

**“Celebrating Children, Celebrating the Child Within”
Matthew 18:1-6**

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At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” He called a child, whom he put among them, and said, “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me. If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea.”

When I was a young child, I believed that God lived in Oswego, Illinois. That’s the town where I grew up—Oswego—about 45 minutes southwest of Chicago. And for some reason that I didn’t dwell on too long at the age of 4 or 5, God chose that town for his home.

My hometown has changed a lot since then. When I was a kid, Oswego had two stoplights. Now it has two Walmarts. It’s one of those sleepy little towns that just happened to have found itself on the outer ring of Chicago’s suburban sprawl. Today when I go back home, everywhere I look there’s a Chilis, an Applebees, or a Bed, Bath, & Beyond. Now I’m not saying that God *wouldn’t* choose to live there now, what with all the shopping opportunities. But 30-some years ago, it had a small, quaint appeal that I must have thought God appreciated, as I did.

As a boy, I knew Oswego like the back of my hand. My friends and I walked or rode our bikes to school every day. We’d leave our homes and head down Benton Street, and if we had a little time (and sometimes if we didn’t), we’d stop to play in Mr. Figgin’s creek. As we made our way toward East View Elementary School, which was about a mile away from our house, we knew every home. We knew where the big dogs lived, we knew which neighbors might fuss at us, and we knew which yards we could cut through.

About half-way to school was the house where I believed God lived. It was at the top of a long, steady hill and then across Washington Street—one of the busier streets in town. God’s house was small, and it had wood siding that was painted white. It had a gravel driveway. Looking back, there wasn’t much to distinguish God’s house from any other house on the street—it was simply a small, average home. There was one thing, however, that made God’s house unique. It had an attached one-car garage, and most of the time there was a car parked inside. The reason you could tell there was a car inside was that God’s car didn’t quite fit in that garage, and the garage door came down just behind the rear window.

That was where I thought God lived when I was little. Just off Washington Street in a small white house with the back end of big old Buick sticking out of a half-closed garage.

I look back and wonder, “Why that house? Why not one of the mansions next to the cemetery? Why not one of the churches in town or some other place?” And maybe the more interesting question, “Why would God either own a car too long for his garage or a garage too short for his car? And what did God need a car for anyway?”

One more detail about that house. I never actually saw God there. I never saw anyone come out of the front door, and I never actually saw that car move. But I believed that God was there—living there, watching TV there, taking care of us all from one of the little rooms inside. Of course, today what I love about my childhood sense of God's presence is that it wasn't too fancy or too upscale. God lived in a small simple house, kind of like me and my family. God was just another neighbor in my town.

This is one of the things that I love about being in ministry with our own small children—this pure, open, pre-critical wonder about who God is, where God lives, and what God does. Did you see your bulletin cover this morning? I was sitting with little Isa Matson when she finished it this week during Vacation Bible School, and I asked her, “Who is this a picture of?” And she gave me a look that said, “What do you mean, ‘Who is this a picture of?’” And she said, “God!” And I said, “Oh, of course it is!” And I thought, “Oh, of course it is.” Take a look at your bulletin cover. Don't you think that looks like God?

One of the books I keep on my shelf in my office is *Dear God: Children's Letters to God*. I don't know if you've ever heard of this book before. I just love it and I'm going to read a few things from it to you. The book is simply a collection of letters that children have written to God.

Norma writes, “Dear God, Did you mean for the giraffe to look like that or was it an accident?”

Nan writes, “Dear God, Who draws the lines around countries?”

Another letter reads, “Dear God, I bet it is very hard for You to love all of everybody in the whole world. There are only 4 people in our family and I can never do it.”

Some of them are pretty funny. Joyce writes to God and says, “Dear God, Thank You for the baby brother, but what I prayed for was a puppy.”

Some are challenging, Jane writes, “Dear God, Instead of letting people die and having to make new ones, why don't You just keep the ones You have now?”

And then one of my favorites. A boy named Mickey writes, “Dear God, If You watch me in Church Sunday, I'll show You my new shoes.”

Terrific! These open and wondering and truthful questions and ideas our children have about God!

The disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” Having just read these children's letters to God, I can't help but think, “What kind of question is that? Who is *greatest* in the kingdom of heaven?” It seems like kind of a typical question from the disciples—anxious about the future, anxious about power and status. In response to their question, Jesus does something remarkable. He invites a child—a little boy or a little girl—into their midst, and he says to them, “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the

greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.”

“*Unless you change and become like children...*” “*Unless you change and become like children...*” Perhaps some of you were wondering about ten minutes ago why we were all learning that silly song and trying to dance that silly dance. “*Unless we change and become like children...*” And you know what? There’s not much that can make us change and become like children like a good, silly dance!

One of my favorite poems is by Hafiz, a Persian poet of the twelfth century. I actually shared this poem with you a while back in our church newsletter, but I’ll read it to you now. It’s called, “The God Who Only Knows Four Words.”

Every child has known God,
Not the God of names,
Not the God of don'ts,
Not the God who ever does
Anything weird,
But the God who knows only 4 words
And keeps repeating them, saying:
"Come Dance with Me."

Wonderful poem. “Come Dance with Me.” Change and become like children, and enter the kingdom of heaven. Celebrate life and celebrate the child within you and come dance with me.

Sometimes that's trickier than it sounds, I guess. Sometimes it’s hard to do what Jesus says we should do—hard to change and become like children. Which is one of the wonderful reasons we need our children, isn’t it? Sometimes we catch ourselves saying that children are the future of the church. But they’re not. They are the church right now, right here. And we need them—we need their constant welcome for us to humbly become like them and to enter the kingdom of heaven with them, every day.

There is a lot to say about this—a lot to say, not only about celebrating our children but also about celebrating the child within each of us. Some of us have forgotten how to dance, and some of us have forgotten how to just get silly! Maybe it’s been a long time since you were a child with child-like wonderings and questions. Or maybe when you were a child, you were the subject of some unkindness—and so before you can celebrate your inner child, you need some healing. And that’s ok. God knows and quite honestly, that’s what we’re here for.

But if any of us are going to take anything that Jesus said seriously, we’d do well to remember that he said that unless we *change* and become like children, we’ll never know heaven! And so, as a congregation, let us look to our children as guides among us. Perhaps they’ll take us by the hand and show us what *they* know about God and about heaven and about goodness and mercy and love and grace. Maybe they even know where God lives in Racine, Wisconsin!

We've started today. We've danced with our children and we have another start here in front of us. During Vacation Bible School, our children created an "Affirmation of Faith," which is printed next in your bulletin. It's funny—most of the Affirmations of Faith that get read in churches were written hundreds of years ago by leaders in the church. Ours was written this past Thursday by some leaders in our church. This morning, let us follow them as we say what we believe...

**God is good. God is alive and God is kind. God is sweet and God is our love.
God is always with us, wherever we go. God loves us, everyone, all people in the world.
God made everything and God helps us grow. God made our food.**

**God isn't only a boy or a girl. God is God—a miracle. God is the father of all of us and
God is Jesus. God died to help us—to keep us alive. God saves us.**

**God wants us to love others, to obey, try new things, to be nice, and to be kind to other
people and to our teachers.**

**This church was made because of God's love for all of us. You can pray in church and God
will always hear you—you're with others who believe. We should pray to God and say, "I
love you." And God should say, "I love you, everyone!" Amen.**