

Matthew 19:13-17

Then little children were being brought to him in order that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples spoke sternly to those who brought them; but Jesus said, 'Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs.' And he laid his hands on them and went on his way. Then someone came to him and said, 'Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?' And he said to him, 'Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments.'

“Exposing Virtue: Why are We Good?”

Charles Schuster

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He doesn't always come to church on Veterans' Day Sunday. In fact, there were years he didn't come at all. He was a soldier in some distant and forgotten war, very few really knew that side of him. He never wore his hardware that would have told any who noticed that they were in the presence of a hero, and there were letters of commendation filed in a shoebox, put back in the dust of a closet he never entered. And the limp in his step, most just figured age had had its way with him, but that was not it. The wound in his leg and the pain in his back were slight compared to those who never came back from a war that is a history's book of nightmares. Heroes like that don't like to talk, and consider their sacrifice just part of what it means to live in the land of the free. This particular day, he had heard of Fort Hood, and a man in the name of some distortion of faith, an officer and professional caregiver pulling rank and guns and calling out "God is great" while performing an act so obscenely evil as to deny God at all. This day, the old soldier came to church, and he sat in the back and he wondered what was what, and if it was all worth it, what he did. Or does anybody care any more? Does anybody care? It was a strange day, too. He wondered if there'd be much to feed his soul on this second Sunday in November, Children's Sabbath, one Sunday a year when all the children are in the sanctuary for the 9:15 service, which is when he came for an hour of worship, and the preacher began the muted homily recalling an ancient translation of the familiar text, how Jesus said "Suffer the little children...." following that with "We have our children in church and we're going to make them suffer." But then the preacher got a grip, and launched into a more reasonable exposition of the text and what Jesus really said, and how he might have said it. "Let the children come to me. Forbid them not." Why we need our children with us, why the first Sunday of every month we want them here, we want them to know what worship is, we want them to experience God in the church, in the sanctuary. Once a month, for the whole hour, we want them here. We want that to be a resource for them.

First of all, the preacher said, children remind us to be honest. Jesus loved the children because children are honest. Jesus had some people in his life who weren't. Some tried to trap him. People asked, "Should a woman taken in adultery be stoned to death?" If he said no, that would position him as a lawbreaker. If he said yes, that would make him look cruel. People wanted him to lead the charge, to be the Messiah, to kill the Romans. Militant, revolutionary, which he never was. People putting words in his mouth, trying to

get him to claim to be king or something. No wonder he wanted children around, because they're honest. Like the five-year-old at the dinner table stood in her chair, reached for the bread. Her father said, "Why don't you sit down and ask your brother to pass it?" She sat down and smiled sweetly and said, "Okay, Daddy" so she yelled across the table to her brother, "Gimme bread!" Her mother interrupted, "Now Sally, honey, what's the magic word?" She looked at her little brother and spoke those words, "Give me bread - now!" Children are so honest. A child wrote a condensed version of the Bible. Some of it went like this: "In the beginning, which occurred near the start, there was nothing but God and darkness and some gas, and the Bible says 'the Lord they God is One,' but I think he must have been older than that. Anyway, God said, 'Give me a light,' and someone did, and God made the world. And the split the atom and made Eve, and Adam and Eve were naked but they were not embarrassed because mirrors hadn't been invented then. And after the Old Testament came the New Testament, and Jesus was the star of the New. He was born in Bethlehem in a barn. I sure with I'd been born in a barn, because my Mom's always saying to me, 'Close the door, were you born in a barn?' It would be nice to say, 'Well, as a matter of fact, I was.' During his life, Jesus had many arguments with sinners like Pharisees and Democrats, and Jesus also had twelve opossums. The worst of them was Judas Asparagus, and Judas was so evil that they named a terrible vegetable after him." And the preacher said, "That's what children are, they're just so honest." That's why Jesus wanted them with him, and so do we.

The second thing, the preacher said something else, that they're honest, but they know goodness, so they're honest to goodness. He talked about some Halloween event in the parking lot of the church, late in the afternoon on a Sunday, when people decorated their cars and gave out candy and children dressed up in scary costumes like ghosts and monsters and witches, like that, trying to look evil and scary, but they didn't fool anybody. They were cute, and they were good. Children are good, they're basically good, and they had this thing afterwards where people brought in chili, thirty pots of chili, some of it made out of chicken, some of it made out of buffalo, some of it made out of beef, and some of it you really couldn't tell what it was made out of. The preachers had to judge the chili as to which was best, and therein grew the controversy, because all the cooks thought theirs was better than the others, and after a while the judges couldn't tell the difference between the tastes, in fact their mouths were so numb, they haven't tasted anything since. But the children were so good, so good. One little girl wrote a letter to the church and put it in an envelope. It said, "Dear Church, I had a great time at the Trunk or Treat, so I want to say thanks for everything. Sincerely, Rachel."

The money counters found the envelope and the note, and inside there was a dollar, a gift from a child. A dollar. Goodness, children teach us goodness. That's why Jesus wanted them around him. When you think of the stories Jesus told, they call them parables, there is one thing that's in common with most of them, this one thing. A blind man who has faith and begins to see, a man who was paralyzed, whose friends lowered him down through the roof to be where Jesus was so he could be healed. A woman who gave him a drink of water, a Samaritan who helped a traveler beaten and left to die on the side of the road. The one thing that a lot of those stories have in common is the sense of goodness, the goodness of people, the goodness of God. The Godness of good. Did you ever hear

the story of the little boy... his mother was going to have a baby. The family dog was pregnant at the same time, and the three-year-old was curious about it all, and someone took him aside and explained where babies come from, and the boy was absolutely amazed when he watched six puppies being born. A few months later, on the day of the delivery of his little sister, that same child went to the hospital. They took him to the nursery, and he looked at the row of babies through the glass window, and he said, "Are these all ours? Can we keep them?" Goodness. Honest to goodness. Honest to goodness to God.

Third point: the preacher spoke of God, how children remind us of God. We can come to understand who God is and how God is. Jesus was always talking about the kingdom of God, and how you had to be like a little child to know it. Parents at a preschool, waiting to pick up their children. It was the last day before the recess for Christmas. Each kid had a package wrapped, it was something they had made at the preschool as a gift for their father or their mother or maybe both. It was to be a surprise, that's why it was wrapped, and one little boy tried to put his coat on and carry his surprise and wave at his mama all at the same time, and it happened - he slipped, he fell, and the surprise crashed to the ceramic tile floor and broke. He was too stunned to speak, he just sat there and cried, and was inconsolable. One of the other parents tried to comfort him, went over and patted him on the head and said, "It will be all right, it will be all right, it really doesn't matter, it really doesn't matter." His mother saw him there, and she knelt beside him on the floor and took her son into her arms and whispered, "It will be all right. Maybe we can glue it back. But it does matter, it matters a great deal." And she wept with her son.

We have lots of questions. Who God is, and how God is. But of this we're sure. God is not the careless parent who pats us on the head in the middle of our struggles telling us, "It doesn't matter, it's not important." So what happens to us when we do the things we get into? They are important, and our God is like the parent who falls to the ground beside us. Our God takes up our torn and bleeding spirits, and our God says to us, "It matters." It matters, ultimately. Eric Marshall and Stuart Hample published so many *Children's Letters to God* books, these letters are funny, but they're also profound. Donny, for example, wrote "Dear God, we're going on a vacation for two weeks Friday, so we won't be in church. I hope you'll be there when we get back When do you take your vacation?"

Children look at the world to make us see the presence of God, and sometimes they think like a Psalmist - "My God, my God, have you forsaken us?" We see through their eyes the presence as well as the absence of God. Krista Tippett believes the way we get in touch with the merciful creative God is to see mercy and creativity in life, and sometimes through the eyes of a child. The preacher tried to explain it, but the preacher then all of a sudden stopped, and he said, "When do we see God? Honest to goodness, to God?" And the preacher said, "You know, sometimes we can hear it sung better than we can hear it preached." And then the preacher said, "Listen to Richard, he wrote this song." And the people heard it.

You saw it there in fields of flowers that were peeking through the snow

and climbing up the mountain to the sky
You say you saw it on the canyon rim, its river far below
The beauty of the sunset made you cry
You felt the touch in your baby's hand so warm upon your breast
You trust and pray, those feeling can't deceive
The quiet falls around you, the whole world seems at rest.
Your child's gentle touch helps you believe
You hung this portrait that they gave you on the wall above your bed
Those memories of what you learned in school
But the images you're seeing now don't fit with what they said
You wondered if it's you who's been the fool
Don't let them tell you what your God has to be
It's all yours to find out on your own
You're as different as the snowflake that falls upon the leaves
It's your God, and it's a wonder to behold
Kaleidoscopic flashes, scenes that came too fast
We're taught of only one way to believe
This torrent swirls around you of pictures from your past
May the God you've come to know bring you peace.
You know now that your vision's clear, you marvel at your find
You see it everywhere, and in your soul
Your seeing through your heart now, what's been getting in your min
It's your God and it's a wonder to behold
Don't let them tell you what your God has to be
It's all yours to find out on your own
You're as different as the snowflake that falls upon the leaves
It's your God and it's yours alone
God's yours, you know, and yours alone.

Well the song ended, and the congregation stood for the benediction and prepared to leave, and the old soldier stood and limped toward the door. He came to church wondering if his sacrifice was worth it, as the flags in the sanctuary, on this special day, and the children in their special way were beginning to get through to him. He had given many years of his life. He had lost friends, and he had been wounded, and for what? For this? For freedom, for children, for their future? For all that he heard and saw on this Sabbath? He and the others left to go back to their homes, having taken the path from honest to goodness to God. He was at the door of the church when it happened. A ten-year-old boy did it. Had recognized he'd been one who had stood with the others who had been in service to the military, on Veterans' Day, in church. A ten-year-old face to face with an old soldier, saying, "Thanks. Thanks for your service. Thanks for what you did for me," on Veterans' Day, on Children's Sabbath. An old soldier remembered why he'd served.