

## Going on the Journey, but Missing the Adventure

[Matthew 18:1-5](#)

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Sunday, September 24, 2006

Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

Good morning. It's a great joy to be back among friends at National Presbyterian Church.

Writing more than one hundred and fifty years ago, a social theorist named John Stuart Mill was commenting on the way the most radical and startling teachings of Jesus could, over time, come to "coexist passively in the minds of Christians, producing hardly any effect beyond that caused by mere listening to words so amiable and bland." Which brings us to this morning's text: the sweet little Jesus vignette about coming to the kingdom of God like a child.

If ever there was a teaching of Jesus that qualified for the designation "amiable and bland" and threatened to have no discernible effect upon us at all, perhaps this is it. On the other hand, I have found for myself something in this passage that I think actually has the power to utterly change my life. And I do want my life changed.

Let's look at the text for a minute and see what Jesus is saying.

In particular, what does Jesus mean when he says, "We will never enter the kingdom of God unless we receive it like a child," and how would it change our lives if we lived like this were actually true?

Well, first let's establish what this doesn't mean. Receiving the kingdom of God in Jesus' teaching does not simply mean receiving the salvation of life hereafter. It certainly does include that, but it also means receiving and living in the kingdom and rule of God now.

The complete rule of God's kingdom is, indeed, something yet to come. But Jesus continually beckons his followers to enter daily into the rule and reign of Christ. And as earnest Christians, you and I rightly yearn to walk in the way of Jesus, to experience the intimate presence of the Almighty God, to live daily lives that are actually completely different because we know Jesus. In a word, I think we want to live alive to God.

But how do we get to live like that? The answer, says Jesus, is by coming to him like a little child.

And how does a child come to Jesus? Well, to be straight and plain about it, a child comes in weakness, vulnerability, and neediness.

You come to experience my rule, my presence, my power, my life, Jesus says, when you come in the weakness and vulnerability of a child.

Here, of course, is where the whole thing becomes difficult for me and perhaps for some of you.

I simply don't like to be weak, vulnerable, and needy.

I'm sure this is a very encouraging memory verse for people who are weak, vulnerable, and needy, and it's jolly good that Jesus is on their side.

But I like to believe that I and my friends here at National Presbyterian Church are cut out for a more muscular approach to Christian faith.

On the other hand, Paul does clearly teach some things in 2 Corinthians that say, God's power is actually made perfect in my weakness. That the power of Christ actually dwells in me in my manifest weakness. That my weakness is actually meant to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from me, and that when I am weak, that is when I am actually strong.

I know and believe all these things. But of my belief in these familiar passages, Mr. Mill wrote 150 years ago, "He's not insincere when he says that he believes in these things. He does believe them. As one believes what he has always heard lauded and never discussed."

He has a "habitual respect for the sound" of such things, "but when it comes to conduct, he looks around for Mr. A and for Mr. B to direct him in how far he should go in obeying Christ."

And how far do I find I should go? To be brutally honest, as far as I am safe, as far as I'm in control, as far as the risks feel manageable, as far as my sphere of certain competence will take me.

And consequently in quiet, secret moments, I sense it doesn't take me very far at all.

One of the saddest regrets of life, I think, is a sense of having gone on the trip but missed the adventure. One summer when I was a young boy of about ten, I was camping and hiking with my brothers and my dad on Mt. Rainier, a massive volcanic dome of rock and glaciers more than 14,000 feet, cutting into the clouds outside Seattle.

The mountain creates its own weather, still steals the lives of scores of climbers, and served as the training mountain for the first American team to scale Mount Everest. Below the tree line is one of the nation's oldest and most dramatic rainforests with absurdly giant Douglas fir trees. Visitors to the park can drive up to a breathtaking Alpine meadow called Paradise, which averages more than 50 feet of snow during the winter, and arguably the world's most spectacular display of Alpine wildflowers during the summer.

Now one of the ways I think my father expressed his love for us was to take us to such places and to simply walk, mile after mile, up into the beauty and grandeur of these sacred treasures. My older brothers would race up the trail to the next dramatic vista leaving me struggling. But my dad would always stay behind me, making me feel like I was setting the pace, enjoying, I think, the sweetness of being with his little boy in the massive quiet of the mountain.

We always went further and higher than I really wanted to go, but along the way Dad was there to steady me over the streams, to act like he needed a rest, to help me over the boulders, to assure me that I was almost there.

But on this particular summer day, I just didn't want to go on. We'd been walking with the other hordes of tourists along the gentle asphalt trails outside the Paradise visitors' center, admiring and naming the fabulous wildflowers. At the top of the meadow trails, however, the paved trails end, and a large warning sign indicates the beginning of the trail that's used by the climbers who actually go to the summit. With a text that was undoubtedly drafted by lawyers, the sign warned of every conceivable horror that awaited those who ventured beyond. I wasn't feeling particularly tired, but my little stomach ached as I looked up the massive rock formations and the snowfields that just went up and up and up.

My dad suggested we try to go to Camp Muir, the base camp used by climbers who are heading for the summit, and my brothers eagerly accepted. Dad assured me that I could make it, that he would help me, and that the view and the triumph would be more than worth the effort, and that it would just be simply marvelous to do together.

I, however, was thinking that we ought to listen to the lawyers who took the time to make that nice sign. All manner of things could go wrong. What if Dad is wrong and I can't make it? It will be so humiliating to be the one who needs help again. What if Dad doesn't even know the way up there? What if it becomes too aggravating for him and he actually doesn't help me and just leaves me stuck?

With these mounting anxieties beating in my little chest, I responded the only way a ten-year-old can to such a proposition and simply said, "No, that looks boring."

Instead, I suggested I'd like to hang out at the visitors' center.

Indeed, the Paradise meadow had a huge and magnificent visitors' center with exhibits and video displays of the wildlife, the history of the mountain, the drama of those extraordinary people who tried to climb it, and even a wildflower quiz for kids that I thought I could win.

My dad tried a few more times to woo me to go up the mountain with him and explained that it would be a long day at the visitors' center with them gone climbing the mountain. But eventually he relented.

I scurried back down to the visitors' center and quickly felt pretty pleased with myself. The visitors' center was warm and comfortable with lots of interesting things to read and to watch. I devoured the information and explored every corner of it. And, judging by the crowd, it was clearly the place to be.

As the afternoon stretched on, however, the massive visitors' center started to seem awfully small. The warm air started to feel stuffy, and the stuffed wild animals started to seem just dead. The inspiring loop videos about the extraordinary people who climbed the mountain just weren't as interesting on the sixth and seventh time, and they just made me wish that I was actually one of those special people climbing the mountain instead of someone who was just reading about it. I felt bored, sleepy, and small. And I missed my dad, and I was totally stuck. Totally safe, but totally stuck.

After the longest afternoon in my ten-year-old life, my dad and my brothers returned flushed with their triumph. Their faces were red from the cold, and their eyes clear with delight. They were wet from the snow, famished, dehydrated, and nursing scrapes from the rocks and ice, but on the long drive home, they had something else.

They had stories, and they had an unforgettable day with their dad on a great mountain. I, of course, revealed nothing, insisting that it was my favorite day of the whole vacation. Truth be told, I went on the trip, and I missed the adventure. And 32 years later, I still remember the day at the visitors' center.

Moreover, it is my sense that many of my fellow believers are starting to suspect that they are stuck at the visitors' center, that they are traveling with Jesus but missing the adventure.

In different times and in different ways our Heavenly Father offers us a simple proposition: Follow me beyond what you can control, beyond where your own strength and competencies can take you, and beyond what is affirmed or risked by the crowd, and you will experience me and my power and my wisdom and my love.

Jesus beckons me to follow him to that place of weakness where I risk the vulnerability of a child so that I might know that my Father is strong and how much he loves me.

But, truth be told, I'd rather be an adult. I'd rather be in a place where I could still pull things together if God doesn't show up, where I risk no ultimate humiliation, where I don't have to take the shallow breaths of desperation.

As a result, my experience of my Heavenly Father is simply impoverished. I just don't get to be with him on the adventure up the mountain if I want to be safe at the visitors' center. He says his power is made perfect in my weakness, not my strength.

Does this mean I have to abandon the things I do well? Do I have to let go of my sources of strength – my gifts, my passions, my training, my expertise? I don't think so.

Those are all good things from God. I simply think he wants us to take them all on a more demanding climb where we will actually need his help and where he will actually delight to grant it.

My difficulty is this: I either would prefer not to have to desperately need help, or I would desperately like his help with things that aren't necessarily of his kingdom. They're of my kingdom. In either case, my Father just can't pour himself out in power because I'm not asking for it in the first case or it wouldn't be good for me in the second. So, I'm stuck at the visitors' center.

This is why I've been so incredibly grateful to God for my experience with International Justice Mission (IJM) because it gives me a continual experience of my weakness in which God is delighted to show his power.

As many of you know, I work with International Justice Mission. We're a collection of Christian lawyers and criminal investigators, advocates and social workers, and we rescue victims of violence and sexual exploitation, slavery and oppression around the world. I started out as employee number one about eight and a half years ago, and now we have almost 200 full-time staff around the world in thirteen different offices.

So, this journey for me has been just incredible. But by far the most joyful, exhilarating and life-altering part has been the authentic experience of God's power and presence. I've experienced God, but I've always experienced it in my weakness. God has called us at IJM into a battle with actual violence and aggressive evil, a battle that every day my colleagues and I know that we cannot win by ourselves.

We can't win without the specific intervention of God, and so we're forced by our own weakness to beg for it, and at times to actually work without a net except for the sustaining hand of God. And we have found him to be real, and his hand to be true and to be strong in a way that we never would have experienced if we'd been strapped into the short lines of our own high-tech safety harnesses.

What does that desperation look like? Well, for me it means confronting our undercover videotape of hundreds of young girls in Cambodia who are being put openly on sale to sex tourists and foreign pedophiles. It means going into one of those brothels and actually being presented with about a dozen kids between the ages of five and ten years of age who are being sold.

It means being told by every one who should know that there's really nothing you can do about this.

It means facing death threats for my investigative colleagues, high-level police corruption working against us, desperately inadequate after-care capacities for victims, and a hopelessly corrupt court system.

It means going to the Father with an honest argument that says, "God, we cannot solve this" and hearing him say, "Do what you know best and watch me for the rest." And in the end it means taking that risky bargain and seeing God actually do more than I could have ever hoped or imagined, setting girls free, providing high-quality aftercare, bringing the perpetrators to justice, shutting down the whole nasty operation, training the Cambodian authorities to be able to do this work themselves, and having the US government pay for much of it.

In taking on the forces of aggressive evil, we have found a place where we desperately need our Father's help and where he delights to grant it.

It's not a resignation of my gifts or passions or training, but a deployment of those endowments to a place beyond safety or my ability to control the outcome or my power to actually succeed, a place where God is desperately needed and in a work he delights to engage because it's his work.

My colleague Michael found himself in such a place this year as he and his IJM colleagues were confronted with a man who was too strong for them. He is a powerful and ruthless slave owner who operates a brick kiln in South Asia. When some of his slaves ran away, including this one slave named Shiveraj, the slave owner sent out thugs to kidnap Shiveraj's relatives from a distant village.

The slave owner held them as hostages and savagely beat them as a way to try and force Shiveraj and the other slaves to come back. IJM received this case referral—what do you do when you receive a case referral?—and attempted, therefore, a rescue with local police. But mistakes were made, mistakes that risked the tip-off of the slave owner and then risked possible lethal retaliation against the hostages. We were in trouble. And riding out to attempt the rescue with the team, Michael asked one of his highly experienced local colleagues what he thought the chances were of success. His colleague pegged the odds, he said, at about three per cent and then added, "But with God, three per cent can become a majority."

Indeed the God of justice was pleased to move, and by a series of utter miracles allowed the IJM team to rescue all of the hostages and secure the release of all the slaves.

Michael said the expressions of gratitude from the hostages created perhaps the most overwhelming experience of his life. My colleague Michael has not resigned his gifts and expertise as a Harvard-trained lawyer who once served at the Department of Justice and then as associate counsel to the President.

Rather, he intentionally takes those gifts onto battlefields where he knows he cannot win on his own and where he believes God is

pleased to stand with him. And he gets to experience God. Not without struggle, not without scrapes, not without doubts. But at the end of the day, his cheeks are red and his eyes are clear and he has stories. He has an unforgettable day with his Father upon the mountain.

On December 5, we're having a special event here in Washington DC, where we bring our folks together to share these stories and to encourage friends to come and be part of what we do, and I would love to invite you to come. There will be folks with invitations in Stone Hall, and I encourage you to take a stroll downstairs on your way out and pick up an invitation.

But of course it's not just my IJM colleagues who have these kinds of days, nor just people who work in Christian ministries. I have a screenwriter and movie producer friend who has taken his craft into a battle for truth and beauty and authenticity that he cannot win on his own. He's cried out to God in weakness and as a result has a blockbuster movie to show for it, but also boxes and boxes of heartbreaks. But he has stories, and he has great days with his Father upon the mountains. Likewise I've seen a friend of mine imprudently give away millions of dollars to the work of God's kingdom in good days and seen his business collapse in bad days.

But coming or going, he's just never found in the visitors' center. He's on the high mountain, as a child, but with his Father. Another godly friend is taking a season to care for her elderly father; while another has set aside a season to make his wife's academic pursuit the priority of the family. And in each case they're over their heads and they won't make it without God. And that's exactly where they want to be because they actually live their lives as if they believed that God's power will be made perfect in their weakness.

How do we find that abundant, heroic life for which we were made? How do we enter into God's kingdom now and experience the authentic power and presence of him? We do it in weakness. And we're comfortable with (and even boasting in) our weakness, because we actually believe that our Heavenly Father is both all loving and all powerful and that all is well as long as we are with him who never leaves us nor forsakes us.

Accordingly, I can take my gifts and passions and training and strengths beyond the places of safety and control and into a sphere of kingdom endeavor where I actually need God.

Perhaps the first indicator that I'm approaching such a place will be seen in my prayer life. You know, Mother Teresa said that she couldn't imagine doing her work for more than thirty minutes without prayer. Do you and I have work that we can't imagine doing for thirty minutes without prayer?

If not, perhaps we need a new life's work or an old life's work done in a new way.

I won't need to be in prayer every thirty minutes if my work doesn't really need God's power to get it done, or if it's a work that God doesn't really need to get done because it has nothing to do with his kingdom.

At IJM we begin every working day with thirty minutes of silence and prayerful spiritual preparation for the day and then we all gather again at 11 o'clock to pray. We don't do this as a matter of discipline.

We do this as a matter of desperation. We don't actually think we can do the mission and love each other as we ought without accessing the spiritual resources that come through prayer.

When you are following your Father on the great mountain, you want and need to talk to him. It's part of the journey; it's natural. But at the visitors' center, there are enough things to occupy us that such conversations with the Father really aren't necessary. Just the occasional check-in with the Father is pretty much adequate.

But I don't think we really want to spend our days at the visitors' center. But to get out, I have to admit that it's fear and not cleverness that's keeping me there.

I need to believe that the Father really does know where the joy is, and that it's safe to follow him in my own weakness up the mountain. Perhaps then we can know the joy of going on the trip without missing the adventure.

Amen.