

Quaker Life

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And a Little Child Shall Lead Them

Isaiah 11:6

by *Susan Peabody*

Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

— Matthew 18:3 RSV

These are words of wisdom, some of the most important ever offered to humankind. They are direct and to the point—do this and this will happen—cause and effect. And certainly, if we truly want to go to heaven, we need precise directions. Being told to be “good” Christians is such vague advice. This verse offers us much more specific information. We must “turn and become like children.”

I assume that to “turn” means to change in a very unique way. Not by adopting new and never experienced attitudes, but by reclaiming a former way of feeling, thinking and behaving. One can visualize, with the aid of the verb “turn,” that we are being told to do an about-face and go back to where we started. This surprising advice reminds me of the parable of the prodigal son, in which to move on to a better and more fulfilling life, the son had to turn back to something he had abandoned.

What specifically are the characteristics or personality traits of children which make emulating them the key factor to our entry into “the kingdom of

heaven”? Certainly not every personality trait is relevant. Will having a temper tantrum get me into heaven? I think not. However, using the imagery of the parent/child relationship and looking more closely at some of the qualities intrinsic to children, we can clarify the point Jesus is making.

One characteristic of children is the complete confidence they have in their parents. Children recognize and totally accept their dependence on their mother and father to provide food, clothes, shelter, and emotional support. As a result, children do not have to be encouraged to give credit where credit is due, or to believe and trust in their parents. It is not a soulsearching experience, it is just reality. As adults we must emulate this natural, spontaneous, unquestioning faith. We must not doubt God’s role as the provider of our “daily bread,” and we must not hesitate to believe and trust “Our Father who art in heaven.” The less our faith is compromised by doubt, the closer we are to being like innocent children, and the closer we are to the kingdom of heaven. In speaking of Corrie ten Boom, Jean Buckingham observed, “As a little girl believes her Daddy can do anything, so Corrie ten Boom trusts in God—even more. She is living proof of what happens when a woman—when any person—is filled with the Holy Spirit.”

Because children are dependent on their parents, they are (for the most part) obedient. They may seem somewhat rebellious and independent, but when push comes to shove they do as they are told. As adults, we too must be obedient to God. We may have our own ideas about how to live our lives, but in the last analysis we must say to God, “Thy will be done.”

Furthermore, because they trust in the omnipotence of their parents, children do not have as many fears as adults. For the normal child, life is carefree as long as parents are near at hand. As adults we too

must take this brave attitude. Despite our awareness of the reality of evil in this world, if we are to have peace of mind (heaven here on earth), we must turn our fears over to God and never forget that God is with us always. Our state of mind should reflect our belief and trust in God's love and power to carry us through.

In observing children, I have noticed that their perceptions of the world are based more on their feelings than their thoughts. They don't analyze or think about their experiences, they just "feel" them. Adults can really take a cue from this. Feeling, I am convinced, is the most pleasurable way to experience God in our lives. The intellect can easily dismiss God. In this age of scientific rational thought, thinking can be an unemotional activity which can leave us cold. Feelings, on the other hand, promote a bond of understanding between ourselves, other human beings and God. Feelings are universal and thoughts are unique to the particular ego. We all can experience God as love.

Children are also more intuitive than adults because they are less cluttered by ego-oriented, analytical thoughts. "Out of the mouths of babes shall come gems of wisdom." The child's gift of intuition is based on a lack of self-consciousness and doubt (both products of the thought process). Children are also more honest and don't compromise their intuitive feelings. They just spontaneously share their perceptions. To me this is illustrated beautifully in the fairy tale about the child who can see that the emperor has no clothes even though the adults around him are acting as if he is fully dressed. In the adult Christian, this can be seen as the evangelical experience, the spirit of God bursting from the human heart and lips, not the mind. We adults must seek to experience God more intuitively so that we can see to the heart of things. "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."

Another noteworthy characteristic of children is the natural (ego-less) bond they feel with their parents. In their infancy, they feel completely at one with the mother and are not conscious of themselves as separate human beings. The development of the ego, which results in the consciousness of self and later preoccupation (or obsession) with self, has not yet separated them. Later, the bond between parent and child is based more on love but they always retain the memory of feeling totally at one with their parent. This reminds me of Adam and Eve, before their

expulsion from the Garden, when they had no sense of separateness from God, when communion with God was a way of life, and when self-will had not yet spawned disobedience. In many ways, entering the kingdom of heaven is like finding our way back to the Garden and bringing to our lives that feeling of oneness with God. This can happen with the deflation of our ego, that part of us that can only see ourselves and therefore cannot see God. In turning away from being egocentered, we can return to the state of being like a child. We can perceive ourselves as being one with God.

Another aspect of the child's personality which adults should emulate is the wonderful lack of prejudice and preconceived notions. Unlike the average adult, the happy, well-adjusted child wants to touch and embrace everybody without discrimination. And they do just that until the parent begins to socialize them into the mores of their particular culture by separating them from the "unacceptable." In a multi-ethnic community such as Berkeley, I have been privileged to see what happens when you place young children of various ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds in the same room. They don't waste any time getting acquainted and have no inhibitions about enjoying each other's company. They are easily able to transcend the barriers that adults might erect in a similar situation. We grownups can learn from the "open-arms" attitude of children. We can set aside our prejudices and experience brotherhood in the full sense of the word. This can be a major milestone in our journey to the kingdom of heaven. Prejudice is the product of fear and intolerance. It has no place where love rules supreme. Ask any child.

Finally, we should note that children are more teachable and enthusiastic about learning new things. If you do not believe me, just sit down and play with youngsters and see how anxious they are to learn how to hold a paintbrush, stack blocks, and read a book. Many adults only want to learn new things grudgingly. More often than not, they are closed-minded and full of outdated information. To enter the kingdom of heaven, we must be willing to be molded by God—or to transcend our limited notion of who we are and how we relate to the universe. And we would do well to reach out joyously for what God wants us to learn. For it is through lessons learned along life's way that we are shown the way to heaven.

It is obvious that there is much to be learned from

the ways of children. In becoming more dependent, obedient, trusting, intuitive, tolerant, teachable and less analytical we are humbling ourselves before God. And this is how we “enter the Kingdom of Heaven”—led by a little child.



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peabodys@sbcglobal.net
brightertomorrow.net