



Children Have a Way With Words

Psalm 8, Matthew 21:14-16

February 26, 2006

Art Linkletter loves to tell how, “Kids say the darndest things.” One young boy was at school. His teacher was leading a lesson on drugs and mentioned that nicotine in cigarettes was a drug, too, whereupon the boy piped up, “My dad is a cop and he does drugs!”

Three year old Joe had a granddad who had an interesting job: he was an opera singer. One evening granddad was getting dressed in his tuxedo for his performance. Meanwhile, in the living room, Grandma told little Joe, “When Grandpa comes out, tell him he looks smashing!” So Grandpa comes out, and Joe says, “Grandpa, you look all squashed up!”

Dad was driving daughter to school. They were listening to the radio. On comes a commercial for a church, and at the end of the commercial, they give the church’s phone number. “Daddy,” says the daughter, “I didn’t know Jesus had a phone number!” Reminds me of that old song, “Jesus on the Main Line, Tell Him What You Want!”

One Sunday in our church, a children’s Bible study class was going on a field trip: they went to the pastor’s office, and they went to the sanctuary, and they went all the way up into the top-top of the balcony, where they sat down, and gazed down at the stained glass window of Jesus. Said one little girl, “This is the closest I’ve ever been to God!”

Well, it is true: children do have a way with words. Sometimes what they say is comically brilliant. And sometimes what they say is profoundly true. This month we have been speaking of the ways that the voice of God can come to us. I am convinced that the voice of God can come through the voices of our children. A couple of weeks ago we heard the story of that unnamed servant girl who told Naaman, the master of her house, “O that you could meet the prophet of Samaria! He would heal you of your leprosy.” And Naaman did meet Elisha, who told Naaman to go wash in the River Jordan seven times and be healed. And so he was. The voice of God had come through a humble servant girl, and Naaman listened, and was made whole.

Today young Carey Tipps has read Psalm 8 to us, the psalm that sings of how the praise of God comes “Out of the mouths of babes and infants.” All creation praises the glory of God, from the stars in their courses to the infants in their cradles. Even babies recognize the cosmic sovereignty of God. God can use even the speech of vulnerable infants to declare truth and foil evil.

Children remind us of things we too often forget. We hurried, jaded adults forget to stop and look what an amazing world we live in. We miss the handiwork of God surrounding us at every hand. Yet a six year old boy will spend a whole afternoon lying down in the grass watching a colony of ants making a new home. The boy watches with awe and wonder, and marvels that God could put such ingenuity in even the tiny ant. If we pay attention to our children, if we listen to them, if we would pause to see the world again through their clear new eyes, then we would remember again for the first time how wondrous this life is, and how wondrous the Creator who makes it all happen. “Out of the mouths of babes and infants” the praise of the Lord comes forth.

Young Amanda Tipps has read to us about the time Jesus quoted these very words. He was healing in the temple. Blind people and lame people were coming to him and being cured. And children were there, seeing all of this, which was such an amazing sight to them that they started singing in the temple: “Hosanna to the Son of David.” And, as happens too many times in church, the adults got upset, and said to Jesus what adults usually say: “SHHHH. Can’t you keep these children quiet?! Do you hear what these are saying?! Children should be seen and NOT heard, especially when they start calling you the Son of David.”

Jesus answered, “Yes, I hear what they are saying. And have you never heard what the psalm says,

Out of the mouths of infants and nursing babies
You have prepared praise for yourself. (Matthew 21:16)

The children have seen what the adults have missed. The adults should have understood who Jesus was, but it was the children who called him “Son of David.” And Jesus accepted their praise. Children have that uncanny ability to see important things that the rest of us overlook. And children have that honesty that moves them to blurt out exactly what they see. And what they saw on that day was the Son of David. So they sang, “Hosanna to the Son of David.” Out of the mouths of babes...

All of this leads me to wonder what our children are saying. From their point of view, what do they see around here? Do they see Jesus among us? In my Elizabeth City church, a previous pastor there had a son who came into church for Sunday School and noticed in the hall a piece of chewing gum. He picked it up and was about to, shall we say, recycle it, when an eagle-eyed Sunday School teacher screeched, “Son, don’t you dare put that gum in your mouth. Don’t you know it has germs?!” The boy said, “Germs and Jesus, that’s all I hear around here and I hain’t seen neither one!” Well, I wonder, what do our children see around here? Have they seen Jesus here? And what do they have to say about it? And how has the voice of God come through them?

One person who is in constant touch with our children is our Minister of Children, Beth Cockman. I have asked her to come today and reflect for a while on how she has heard the voice of God through children of the church...

....Beth Cockman....

I thank God for Beth, who came among us four years ago, and ever since has been challenging us to listen to what our children are saying. For sometimes, when we truly listen to children, we may hear the voice of God through them.

I thank God for the things Beth has taught us about children's ministry: that it must be more than child care, more than entertainment, more than activities. In a growing church, children's ministry is never an afterthought. In a growing church, children's ministry is one of our highest thoughts.

In the Bible, children are so important that they are mentioned hundreds and hundreds of times (seventeen hundred, by my estimate from *Strong's Concordance*). Psalm 128:3 says that children around a family table are a sure sign of the favor of God. Proverbs 17:6 says that grandchildren are the crown of the aged. In our church, children are important for their example of being spiritually open. They soak up all they can learn about Jesus. They ask good questions. In our church, children are important, not just as the future of the church, but as the present of the church. They are important not just for their potential to be adults someday, but for who they are and what they do now.

For one thing, they help us see things that we miss. I've already told you about the children recognizing Jesus as the Son of David in the temple. Here is a more current recognition story. In my office is a painting of the interior of a great cathedral. Away up at the front you can see the chancel and the pulpit and worshippers. But back in the back there is Jesus walking around the last pew. Jesus has shown up at church. When my Whitney was eleven, she was looking around my office, and was fascinated by that painting. She asked, "Daddy, what do you think Jesus is doing there?" I said, "Well, I reckon he's shown up to check out what's going on up there in the worship service." Whitney said, "No, he's gone there to take care of HER." And she pointed, and I saw what I'd been missing all along: in the shadows of the painting of the sanctuary was a woman kneeling in pain and grief, and Jesus was reaching out to her. All the other people in church were up front doing what people in church do. But it was Jesus who noticed her. And it was a little girl who helped me notice them. Through children, the voice of God speaks, telling us not to overlook little ones in the shadows.

Here's another story of why children are important. John Roberts was at home one evening with his pre-school son Chris. He got a call from someone in a desperate situation who needed him right away. His wife Marylynn was not home, so there was nothing for John to do but put Chris with him in the car and go. John drove as fast as he dared, already exhausted and stressed from work, now steeling himself to deal with this next crisis. All of a sudden John felt a little hand patting his leg. Somehow little Chris could sense that his daddy was worried, so Chris did what he could to comfort his father. And he did. Through children, the voice of God speaks, reminding us that our Heavenly Father cares for all of us.

One more story on the importance of children: In the movie “Neverland,” J. M. Barrie is planning the London debut of his play “Peter Pan.” He convinces his producer to save some tickets for some surprise guests. On the night of the play, at the last minute, the mystery guests come. They are children from a nearby orphanage. At first the very adult, very sophisticated London theater goers are a bit put out by all these ragged little people squeezing past them to sit among them. As the music begins, the adults are uncomfortable, the children intimidated. But then the curtain rises, and the children gasp at the world of Peter Pan. They are enchanted. They squeal with laughter. And as those children react so openly, so honestly, eventually the adults begin to see through the eyes of a child once more.

In church, we tell a story that makes Peter Pan sound tame. The story of Jesus is the story of the too-good-to-be true in fact coming true: Jesus came and taught and healed and died and rose again, and now you and I can follow that same way. But we jaded, sophisticated adults watch with narrowed eyes from a distance...until the children come in, and their eyes widen at the wonder of the stories of Jesus...and then we see the gospel again for the first time, through their eyes. Jesus tells us that the only way we can follow him is to become like a child again. That’s what children do for us in church. They help us to recover that childlike openness, that simple trust, that capacity for awe and wonder, that is the only way we can come to the Father. Children show us the way to God.

-- Douglas E. Murray