

Sunday, September 7, 2014 -- "Window 5: Let the Children Come Unto Me"
Scripture: Philippians 3:8-11; Matthew 19:13-26

This window, our fifth stained glass window, was donated to the church in 1974 through the Abiding Memorial fund. The Abiding Memorial fund is responsible for much of what we do not really see in the meetinghouse here - the sound system, the repair and upkeep of the organ, the robes for acolytes, sometimes the flowers on the communion table. Little things. The Abiding Memorial fund exists because all of you contribute to it on a regular and ongoing basis. So this window is a testimony to the ongoing care you have for your church and faith.

This particular window is also a testament to the goal of our faith - to be welcomed into the Kingdom of God. Jesus tells us we can only do this by becoming like little children. This is what the first panel shows - Jesus guiding a child into the Kingdom of God, which I take to mean a fulfilled and complete life which reflects the love and mercy of God, of which Jesus is the best model.

Notice in this first panel: Jesus stands behind the child. The *child* is the one who goes forward into the world. *Jesus* is the one who supports, guides and stands back and allows the child to go forth with what she or he has learned, with what they have drawn from growing up in the faith.

In the center panel, we see all these children around Jesus. In Jesus' day, children were counted as almost nothing. Even so, we can assume it is the mothers who are bringing the children to Jesus so he can bless them. In our modern parlance, this is a Jesus Play Date. But back in the ancient world, there was nothing romantic about being a child. There was no sense of children being the future, except in the sense of inheritance. This was true only for boys, not girls. Up until the child was of a certain age, they were virtually unseen in public. They were with their mothers until they were able to work. This is why the disciples try to stop this. Children were worthless and their mothers were simply agents of upbringing.

And this is why Jesus' response is so radical. The worthless, the small, the unnoticed are called to come to Jesus. Further, and even more incredible, they are not to be hindered, because the Kingdom of God belongs to those who are like them. This flew in the face of everything the people of the day thought of children.

For many, especially in church, children are what we want them to be, not who they are. We want them to be quiet. We want them to be still. We want them to keep their fingers out of their noses and mouths. We want them to be kind and respectful. This is not the image of children Jesus is speaking about. Jesus is speaking about another of children - who they are.

If children are anything, in the most ideal sense, they are an expression of innocence, and in their innocence, they are free. Children do not care about the external realities of things very much, mostly because they do not know. They don't have to work

to make a living. They don't have to please a boss. They don't even really have to follow rules, since the parent creates the guardrails and barriers. Again, this is an ideal vision.

But think about a child. What do they do once they can speak? They ask a ton of questions? "Why?" "What is that?" "Are we there yet?" "What kind of animal is that?" "Can we have ice cream now?" With Rhiannon, there was a constant stream of questions and commentary. From 10 months old. The questions are combined with imagination and a sense of play. The Self is fluid. The sense of "I" is not settled.

They run. They yell. They sleep. They have nightmares. They seek comfort, then don't feel they owe anyone anything for what they have received, but are grateful. When a child is sad, she is sad. Then it is done and they are curious. And happy. And confused. They are unburdened with a profound need for self-reflection and external definitions.

Then parents get involved and we impose all sorts of things on our kids. Some of us have very clear ideas of what it means to be an adult and we want our very young children to conform. Some of us don't have very good models of what it means to be a parent so we get our clues from what we think is right - television, the poor parenting we received, bad authority figures - (none of which a very good guide), and then we end up just doing what our parents did. Some of us read a thousand books and try to write the perfect program that will align the mechanics of the child's personality just right so they can get into the best schools, get the best things. Basically, most of us, as parents, do a lot to really screw up that innocence and freedom Jesus promotes.

I do think most parents have one goal for their children, and I think it is a goal we see expressed in the window, especially in the first panel. I did not fully understand what being a parent was all about until we dropped Rhiannon off at college last year, which was about the most painful thing I have done as a parent yet. That one goal is simply this: *to set your child free*. As Rhiannon's parents, we have done everything we can to instill and ensure that Rhiannon has everything she needs to be a self-actualized and complete person in the world. Sure, we talk to her everyday. We worry about her. We have all kinds of advice for her. Sometimes she seeks it and sometimes she doesn't. But like Jesus in the first panel, we stand behind and support her while she goes forward into the world.

This is what Jesus does. He calls out the free and innocent, questioning and curious, playful and sensitive child to come to him; and he sets that child free. Or to put it in a more accessible way, Jesus asks you and I accept the freedom and innocence he gives us and then sends us out into the world, which, in the freedom of Christ engages our curiosity, our playfulness, our sensitivity and our love.

The story of the rich man follows directly the story of the children coming to Jesus, and this is why it is the third panel in our window. The rich man is trapped by the impositions of who we want our children to be rather than who they are. The rich man has bought the whole illusion of cultural expectation, reputation and even adulthood hook, line and sinker. He has become a complete adult at the expense of the freedom God and Christ expect of us. Now, he is captive to his things.

The rich man believes if he works hard enough, if he just follows the rules and does everything he has been told, he will be...what? Free? Richer? Accepted? I think each of us are captive to this in a different way. The question really becomes, *“Where did I abandon my freedom, or let’s call it eternal life, and why?”* To find one’s way back to God after being led so deeply into the maze by adult expectations, by cultural ideals, by the voracious appetite of advertisers and moneymakers, by the labyrinth of becoming the *‘self-made person’*...finding your way out of that maze is the equivalent of riding a camel through the eye of a needle.

The rich man scares me. I see a lot of myself in him. His questions are quite child-like. *“What **good thing** must I do to inherit eternal life?”* Jesus answers like a parent. *“Why do you ask me what is good?”* Or to say it another way, *“Have you not been taught these things? Why are you asking me this question when you have been brought up in the knowledge of good and evil? **You have the power to figure this out!**”* But like a good parent, Jesus still answers the question. *“Follow the commandments”*, he says. Like a child, the rich man says, *“Which ones? C’mon, Dad. Quit playing around and just answer my question.”* Jesus then lists the commandments. Then the rich man says, *“I have done that. So what do I lack?”*

This is why the rich man scares me. Where does assurance and freedom in Christ lie when everything seems to be a struggle and challenge, even when I have much? Why can’t I have the experience of eternal life, entering into God’s kingdom now? It is a good question, and it is the rich man’s question. It scares me because this is the question I ask sometimes. Jesus’ answer doesn’t help. *Sell everything and follow me. Or, give up all your accepted and cultural submissions and free yourself from the yoke of giving in to the demands of your society so that you can see the world like a child again.*

The disciples get it. The event with the rich man scares them, too. *“If that is what it takes, Jesus, who can be saved?”* They are all like children around Jesus, aren’t they? The rich man, the disciples, us? But Jesus wants for us what any parent wants for their child - freedom. And freedom is only possible when we know the foundation of our support, which is always God. Freedom really is impossible for us, letting go of all those things. We, of our own power, can’t do it. I mean, look at the rich man. Look at your neighbor in the seat next to you. Look at yourself. *“...but all is possible with God.”* Freedom in Christ is possible with God.

Paul understood that freedom in Christ is messy. He was like the rich man once himself. But then Christ found him and he wrote to the Philippians, and I am not making this up - this is the literal translation, *“My entire life up until the point I encountered Christ, everything I gained and all the recognition I achieved, was total crap.”* He says, *“All my gains are actually loss because of Christ.”* Either Paul lost everything because of Christ, or he gained everything because of Christ. It depends on whether you are seeing from a child’s point of view or not. Only a child would give up things to gain a relationship. Adults have to thread their way through cultural standards, parental expectations, the maintenance of stuff and things. Adults have to thread the needle in order to find their

way back to God. But this is what Paul has done. He has ridden the camel through the eye of the needle by the power of God. Having done so, all he wants is to know Christ and become like him in order to attain the resurrection of the dead.

Can we become like these children in our window? Can we rely on the support of Christ, who sends us freely into the world? Can we come to him and let him bless us? Do we desire the kind of relationship Paul has? Where are you like the rich man? What is in your way? What is in our way as a church? This is an act of faith, this seeking a deeper and true relationship with God, and this act of faith is one we can only do knowing we are doing it with others. We can only do so knowing God is the one who can make it happen.

The process is messy. Christ's freedom is messy. Jesus made a huge mess of things when he invited children - the worthless, unnoticed, messy, loud, unlearned - to come to him. The disciples try to stop it. The authorities want to kill him. The rich can't abide by it. Here is what Michael Yaconelli, author of *Messy Spirituality*, says about Christ's wild freedom:

Freedom in Christ. What a nice concept. Sadly, most Christians are frightened of freedom. Ever since Jesus announced, "You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free," many in the church have tried to explain away his remark: "what Jesus meant is that we are free not to sin." Which is true. We are free not to sin. And we are also free to sin.

The radical truth of freedom in Christ is that I am free to choose good or bad, right or wrong, this way or that way. I can choose to run to Christ or run away from Christ. Freedom in Christ means I am free from everyone else's definition of freedom for me. Because I am free in Christ, when it comes to my relationship with him, he is the only one I answer to. Because I am free in Christ, I am free from other people's concern that I might not use my freedom well. Paul said in 2 Corinthians 3:17, "And where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom."

...All God can do is leave us with his words, his precepts, and then let us figure out how a spiritual person would act in the context of our lives.

That is the way it is with parents and their children, if we truly desire freedom for them and for ourselves. Even though it is impossible for us, we trust in the possibility that God's desire for us is the presence of His Spirit with us in all ways and in all places, for wherever his Spirit is present, there is freedom.

Amen.