



Sermons **from Northwood United Church**

"As a Child"

Mark 8:30-37

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September 20, 2015

May the words of our mouths, the meditations of our hearts, and the actions of our lives, be acceptable in your sight O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Many many years ago when I was going to university, one of the ways I put myself through was working in the summers for the Canada Wildlife Service. I lived and worked in a bird sanctuary in the South Okanagan keeping track of the bird life throughout the region. As I look back on it now, it was an idyllic job: gorgeous environment, worked outside all the time, on a great crew of friends. And that youthful experience cemented a lifelong passion for birding.

I also got to see biology in the raw. One of the images that stands out in my mind is the behaviour of mallard ducks in spring. I know the hormonal reason for it bit to watch the drake literally prancing around trying to out-strut the other drakes so that his genetic material would be carried to the next generation got a little much. It would appear that male ducks are required by their biology to make absolute fools of themselves every spring. It also appears that we humans don't restrict our foolishness to spring, or to four year election cycles. We can make ourselves look like fools in the grip of our biology any time.

Advertisers are appealing to such foolishness all the time. When Dodge was looking for a new name for its truck line, they chose "Ram." All the better for men to strut their stuff in. Ford thought numbers would better appeal to the truck buyers instincts. Who would buy a lowly F150 or even an F250 if you could get an F30 King Cab. No queen cab in their lineup. They are appealing to basic biology.

So what do ducks and trucks have to do with us today and the gospel we follow? Well, my friends, it's the disciples. "When they came to Capernaum, and when he was in the house, Jesus asked them, 'what were you arguing about on the way?' But they were silent, for on the way they had been arguing with one another about who was the greatest." I really wonder how different that argument was from the strutting ducks on Vaseau Lake.

You know when I read that this week, I could just imagine Jesus heart sinking. More than any of the other gospels, Mark lays out for us in event after event how utterly at odds was Jesus with the dynamics of power in his day, and in ours. He was offered power and prestige, and he turned it down. He teaches of a community of the poor and the weak. He shows people, in teaching and healing that the power of real life and real love is in our hands no matter who we are. Our faith can make us well. But so many prefer to believe that real life and real live is scarce and you have to compete for it, vie for it, prove you are the greatest in order to get it.

The original disciples through Jesus were building a kingdom of kings, when in fact it was a community of peasants. They wanted to be generals and important ministers when there were no generals, and everyone was an important minister. You can imagine what it must have been like for Jesus offering his life for the poor and vulnerable, all the while watching his core followers strutting around like roosters behind him.

"Look you guys; you are letting your biology be the sole ruler of your destiny. We don't need that kind of power dance in our community. Take a look at this child who has not yet learned the ways of the world- who is able to laugh and dance and love and give, freely. Learn to let that be your way with each other and in the world. It is in you. Remember how to be like that."

Some years ago popular psychology coined the phrase, "getting in touch with your inner child." Although pop psychology is often more about popularity than it is about psychology, there is often, amid the fanfare, a grain of truth, a nugget of gold, a tiny piece of wisdom worthy of notice. In the case of the search for the inner child, there was a conviction that there is within each of us a vulnerable, weak, yet open, and free person whose power is not borrowed from years of training, or the accumulation of reputation, or wealth, but whose power is inherent, bred in the bone. Soul power which is free and beautiful and genuine, and disarmingly, joyously unpredictable. And there is in most of us a dream to get back to that child, a kind of "return to Eden" dream in which we are no longer in the grip of either our drake like biology or the layers of socialization that teach us that we must fight our way to worthiness, but rather a dream in which we are simply free to be. And I think Jesus is appealing to this dream when he calls us to let the child reign within us. Come as a child. Welcome the child and you welcome me, and the one who sent me. Welcome the child in your community, and in your soul.

Now it is not easy to live like that all the time. It is hard to get the dishes done, and that child may not give a hoot about my pension plan. There is a complexity to life and real difficulties and dilemmas that need attention. And yet what I hear in the words of Jesus to his disciples (that's us) is: don't let that child fall asleep in you. Don't let your biology or the dominating culture in which you live take over.

The trouble is, we live in a real world in which the dishes need doing and the pension matters. We can place innocent child-like values at the centre and we could get eaten alive. Jesus also said "be wise as serpents and innocent as doves." And that is the real challenge. How many examples do we have of churches or ministries that were so rooted in child-like idealism that they failed to take care of business. The real world, business end of life cannot be ignored. Our Northwood Ministry board meets this week and on the agenda is a real world financial picture which has made it hard to fund our ministry, a real world roof problem, as well as the task of leading a Christ-like ministry of genuine vulnerable, soulful life. How do we come as a child, welcome the child, and live in this real world? It is a spiritual conundrum that requires a special kind of spiritual attentiveness.

Well, first of all, sometimes life just puts us there and we don't seem to have much choice. Life can strip us of our accumulated power and make us vulnerable: we lose a job and realize we are not the bread-winner we thought we were. We become ill and realize that we are not immortal, or that we need people. A love fails and we realize our brokenness. Although these experiences are never welcome and we resist them, pay attention because these are times when that vulnerable and free child can emerge. These can be deep and holy times in our lives in which we welcome the child as Jesus taught.

Secondly, do not underestimate the power of the dominating culture in which we live to crush that child. That is what is so stunning about Malala. We can all see the child, right in front of us, and forces in her culture shot her. It is breath taking. And yet we mustn't underestimate the power of capitalism, consumerism, competition crush that child just as efficiently as the Taliban. I watch our kids grow up in our consumer driven culture with its constant barrage of advertising, and I want us to pay attention to the health of their soul and ours in the midst of all that. Pay attention to the powers within our own culture trying to make us forget about the child that Jesus would have us welcome.

And finally, watch what happens with a particular eye open to signs of the presence of the child among and within us. I will always hold in my heart very dearly the time when I took my then 3 year old Aidan to a service at a seniors home in Salmon Arm. Aidan often went with me and was always something of that free spirit. The people gathered with their wheel chairs and walkers in the small chapel and they had gotten used to Aidan lying beneath the communion table and crawling between the wheelchairs. In fact his ministry there was probably way more

significant than mine because his presence, way more than any words I would ever offer, pointed people to the free, vulnerable, joyous soul at the heart of things.

One time, as we all quietly bowed our heads in prayer, Aidan began to go like this. (tongue click). He did it all through the prayer. It wasn't disruptive, just there. After the prayer ended, I asked the gathered dozen or so 80-90 year olds "how many of you can go like this?" (click) And in joyful, frivolous, silly chorus, they all responded, "click." And I thought, there it is. That is the heart of the discourse right there. The child among the children. The wise ones and the wise one. The openness, appreciation, love, spontaneity. The kingdom of God- as a child.