well, I'm here.”

He simply said, “Oh, Good. Look. Have you ever noticed how the blossoms on this tree are made. Look closely. Isn't this amazing. From a distance they all look the same, but each one has its own characteristics. Amazing.”

She could hardly look for her impatience. Didn't her teacher know that time was limited, that they had lots to get done?

But that day represented a turning point in her perception. As the day progressed, she noticed that Thich got more done than any of the rest of them. He was always fully present, undistracted, and he never rushed.

When our children were very small, I remember going for walks with them, sometimes to the market, or to the park. To my embarrassment, I remember I would say, "Come on. We're wasting time. We've got a bus to catch."

They would pause to talk to a dog, as I would stride along. Or they would stop to notice how cracks in the sidewalk reminded them of that spiderweb in our backyard. "Look at this, daddy," they would say.

They were inviting me into the realm of God. I was just trying to catch a bus.

And do you know what would have happened if we had missed the bus? Another one would have come along in about fifteen minutes.

Brother David writes: "No wonder that so many marvelous children turn into dull adults."

Is there good news today for dull adults?

Yes. We can become marvelous children again.

It doesn't take hours of prayer at ungodly hours. All it takes is a skill we have all had before, when toes were a miracle, and when bees were a wonder. Life has never stopped being a miracle, we mostly just have taught ourselves to take the miracle for granted.

The reign of God, that kingdom that knows no particular place but is a comprehensive way of seeing and being in the world conscious of the presence of God, can only be entered into when we have become like little children. So Jesus says. And once we enter that reign, prayer becomes a constant reality, because we cannot stop being conscious of God ever again.

Who was it who said that there are many who call God nameless who trust God more fully than those who call him Father? I can't recall, but I do know this. It is not dogma that makes us trust in God. There are few Ph.D.s in the nursery, but the cribs are full of the faithful.

Amen.