"CHILDISH OR CHILD-LIKE?"

A Sermon By

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Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
April 23, 1989
"CHILDISH OR CHILD-LIKE?"

TEXT: "And He took them in His arms and blessed them, laying His hands upon them". (Mark 10: 16)

INTRODUCTION

I've always felt sorry for the youngster who happened to be there the day that Jesus decided to use him as an "object lesson". Few children like being used in this fashion. And some of us can even remember being stood up before a group of adults and having our parents ask us to recite something we'd just learned in school...or being made to sit down at the piano and play some little piece for our family's friends. We wanted to shrink into the woodwork and become invisible.

Frederick Buechner, in one of his books, describes the boy in this way,

"Jesus...puts his hands on his shoulders so he won't make a run for it. The child stands there wide-eyed, more than a little scared, much more than a little embarrassed, toe-ing the dust. If it weren't for the honor of the thing, as in Lincoln's joke, he'd as soon have been left unnoticed. He wishes he'd had time to get the hair out of his eyes, button up his shirt, at least to spit out his bubble-gum".

It was so unlike our Lord to embarrass anyone in this fashion...much less a child. For Jesus to have done such a thing there must have been a good reason. And there was. Let me suggest to you three reasons here this morning.

THEY WERE REBUKING THE CHILDREN

First-off then, Mark says, "And they were bringing children to Him...and the Disciples rebuked them".

Down through the centuries there have been far too many Christians who have felt that their primary calling in life was that of "rebuking" somebody. Maybe it began here with the disciples. There have been too many who have felt that God wanted them to look around to see if anybody was having any fun, so they could quickly put a stop to it. You know the kind of person. A priest once said to Groucho Marx:

"Oh, Mr. Marx, I want to thank you for bringing so much joy into the world".

To which Groucho Marx, always quick on the uptake replied, rather ungraciously, I think, "and I want to thank you for taking so much out". He was ungracious, but mind you - he had a point! A lot of religious folk seem bent on bringing their wet blankets to every party, every church gathering. Oliver Wendell Holmes once remarked to a friend that "he would have entered the ministry if so many ministers he knew hadn't looked like undertakers". And Finley Peter Dunne, the American humorist who wrote thick dialect humor under the pseudonym of "Mr. Dooley" once said of Thanksgiving,

"Twas founded by th' Puritans to give thanks f'r being presarved from th' Indyans, an'...we keep it to give thanks we are presarved fr'm th' Puritans..."
The disciples were always rebuking somebody, but it is shocking that they should have rebuked anyone for bringing children to Jesus. Halford Luccock raises this question in the Interpreter's Bible,

"How could they be with Christ so continuously, seeing what He cared about the most...hearing His words...and still fail so dismally to understand Him?"

And Luccock goes on to answer his own question by saying,

"Here is a mirror. Look into it. That will help you fathom the mystery."

How could they miss the point of the message of Jesus? And how can we? All through the years, even among those who profess to follow Jesus the most, there have been those who missed His message. It's hard for us to believe, but there have even been those over the history of the Christian Church who have had stern rebukes for those who have tried to bring children to Jesus. As a matter of fact, the discovery of the child as a person of inalienable rights is a relatively new one in Christian history. Child labor laws were not passed until nineteen centuries after Jesus and most were passed over the objections of church people! They supported long hours of child labor because it kept the children off the streets. In 1915 a poet by the name of Sarah Northcliffee Cleghorn wrote,

"The golf links lie so near the mill
That almost every day
The laboring children can look out
And watch the men at play!"

And then there was that shameful period in the history of the Church when theologians actually taught that unbaptized infants who died were fit candidates for damnation simply because some priest had not splashed a few drops of water upon their heads! Can you imagine anything more out of keeping with the teachings and the example of Jesus? I cannot. It was not until the 19th century American Congregationalist minister, Horace Bushnell, wrote his epoch-making book, Christian Nurture, that children began to be recognized as members of God's family. It seems that it took the Church 19 centuries to catch up with Jesus...and let's face it, in some areas it still has a lot of catching up to do.

ONLY ONE NEGATIVE REFERENCE TO CHILDREN

Moving on to the second point, only once did Jesus say anything negative about children. We find it in Luke 7, verses 31 - 34. And here Jesus was making a sharp and cutting criticism of some of the most respected leaders of His day, the Pharisees. Many of them were so rigiely righteous that they thought they had a corner on God's market. And Jesus compared them to children playing in a marketplace...or rather, not playing...sitting around glaring at one another, sulking, pouting. Why? Because the gang wasn't playing the games they wanted. And if you asked them, "Why aren't you playing?" you could hear them reply, "They won't play". Then the answer would come:

"You won't play, yourself. We wanted to play wedding, but you said, 'that's too silly!' We wanted to play funeral, but you said, 'that's too serious'. We want to play, but they won't play our way".
So there they sit...glowering at one another. DEADLOCK. Or GRIDLOCK. I recall the word of Belgium's Paul Henri Spaak as he presided over the First General Assembly of the United Nations. When it ended, he told his colleagues,

"The agenda is exhausted. The Secretary General is exhausted. I am exhausted. At last we have achieved unanimity!"

"We piped to you and you did not dance. We waited...and you did not weep"  
(verse 7: 32)

In other words, they were angry, fretful, spoiled - yes - little brats who could not see past the end of their little noses. They must have their way or they won't play. And Jesus said, "Some of you religious people are like that!"

Unfortunately, we see childishness at work in the world wherever we turn. On a world level, we see nations unwilling to play the game of peace. On a national level we find too many politicians who put the good of their own party or their own personal friends above the good of the country as a whole. It even creeps into our homes. Often they are divided by childishness. You've all seen those tags hanging in automobile windows, "Child on board". I saw one awhile back which said, "Childish adult at wheel". One of the places where all of us become a bit childish is when we're driving down the road and some idiot cuts in front of us. Childishness on the street. In the home. In the work-place, and even (and God forbid) in the Church!

However, we are not called by Jesus to be childish. We are called by Jesus to be child-like. And this brings me to the third and final point of the sermon.

WOEVER DOES NOT RECEIVE THE KINGDOM OF GOD
child shall not enter there in". (Mark 10: 15)

In childhood Jesus found the perfect analogy for membership in the Kingdom. Not in childishness, but child-likeness.

A good many sermons have been preached about this young child, declaring that what Jesus wanted people to emulate was the supposed "innocence" of childhood. Every parent (and grandparent) knows that the "innocence of childhood" is something of a myth. Children and not all that innocent. Someone once said that children exhibit the most "original form of Original Sin".

Two theologians were walking across a seminary campus when one asked the other, "Do you believe in Original Sin?" And the other replied, "Yes, I do...we have a child". He - the first man then asked, "And do you believe in Total Depravity?" "No...I don't" said the second man..."That's an excess of Calvinistic theology". The first replied, "Just wait until you have two children!" There are a lot of qualities which children have which are more irritating than inspirational. Sometimes, they can be little demons in human form.

Children are not always little angels. But they do have some endearing qualities that caused Jesus that day long ago to single them out as object lessons for His disciples - and for us. And the one quality which I wish to single out this morning is enthusiasm or spontaneity.
Adults are careful and calculating. Children tend to jump right in, feet first, unafraid. They act on impulse and that isn't all bad. Someone once said, "Distrust first impulses...they're nearly always right". But someone else has said, "Don't look before you leap. If you do, you will decide to sit down". There is, among too many of us, such a careful, cautious attitude toward our religious faith that we hesitate to take the bold action, the bold move, the daring move. But the child-like spirit is one of daring to take a few risks...not knowing it is impossible, they are at least willing to try to do it anyway.

There's something exuberant and unrestrained about children. They have an enthusiasm for life that we tend to lose as we grow older. They have a sense that anything's possible which comes from that feeling of being believed in. We can all testify to the fact that we do better when someone believes in us. Robert Valentine once compared Teddy Roosevelt and William Howard Taft as Presidents. He said,

"The difference was that when you left Teddy Roosevelt's presence you were ready to eat bricks for lunch and when you left Taft's office you felt...oh...what's the use."

And wasn't that the secret of Jesus' way with men? He believed in them, in their possibilities. He grasped them by their future and drew them on. "You are Simon. And you shall be called Cephas". And Peter grew into his new name.

As adults, we admire children's childish enthusiasm. But it seems that we also tend to encourage the kids to outgrow it. Syndicated columnist Ellen Goodman, a few years ago, wrote some words in an article that I clipped.

"We raise our children with 'ethical time bombs' and 'built-in disillusionment alarms'. We allow our children their ideals until they are perhaps 13 or 15 or 18 or 22. But if they don't let go of their ideals, we worry about whether they will be able to function in the real world. After all, the real world is some place else. We have to be tough and even a little cynical."

Goodman goes on to give examples of what she means.

"Adults know that clean air is all very nice, but it must be balanced against jobs. Adults know that helping others is neat, but it may well take away their motivation to find a job. Adults know that peace is swell, but we can't ever trust our enemies to ever stop preparing for war."

Goodman concludes that this "so-called realism" of adults may be the true "junk food" of our time.

"We instill ideals in our children, resent it when our children challenge us for not living up to them and then feel reassured when our kids give up their ideals like sleds or cartoons."

One wonders...can this be what Jesus had in mind when He asked His disciples not
to lose the "child-like" spirit, when He warned them about hindering little children on their way into the Kingdom?

It's interesting to reflect on the derivation of the word, "enthusiasm". It literally means "in God". When anyone was really roused, it was assumed in ancient times that a God had possessed him. This possession was "enthusiasm" from the Greek EN-THUSIASMOS (en theos - a god within). Emerson once said,

"Nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm".

This building in which we worship was not built 62 years ago without the enthusiasm of those who were a part of it. Our restoration fund drive of next month will not be accomplished without enthusiasm. A minister was showing a friend around his church recently and referring to the sound system, he said, "We have a number of dead spots in this church". His clergy friend, "So do we. We should all brother...so do we all." Enthusiasm is one child-like attitude we can all adopt to our benefit.

CLOSING STORY

I close with this beautiful "human interest" story that was in the Los Angeles Times back in 1985. It happened a few days after the disastrous earthquake in Mexico City. A little Japanese American boy was going "door to door" in Los Angeles selling picture postcards for twenty-five cents each. He was giving the profits for Earthquake Relief. One man bought some post cards from the little boy and then asked him how much he hoped to raise. The little lad answered quickly, "One Million Dollars!"

The man smiled and said,

"Do you mean to tell me that you are trying to raise a million dollars to help the earthquake victims all by yourself?"

"Oh no, sir" replied the boy, "My little brother is helping me."

When Christ comes into our lives we become "enthusiastic". "God-filled". And all becomes possible. We simply can't sit still. We want to get out and do something about it. And remember this, too - we have a Big Brother to help us do it. Amen. Amen.

PRAYER

Move within our hearts, O God, in these moments...deepen us in our commitment to Christ that we may be more "child-like" in our lives...and less childish...filled with wonder and enthusiasm as we bear witness to your word and way, your life and love, brought to us in Christ, Jesus, Our Lord
B. New members will be received into the church next Sunday.

C. I'm always reminded of those lifting words of John Wesley,

"If your heart is, as my heart is, then come and give me your hand".

I've always been partial to the tone and inclusive nature of that invitation myself...it speaks to us here. And so we need new friends to share their "hearts and hands" here in the work we do at this busy corner of God's Kingdom!

V. OFFERING

A. Jesus said,

"It is more blessed to give than it is to receive".

In this spirit, let us now worship God with our gifts and offerings!

VI. ROSE ON ALTAR:

A. In honor of Elizabeth Blaine Simms, infant daughter of John and Kathy Simms, born 12:25 yesterday afternoon. April 22, 1989

VII. SPECIAL MUSIC

A. Note that the Oratorio Society will be performing a special work in Carnegie Hall, Tuesday evening, May 2nd...under Lyndon Woodside's direction. And on May 3rd, Wednesday evening, the Adult Fellowship is planning to attend the opera, "The Masked Ball". Erik O'Neill is coordinator and it's a opera in which Sandra Van Cleve of our own parish will be appearing.

VIII. FRIENDS / FORMER DAYS

A. How wonderful to welcome Richard and Linda Stanford...all the way from Birmingham, Alabama...Dick was active here from 1978 to 1982...here for the lovely wedding yesterday of Cathy and Bob....

B. Also like to mention that Eric de Freitas is with us...and our deep condolences go to Eric on the death of his wife Tolly...and how moved all of us were by the Memorial Service last Sunday here in her honor.
ANNOUNCEMENTS: Sunday, April 23, 1989

I. GREETING / VISITORS

A. We greet the visitors in the congregation...delighted to have you with us...and we hope that the opportunity will be ours to greet you in a more personal way...

B. Make yourself known to us. Be free in the sharing of your name with us. Sign a visitor card. Leave a name in our Guest Book. Worship with us...work with us in the programs of service. Join us downstairs for coffee.

C. You worship in a Church whose roots are deep in the soil. We have been ministering here since 1837. We minister in the name of Christ and it is in His loving spirit...

II. PARISH CONCERNS

A. Parish concerns are listed for you in the bulletin...review them on your own...noting that work begins soon on the monthly issue of our parish news sheet and your contributions are always most welcome.

B. Next Sunday afternoon our Annual District Meeting will be held at Christ Church, Park and 60th...if any of you are free to attend and wish to...mention it to me.

III. SPECIAL DEDICATION

A. As I mentioned last Sunday our parish circle has been touched by death in recent days. The passing of Jack Kilbride, father of Rick and David. Tolly de Freitas, wife of Eric. (Eric is with us this morning). Also, in Japan, the dear mother of Reiko Ito passed away in recent days. Reiko, a long time member of the choir, is with us today...not singing...but the choir would like to dedicate our second anthem in memory of Reiko Ito's mother.

IV. TONIGHT AT SIX

A. This evening we shall be holding another of our "Conversations in Membership". It's an opportunity for our new friends to learn more about the church...meet some of our leaders...see slides of the church "in action". "It begins with supper...a light supper...persons interested in strengthening a tie with the church are invited to come...to be in touch...
PASTORAL PRAYER: April 23, 1989

O THOU who art the SOURCE of all things good, grant that we who are so often inclined to remember what we LACK may not forget what we have!

MAY BLESS THEE for the warming quality of Spring, for green grass, budding trees and longer days; for parks and paths and bicycles, and for all the scents and colors that edge us each day toward the days of Summer...

AND WE THANK THEE for the interflow of ideas, for the sharing of convictions, for man's ability to receive and to infuse hope, and the lifting play of Divine Truth on the human spirit.

OUR HIGHEST PRAISE we reserve for YOU - our God - whose mercy is the same from age to age, and whose life-giving grace has been declared and revealed to us in Jesus Christ, our Lord.

CENTER OUR far-ranging lives in YOUR eternal love, O God, that in whatever time or circumstance in this city we may know and feel and celebrate Your PRESENCE, Your POWER, and YOUR PEACE.

TO LOOK at us as we sit here this morning, Lord, it would appear that our grip on life is firm and that we're managing things quite well, that we have come to terms with our fears, our failures, our frustrations...

AND YET, in our eyes as in Your sight, we are not the masters of our fate that we so often pretend to be.

LORD, we are anxious, deeply anxious about the well-being of our loved ones - children, parents, and grandparents. Our jobs, our wives, our husbands, our health. We worry, too, about...

THE NUMBER and the power of our sins and the tug of these temptations with which we constantly wrestle behind closed doors.

AND SO IN THIS HOUR OF PRAYER THIS MORNING, show us each once again the connection between our anxious, restless minds and our lack of faith in YOU.

MAKE REAL in us the glorious, risen life that Jesus brought, lest the cares of either self or society rob us of the joy of life.

AND ANXIOUS though we be about the long view, help us to take without fear the short step immediately before us, knowing that of such the story of life is so often written. All this we now dare to pray in the name and spirit of Christ.
PARK AVENUE
UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
106 East 86th Street
New York, N.Y. 10028
AT 9-6997

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FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER EASTER  
April 23, 1989

ORDER OF WORSHIP  
11 A.M.

ORGAN  
"Vision"  
Rheinberger

CALL TO WORSHIP

HYMN NO. 55 "Praise to the Lord, the Almighty"

PRAYER OF CONFESSION (seated)
Lord, forgive the dimness of our sight and the good we do not see; the quickness of our tongues and the harm we work on others through intemperate speech; the heaviness of our hands, so slow to help; the dullness of our hearts, so reluctant to believe. Forgive us for coming to terms with an age that has so little time for You; and for starving our souls in the pursuit of goals and prizes that are here today and gone tomorrow. We believe that thou art able to forgive. Dear God, forgive each of us now, as on Your great name we call. Amen.

SILENT MEDITATION - WORDS OF ASSURANCE - LORD'S PRAYER

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GREETING TO THE CHILDREN

MUSIC BY THE CHILDREN

SACRAMENT OF BAPTISM

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ANTHEM  
"We Adore Thee"  
Palestrina

SCRIPTURE  
I Corinthians 13: 8 - 13  
Page 1000

PASTORAL PRAYER

PARISH CONCERNS

ANTHEM  
"How Lovely Is Thy Dwelling Place"  
Brahms

PRESENTATION OF THE OFFERING WITH THE DOXOLOGY

HYMN NO. 442 "Spring Has Now Unwrapped the Flowers"

SERMON  
"Childish or Child-Like?"  
Mr. Clarke

HYMN NO. 233 "Rejoice, Ye Pure in Heart"

BENEDICTION

ORGAN  
"Chorale"  
Kirnberger

*** Interval for Ushering

THE SACRAMENT OF BAPTISM

Christian West Galgano, infant son of Hollis and Dennis Galgano, is being presented for Christian Baptism this morning. Christian was born on April 19, 1988 at Lenox Hill Hospital here in New York City.

LAY READER

We welcome Julie Jaqua to the lectern today. A native of Kalamazoo, Michigan, Julie studied at Northwestern University and is in New York City to pursue an acting career. Julie is an active member on the Adult Fellowship Committee.

ALTAR FLOWERS

The flowers on the altar today are in celebration of the marriage of Cathy Syble and Robert Gardner who were married here on Saturday afternoon.

GREETERS AND USHERS

The greeters today are John Hornaday and Lili Bates. The ushers are Jacqueline Notestine, Kenneth Borgeson, Fran Ellison, Effie French, Gary Klein and John Simms.

AN INVITATION

Coffee and tea will be served in the Russell Room following the service. Members and friends are invited to share in these moments of warmth made possible for us today by Bob Gardner, Ken Borgeson, Bruce Evans, Karen and Jeffrey Goss and Marlene Marinangeli.

CHURCH SCHOOL AND NURSERY CARE

Sessions of Church School for children are offered Sunday mornings from ten-thirty to twelve. Nursery care for infants and toddlers is available on the fourth floor in the Day School Room.