

Proper 22, Year B

October 4, 2015

“Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” – Mark 10:15

What does it **mean** to “receive the kingdom of God as a little child”? What *is* it about a little child that allows the child to receive the Kingdom of God?

In our Centering Prayer Group a while back, we heard a parable which might help us answer that question:

Nasrudin sat in the marketplace on a busy marketday. Next to him was a basket of hot peppers.

Nasrudin popped one into his mouth, and then popped a second and then a third. By the time he had popped a fourth, a sweat had broken out on his forehead. He began to perspire slightly and his face began to turn red. His mouth was open and his tongue was hanging out.

Then he began to cry out, “Oh, God, these peppers are killing me!”

Then he took another pepper and popped it into his mouth. “Oh, God,” he screamed, “I can’t handle it. These peppers are killing me!”

The sweat began to *pour* down Nasrudin’s face. His clothes were soaked with perspiration. But another pepper went in his mouth.

“Oh, God, Oh, God,” he yelled. “I can’t take it, I can’t take it!”

Another hot pepper went in and he kept pouring the hot peppers into his mouth one after another, all the while screaming out in pain, “Oh, my God, these peppers are killing me!”

A crowd of people had gathered around him and they finally asked him, “Nasrudin, Nasrudin, why do you not stop eating the peppers?”

He said, “I’m hoping to find a sweet one.” (John Shea, *The Legend of the Bells and Other Tales*, ACTA, 1996, pp. 117-118)

Now here’s the thing: most *little children* I know would **not** act like Nasrudin. Most little children, I suspect, would eat a pepper that burned their mouths, and never eat such a pepper again.

If you are at all like *me*, however, you **do** act like Nasrudin, repeating things in your life that burn your soul, your spirit, your community over and over again. It is said that insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result. Yet don’t we do this in our own lives, on a regular basis – do or say things painful to our souls, our spirits, our community?

Little children seem to know better. Learn better. Perhaps that's the characteristic of children which Jesus holds up for us?

My very earliest memory is of a time when I was two or three years old and stuck a table knife into an electrical socket. I can still remember the shock – both physical and emotional; I can still see the blackened knife blade, and even some black on my little hand. I never again stuck a knife into an electrical socket.

But as an adult, I stick figurative knives into electrical sockets all the time, never seeming to learn. Bad habits and thought patterns – which hurt me, physically, emotionally, or spiritually – *repeated* over and over. Ingrained negative thinking patterns. Hardened ways of looking at things. An inability to change, and – worse – a lack of *desire* to **do** so, even when my attitude or perspective is sinful and destructive; even when my actions or thoughts are contrary to what Jesus embodies and teaches, contrary to the life of the Holy Spirit. There is a strong tendency for us **not** to want to change – a tendency to act just like Nasrudin.

Now I am not advocating that we Christians change our values to match those of the society around us. We *keep and strengthen* our Christian values of love, forgiveness, compassion – all which Jesus modeled and taught. But young people growing up today have been formed by a very different world than many of us were, and we need to be able to communicate Christ's love, forgiveness, and compassion in such a manner that they can receive these gifts. A little child accepts the fact that she doesn't know everything, doesn't have all the answers, and is willing to learn. If we are to enter the Kingdom, we, too, must admit that we don't know everything, don't have all the answers, we may be wrong, and be willing to learn and be changed.

We tend to think that our way of viewing things is right, and everyone who doesn't see things as we do is woefully ignorant or just plain wrong. This judging way of approaching the world, however, burns like hot peppers within us, hurts our spirit, our soul, and our relationship with God and with others.

The need to change our thinking and doing is made even more explicit in *Matthew's* version of this Gospel passage, where Jesus says to his Disciples: "I promise you, unless you **change** and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." (Matt. 18:3) But we don't want to be changed, so we continue to eat those peppers, even though our spirit and soul are screaming inside us that our thinking and actions are burning us from within and sabotaging our relationships! A wise man once said, "We avoid with a passion the things that will save us."

Why *is* this? You can probably identify several reasons; but I would suggest that perhaps one of those reasons is that we have received *half* of the Gospel message, while **rejecting** the other half.

Lutheran professor and author Mark Allen Powell notes that he used to think the good news revealed in and through Jesus Christ was that 'God accepts us just the way we are.' Then he attended a seminar where

a large African-American man [**not** a Lutheran] had two big signs up front. One read, 'Jesus Christ accepts you the way you are.' The other said, 'Jesus Christ will change your life.' Both are biblical and both are good news, the speaker affirmed. [Then the speaker said]: 'So why is it that you Lutherans equate the gospel with *one* sign and not the other?... You get so excited that Jesus will accept you as you are that, after a while, some of us begin to wonder whether this isn't because you plan on *staying* the way you are -- whether Jesus [wants to] change you or not.'

John Bell brings these [two] aspects [of the Gospel] together in a short hymn. The first of two lines is: 'Take, oh, take me as I am; summon out what I shall be.' God's summons *changes* us. The love of Jesus makes us **want** to be better people. [Mark Allan Powell, *Chasing the Eastern Star*, Westminster/John Knox Press, 2001, p. 181]

"Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it."

"At birth, a baby's brain contains 100 billion neurons, roughly as many nerve cells as there are stars in the Milky Way. Before birth, the brain produces *trillions* more neurons and 'synapses' (connections between the brain cells) than needed. During the first years of life, the brain undergoes a series of extraordinary changes. Then, through a process [of pruning], the brain *eliminates* connections that are seldom or never used." (University of Maine Cooperative Extension Bulletin #4356)

By the time a person is an adult, she has less than **half** the number of synaptic connections as a two or three-year-old. What is called the "plasticity" of a brain, the ability of a brain to be molded or changed, has been drastically reduced. In terms of our brains, at least, our patterns of thinking and acting become more hardwired as we age, less capable of changing than is the brain of a little child. Perhaps when Jesus says to Nicodemus, "Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" what he is really referring to is a return to something like that pre-birth state when we humans are most "plastic", most open to being shaped by God's Spirit.

Years ago, Daniel Iverson wrote a small hymn, in which he pleads:

Spirit of the Living God fall afresh on me.
Melt me, *mold* me, fill me, use me...

The Spirit of the Living God cannot mold us if we are hardened in our thoughts and ways.

I am convinced that what Jesus wants of us is teachable spirits, continually shaped and reshaped, melted and molded, by the unpredictable Holy Spirit moving in us and amongst us. And I think that **that's** what he is referring to when he says we must become like little children in order to receive the Kingdom of God.

A while back, our bishop gave a meditation on that passage from Philippians where St. Paul exhorts, "Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus..." (2:5) The bishop stated that the word "let" should tell us that this "mind change", this transformation, this conversion, is not

something which we *achieve*, but **re**ceive – something we LET happen, a transformation which the Spirit of Jesus accomplishes in us, **if** we will but *let* it. Remember that in today's Gospel, Jesus says, "*whoever does not **receive** the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.*" **Receive** the Kingdom of God, as a *gift* – with the plasticity of Spirit which children have.

Allow our minds to be changed into the mind of Christ.

After all, haven't we all eaten enough hot peppers?

Amen