

The Way of Spiritual Childhood

“At that time Jesus declared: ‘I thank thee, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babes; yea, Father, for such was thy gracious will. All things have been delivered to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and any one to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. Come to me all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light’” (Mt 11:25-30).

God’s holiness shatters pride in all its forms; while the modern mantra, in contrast, calls us to become masters of our world. St. Paul counters this delusion with the paradox of Christ’s life and its impact on us:

“For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich” (2 Cor 8:9).

Writings to the Galatians, St. Paul added:

“For if any one thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself” (Gal 6:3).

But how can we become rich in Christ, if we have become, or are striving to become, rich by relying on our own efforts? Diligence and hard work can be a good thing, but we are incapable of that vital reshaping, which can only come from the Master’s hands. Thus God spoke to the prophet Jeremiah: “Like the clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel” (Jer 18:6). Jesus operates in us through the Holy Spirit only when we remain poor, little, free and available to God’s transforming love. The psalmist’s urgent message reminds us to live in the present moment with a malleable and docile heart: “O that today you would hearken to his voice! Harden not your hearts” (Ps 95:7-8).

Discipleship is a lived school in which we continually learn to become like Christ through our intimate association with him. In this daily encounter we are faced with deliberate choices, repeated on an hourly basis. It’s the choice of which master to serve: self, the world, the devil, or our Savior Jesus Christ? The disciple chooses to follow Christ. Then he employs his God given freedom by making himself the obedient servant of the all-wise God. He has chosen to obey his heavenly mother who said: “Do whatever he tells you” (Jn 2:5).

Before Jesus can send us to heal the world in whatever state of life we find ourselves, we must first be healed ourselves. This needed transformation occurs in the daily intimate companionship with Jesus that is achieved in sharing our innermost thoughts and aspirations in prayer, reflection on the Word of God, and being filled with Jesus in Holy Communion.

“The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break is it not a participation in the body of Christ” (1 Cor 10:16).

In the safety of Christ’s loving embrace, we can acknowledge our ineptitude and helplessness as we cry out: “Be merciful to me a sinner.” When we do well, we also need to reflect on Jesus’

words:

“So you also, when you have done all that is commanded you say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty’ (Lk 17:10).

Yes, and even our faithfulness would be impossible except for God’s grace. In this admission we accept our littleness and remain in Christ.

As we have seen, Jesus identified the spiritual “babes,” the *nepioi* or “infants” (Mt 11:25), as those who capture his heart and the heart of his Father. Babies have no wisdom. They can boast of no accomplishments. They are helpless and innocent. However, they are irresistible to God’s flaming love. St. Matthew recorded Jesus’ poignant lesson on spiritual childhood:

“At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them, and said, “Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 18:1-5).

In another marvelous use of paradox, Jesus reversed the definition of “great” and “small” upsetting the disciple’s comfortable understanding of these words that was spawned by their egos and the values of this world. Jesus rejected self-reliance and self-acclaim, but exalted as “great” the utter dependency and helplessness of children, the “little ones”.

To fully understand Jesus’ lesson on spiritual childhood, we should recognize that in the world of the first century children were of little importance. They had neither rights nor social standing. In the Greek language the same word, *pais*, can be translated as “child” or “servant,” even “slave”. The boy in this brief narrative was standing in the back as a non-entity, so as not to distract from the important activity of adults. They were standing with their backs to him, which was indicative of the general disdain of children. Jesus judges things very differently.

Jesus called the boy with words that remarkably paralleled the exact words Jesus used to call the Apostles. This choice of words was a reminder to the disciples that they, too, are unimportant men upon whom the great ones of the world and even their own religious leaders had turned their backs. It was also a reminder that they were chosen because of Jesus’ love and mercy, not because of their wonderful accomplishments.

The boy in the narrative heard Jesus’ call. He immediately came to Jesus and allowed himself to be placed “in the midst of them” (Mt 18:2). The text gives no indication of hesitancy, resistance, self-consciousness or embarrassment. Jesus called. That’s all that mattered. Then Jesus made a statement that surely startled his disciples when he solemnly declared: “Unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 18:3). In other words, unless you change your present way of acting and respond to my call like this boy, you won’t even enter heaven. So forget about who’s the greatest.

The way of spiritual childhood is the way of *surrender*, that is, giving up the fantasy of control. Submission is the straight road to the heaven, but it passes by way of the cross. The apostles

were concerned about rank in kingdom of heaven instead of focusing on servicing its members. All projects of self-promotion in Jesus' kingdom are valueless and must be abandoned. All the trappings of worldly success are stripped away at death. Why not surrender them now?

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