

June 26, 2010 Florida Hospital Seventh-day Adventist Church  
Matthew 18:3 Except You Become Like a Child by Andy McDonald

All week this place has been full of children. Most weekends we are used to having lots of children in the building, but this week every day there have been children everywhere, and it has been wonderful.

Each morning the leaders, the adults and young people who would oversee and care for the children would arrive and then soon the place would fill with children. Their voices and smiles, their excitement permeated this building.

And I think this week I saw our mission for children happening. Our goal, our mission, our vision for children is that this will be place they want to be, a place they are excited about being, and that as a result of being here in the programs and ministries, interacting with others who love Jesus that children will fall in love with Jesus. This week children wanted to be here and hopefully they were infected with a love for Jesus.

One day Jesus' disciples came to him with a very adult question. Matthew 18:1 says, At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked: "Which of us is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"

It was one of those questions about arrival not the adventure.

It was a narrow question as if only one feeling was really valuable  
(the feeling when you have the top place!)

It was a head question not a full bodied experiential question.

It was vulnerability avoiding question.

"For an answer Jesus called over a little child and had him stand among them. And then Jesus said: "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." Matthew 18:2-4

Jesus' wisdom is amazing. He answers a very adult question with a simple call to childlikeness, not to childishness and not to immaturity, but to a childlikeness that has within it the very genius of God.

Except you become like little children.

What did he mean.

Pure?

Needy?

Dependent?

Curious?

Undoubtedly it is more comprehensive than we might imagine,

Children can teach us all sorts of things.

But today from among all the ways children can instruct our spiritual lives I want us to consider just four ways that being childlike can help us grow spiritually.

The disciples imagined they were asking a very spiritual question. In their minds the most spiritual person would be the greatest in the kingdom and Jesus, in his answer to their question wanted to readjust their thinking as to what it means to grow and be spiritual.

Tobin Hart, author of "The Secret Spiritual World of Children" shares an experience that illustrates the first of our four ways—Children See the Adventure

It was one of those rare early morning storm. Sheets of heavy rain falling and strong wind as Tobin left his house for work. He was barely out the drive way when he noticed that a large tree had fallen across the driveway of his retired neighbors just across the street. Being a good neighbor he stopped and braved the weather to knock on their door to see if they needed help getting it out of the driveway. As soon as the door opened it was easy to feel the anxiety and fear and even the evidence of frightened tears.

As he inquired into what had happened the story unfolded that just as this couple's grown son was driving into the driveway to drop off their three-year-old grandson for the day, a sixty-foot-tall dead pine tree fell just a few feet in front of them—a scary event for sure.

The adults were in a tizzy. They were fearful and angry because the owner of the lot next door had not taken down this dead tree. They were afraid that now the son wouldn't think this is a safe place for the grandson to visit next time.

In the middle of all this a little face was peering up at Tobin. He startled him when he first saw the boy because he was such a contrast to the adults. It looked like he was almost glowing, ecstatic. When the adults turned their attention back to each other, Tobin bent down and quietly asked the boy if he thought this was exciting. He quickly nodded with wide eyes—his whole body was trying to control the excitement. But in the next instant, he cautiously looked around to see if it was OK to be excited or whether he was supposed to be scared.

Now listen, in our lives there's plenty to be scared of, but this little three-year-old boy's response reminds us of the exhilaration of life and calls to us to see the adventure—to engage in the WOW instead of the OH NO!

For us staid, unadventurous, adult observers of life children call us to engage. When we view something, even a crashing tree, through a child's eyes, life can become fresh and awesome. I mean how often do you get to see a 60 ft tall pine fall!! In just a couple of seconds of being on a child's level putting ourselves in their shoes we can join the adventure and feel ourselves in the incredible mysterious current of life.

The disciples were projecting, forecasting, concerned with what isn't yet and Jesus in his call to become like little children is saying to them and to us be in the now.

Sure we can be wise, plan for tomorrow, blah, blah, blah, there's some merit to all of that. But today's text Jesus calls us to become like a

little child, to throw ourselves into the adventure of life, to immerse ourselves in the moment, the eternal now, the present holy ground.

Some fear that to see the adventure will mean being caught up in the adventure of sin—there is that pleasure in sin for a season. But Jesus is calling us to His adventure

It was Albert Einstein, so good at retaining his childlike wonder, who said, “Anyone who is really serious knows that life is only a big adventure.” When we become like a little child we are reminded that the spiritual life isn’t a list to check off but a story to be lived>

So maybe the first way Jesus suggests we can become like little children is to “See the Adventure.

The second way is to Live Everything.

Children, sometimes much to the horror of their parents or adult caregivers, Children just let it all hang out.

As adults we try and control our feelings. We try not to cry in public. We see a person on the street singing or shouting out in delight and we assume some mental disorder!! We sort of think that there’s this narrow band width of “proper” feelings, or at least the “proper” expression of feelings so we stuff and control and suppress and the feelings wither in this constricted place.

But not children. The promised and long-awaited ice cream falls off the cone and into the street, and screech of grief follows. Or a magician performs a trick and a child gasps in joyful wonder.

I don’t think Jesus is suggesting that we adults should cry when our ice cream falls or that we should become emotional slaves. But instead what I think Jesus is getting at is that if we become like a little child we can go back to not prejudging our feelings. Feelings are just feelings.

When we are dismissive and try and tell ourselves or our child “Don’t feel bad,” “Don’t be sad,” “You shouldn’t be mad,” does that really help.

Or would it be better to “Live Everything”? To own, acknowledge, and have the feeling of pleasure or pain, pass through it and move on preventing us from getting hung up in some unacknowledged feeling.

One author puts it this way: “By having the experience without restricting it, our lives are opened to spontaneity rather than contracted by a controlling belief or judgment. . . . We are controlled neither by the feeling nor by trying to keep certain feeling at bay.

The lesson from children that Jesus may be pointing us to is that as adults let’s allow ourselves to feel what we feel and just be honest with ourselves to move through it. The point of life is not to restrict it, but to live it, to feel it—just like a child.

Jesus was sad when Lazarus his friend died. He didn’t try and pretend he wasn’t. I imagine him joyful, smiling, even laughing as those four friends tore up the ceiling above the crowded room where he was teaching so they could lower their crippled friend down in front of Jesus and have him healed.

Remember Jesus said, “My purpose is to give life in all its fullness”  
And that includes our feelings

To become like a little child then will mean that we

- See the adventure, that we
- Live everything

Third is that we Be in Our Bodies.

We adults move to mental models. As we move away from childhood we gravitate toward our abstract thinking skills, and there is an adult tendency to move away from body-based knowing.

Adults tend to theorize about the smell of rose. How does that work. What produces the smell. Can that be described and quantified and measured by using abstract thinking skill. And while this mental work can be very useful, children can teach us to just go smell and enjoy the body-based experiential knowing of just sticking that body part known as your nose down into the soft fragrant center of those rose petals and sniff.

Our adult disconnection from touch, taste, smell, texture, feeling can dry us up. All of life becomes a mental exercise. Like the disciples we can mentally wrestle with all kinds of stuff, even making mental models of pecking orders of who's on top in the kingdom when in reality the kingdom of God isn't about that at all.

Children think with their whole body not just their brain. They taste the ice-cream cone all the way to their toes. The experience of living isn't just some mental flash but a full bodied experience.

When a child visits the beach it is an immersive experience. There is light and they may play with floaters in their eyes, and there's the texture of the sand. Their bodies drag their minds along as they experience cooler sand beneath the surface of the beach and the warm sand on top. They relish the feel of wet sand dribbling through their fingers as they drip a sand castle. They don't just hear the waves they feel their rhythm. They absorb the heat and light of the sun.

Children teach us to be in our bodies as they remind us of the importance of touch, a hug, a wrestling match on the living room floor., a stroke of the hair. I was watching one little boy this week being held by one of the helpers and he was adjusting her hair.

At the end of a university general psychology lecture the professor gave a quiz. For the last question the students were asked to make something out of Play-Doh that represented an aspect of themselves. The professor was amazed at how into they got in this simple task that involved their body—the sensuality of texture, smell and movement

Jesus modeled this Being in the Body—touching lepers and blessing children, making mud he applied to a blind man’s eyes, and offering a hand to the crippled guy as he said “take up your bed and walk”. We see Jesus Being in His Body as he washes feet, breaks bread and hangs on a cross, and comes forth from the tomb in a resurrection body!

Maybe he knows that except we become as little children as we learn to be in our Bodies we can’t fully experience the unity and integration of the Spirit.

For us to become like a little child means for us to

- See the adventure
- Live everything
- Be in our bodies
- And finally it means Being Vulnerable

When the disciples ask about which one would be greatest in the kingdom of God they were trying to avoid vulnerability.

That’s what we adults do. We seek to not be vulnerable we don’t like that feeling. So we try and avoid vulnerability by gaining security through things like money (if I have enough money then I won’t be vulnerable—I can be sure to have what I need and even want) Others avoid it by seeking security in professional status. If I’m thought well of, considered a leader in my profession I won’t feel vulnerable. People create safe neighborhoods and gated communities in an attempt to not feel vulnerable.

But a child is in their every day life vulnerable.

Think about a newborn totally vulnerable

Remember you first day going off to school a child is vulnerable.

But as we have more experiences we can draw circles of safety around ourselves. Not try new stuff. Not be honest with people about our feelings. Not tell the whole truth. Not deeply trust people. Not admitting we have more questions than answers.

Without vulnerability our world shrinks to the familiar, safe, controllable tiniest circle and even then we are way more vulnerable than most will admit.

You see a child grows and learns primarily in a space of vulnerability. It is the place of vulnerability where there is possibility.

Jesus knows there is a huge temptation to lock down our lives and avoid being vulnerable-- seeking safety in what we can control.

Children are naturally thrown into all sorts of situations for which they are not prepared. All the first times of life are places we grow in those moments of vulnerability.

That first terrifying day on the ball field.

Those wobbly first attempts at riding a bicycle

Those first class periods in a new home room

Any new sport, art activity, acting in play, meeting new people, asking someone on a date.

I think Jesus perfectly understood the question he was asked, "Who will be the greatest?"

It was a security seeking question. Why risk it? Who wants to bother to

- See the adventure
- Live everything
- Be in your body
- Be Vulnerable

Just let me be greatest so I don't have to fool with all that real life stuff.

But Jesus redefines greatness.

He takes a little child, stands that child in the middle of the group of disciples and says. "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like a little child, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. But whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."

Maybe Jesus is opening a new window of understanding. We've imagined that the bad people are out and the good are in with God. But could the new paradigm be that the humble are in and the proud are out?

Let the children lead. We live with the illusion that we are born ignorant, with little to offer, and then we learn and mature into adults and then we are done. NOT TRUE! Jesus says real growth in kingdom qualities comes when we allow children to lead us, to help us

- See the adventure to really embrace life
- Live everything to own all of life the highs the lows the sadness and the joy
- To remind us to Be in our bodies that we are not just thought not just minds but we have the pleaser of full body experience
- And finally to let them lead us to the edge of growth as we remember the value of Being Vulnerable

And when we become like a little child the kingdom isn't something of someday it becomes the kingdom of God within you right now.

Go Become Like Little Children Not childish but child like—

- See the adventure
- Live everything
- Be in your body
- Be Vulnerable