

Questions of Faith: Children's Questions About God

Matthew 18: 1-7

Rev. Katherine Kerr

First Presbyterian Church – Charlotte, NC

A few weeks ago, at the 9:00 service, I was sitting in that chair and looked out to see a young family in our church sitting in front of me, in the fourth or fifth pew. This family has two young sons, and for several months now, they have been bringing their eldest, who is four, to worship for the first part of the service, and then taking him to the nursery when the older children go to First Church.

They want him to experience worship at a level he is able to handle, and it's working- he comes into the sanctuary enthusiastically- that particular Sunday, Trey dragged his parents all the way down the aisle as Pen was making announcements because he wanted to sit close to the front. I noticed as they walked in that he had a pipe cleaner in his hand, and that it had been shaped in the form of a lollipop- one end had been curved around and attached to the base. When he first came in, he was using the pipe cleaner like a magnifying glass, looking at the people around him through the looped end. He looked completely lost in his imaginary world. But as the service got underway, that changed.

Erika was in the pulpit, beginning the call to confession, and I looked up to see that Trey had taken the looped end of the pipe cleaner and hooked it over his ear, letting the long end come down past his cheek and toward his mouth. He was miming talking into the microphone. I couldn't help but smile.

Children have a way of processing the world that ought to make us grown folks take notice. Just when we think that they are not paying attention, that they can't possibly be getting anything from what is going on around them, they say or do something that reminds us that they are little sponges, taking in what the world has to offer, thinking about it, processing it, puzzling over it, learning from it.

In the midst of his imaginary twirl with that pipe cleaner, Trey connected with what was going on in this space, and made himself a part of worship by imitating what he saw going on in front of him.

Now, I know his parents, and I know that they were initially embarrassed by Trey's behavior. Like most parents, they want their child to sit quietly in worship, not drawing attention to himself, listening to the words being spoken, singing the hymns with the congregation, being a perfect little angel. And like most parents, they've realized that

there's no such thing as perfection- for a four year old or a forty year old- and thankfully they have discovered that when things don't go exactly how they'd hoped they would go, there is grace in this space, and in this community.

We are Presbyterian, and we thrive on order, but as with most things in life, we have to find a balance between our need (or desire) for things to be exactly how we want them to be, and the reality that they rarely are.

Children provide us with ample opportunities to learn, and relearn, this lesson. They are messy and noisy, unpredictable and impulsive, but we are better for having them in our midst, and smart as we adults think we are, we have a lot to learn from our younger brothers and sisters.

So it is fitting, I think, that we begin our summer sermon series with questions that came from the children of this church. When we asked church members to submit questions for this series, we meant for all church members to feel welcome to participate. And we were thrilled that some of our youngest members chose to do so.

They wondered things like, "how big is God?" and "what is faith?" They wanted to know who created God- did he do it himself, or does he have a mommy. They wondered why God created people, and why he chooses to let people decide whether to follow him or not, instead of just making us love him.

Great questions. And I can tell that these are questions some of you who've taken a few more trips around the sun have wondered about from time to time as well. But for some reason, most of us seem to get to a point in life where we stop asking those questions.

We accumulate education and experience, becoming masters of our little domains, and believe that we ought to be able to answer any question that comes our way. We can talk about what the stock market is doing and why certain plants grow only in certain places in our yards. We can tell someone exactly how to bake the perfect soufflé and translate a conversation from Spanish to English. We can add, subtract, multiply and divide. We know the answers, or how to google the answers, to most things we will ever be asked. Until the questions turn to matters of faith. And then, for some reason, we become mute.

I can't tell you how many times I've had parents come to me and say- only half-jokingly- that they'd like to have me on speed-dial for the times when their children ask them questions about God and faith. They are intimidated, and they want help. I often remind them that I don't have more- or better- answers for them, but they don't seem to believe me.

I can understand why adults get a little twitchy when they are asked big questions of faith by the children in their lives. Faith is important, and as adults we have a responsibility to

those younger than us- it is what we promise in every baptism. We want to do right by the curious young people around us. We don't want to lead them astray or give them wrong information. But in allowing those anxieties to shape how we respond to children's questions, we are missing out on a great opportunity.

Because faith isn't about having the answers. It's about having the questions. Let me say that again. Faith isn't about having the answers. It's about having the questions. And so instead of fearing having the wrong answer, or no answer at all, we should instead embrace the question.

I think this is what Jesus was getting at in this morning's passage from Matthew's gospel. The disciples asked him, as the disciples were wont to do, who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Though they were speaking of heavenly things, their focus was firmly on things of this earth, interested as they were in status and greatness. Instead of answering their question, Jesus points to a child and tells them that they won't even enter the kingdom of heaven, much less be in the running to be the greatest, unless they "change and become like children."

Scholars have debated the meaning of this phrase for years. Some have argued it calls for innocence, but we all know that even very young children can be capable of significant mischief. Others suggest that becoming like a child means being teachable, or recognizing one's utter dependence upon a parent. There is no doubt a lot to be said for these interpretations.

But when I read this, I can't help but think that part of becoming like a child in order to approach God's kingdom has more to do with wonder, and imagination, and curiosity than anything else. In the early years of our lives, so much attention is given to these things. As children, imagination is everything. Every occasion provides opportunities for stories to be made up and costumes created. We dream big dreams about heroes and fairies, talking animals and magical creatures. We create new worlds in our minds and wonder what it would be like if trees were made of chocolate or everyone walked on their hands or the sky were green and the grass were blue. Being young is all about embracing wonder.

And what is more wonderful than the kingdom of God? What in our imaginations could ever match the depth or the breadth of God's very existence? No fairy tale, no superhero, no wizard or mythical creature could ever compare to the power, majesty, glory and might of God. Within the openness and curiosity of a child's mind exists limitless capacity to imagine God's grandeur and glory and love. And they want to know about it, so, like Hope in our story earlier, they ask questions. Sometimes a lot of them.

But at some point, every child grows up. As we make the transformation from living lives of wonder to living lives of practicality, we begin to value hard facts and answerable

questions. Though we know on some level that faith can never fully be nailed down, still we want things to make sense. We want to know that things work out for a reason and we want to believe that God wills what we will and thinks how we think. We need order, and balance, and stability, and unanswered- or unanswerable- questions threaten that.

So when a child asks us, "how big is God?" or "why does God let people die?" or "I prayed that my team would win that game and we lost, so why didn't God listen to me?" we can become paralyzed. We don't know the answers to those questions, and we don't like that feeling. We panic. We don't say anything because we don't want to be wrong, or we stumble over some words and hope we can distract them long enough to change the subject. And we likely miss the chance for learning experience- for adult and child alike.

Our need for answers- the right answers- becomes a stumbling block that can keep us from experiencing God's grace and love fully in our lives. When we approach faith with anything other than the wonder of a child, we put up barriers that have no business being there. And we miss something important. You see, questions about God are not like questions about anything else. Asking "how big is God?" is not the same as asking "how big is a humpback whale?" Wondering why God allowed something bad to happen is not the same as wondering why a tornado formed. The former speaks to mystery, the latter to fact.

There are a lot of things in this world that we can measure and prove and explain. Those are facts. But there is much in this world that cannot be reduced to formulas or proofs or equations. Those things we take on faith. When someone asks you a factual question, you give them a factual answer, and that is that. When someone asks you a question about a matter of faith, it opens the door to a conversation. And in that conversation, the possibilities for growth, challenge and change are limitless.

When I started seminary, I had this crazy idea that I was going to learn enough to be able to answer any question about faith or God that came my way. I studied endlessly and suffered a lot of needless agony over this misperception. When I finally realized that not only did I not need to know all the answers, but that it would actually be impossible for me to know all the answers, I breathed a sigh of relief. I discovered that sometimes, the best answer to a question is, "I don't know. What do you think?"

This summer, we are going to take on some pretty big questions about our God, our faith, and our lives. They are not questions that have simple answers. They are not questions that have answers we will all agree upon. But they are questions worth asking all the same. Sometimes it's not the destination that matters, it's what happens on the journey that is most important.

Some of us on this journey ask complex questions, and some ask simple ones. Some of us speak into microphones and some of us pretend to. Some of us feel secure in our faith and

some of us feel shaky. Some of us are okay with the mystery and some of us are disturbed by it. Some of us want the answers, and some of us really don't.

But all of us are in it together.

How big is God? I don't know. What do you think?