

Forever Young

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*In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities,
in the expert's mind there are few.*
—Suzuki-roshi, Zen Master

Ancient Witness: Matthew 18:1-5

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" He called a child, whom he put among them, and said, "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.

Children are an important part of our congregation, and it's not because they are "the future of the church," as I have often heard through the years. Sometimes children are valued only for their potential. But they are an important part *now*, in the *present*. Each child is a unique and precious human being; each is growing spiritually; each of them is on a spiritual journey. And Jesus held up children as representing the pinnacle of humanity.

As a progressive church, we say that this is a place where we celebrate "the divine that moves within, among and around us." And so we gather together to *become more aware* of this Divine Presence, this Sacred Reality. We are intentional about growing in this awareness. This is our hope for everyone in our community, including our young people. And so one of our goals that we have for our children is that they, too, *experience growth and transformation*; that they, too, will become more and more *awakened* to the realm of God that is present in the midst of our lives; and that they, too, are on a spiritual journey as we all are. This journey never ends. We never "arrive." We never have all the answers. We are never finished being transformed. We are led deeper and deeper into the unknowable, into uncertainty, into Mystery.

In fact, as adults, there are important things about the spiritual journey that our children can teach us. We don't fully understand what those things are, but many spiritual traditions say this. The spiritual path is not one toward worldly success, greatness and adulation but toward humility and the shedding of ego. Jesus said it's not about being first; it's about being last. It's not about being great; it's about being the least. It's not about winning; it's about losing.

In this morning's ancient witness, we have one of several times when Jesus is saying that if someone wants to enter the kingdom of God, which is not a physical place but a state of consciousness, one must become as a child. If one desires to grow in one's awareness of the divine embedded in the universe, one becomes like a child. If one yearns to awaken to a hidden reality that is present in this world, one becomes like a child. One pursues not greatness but embraces insignificance. The deep spiritual journey is about unlearning more than learning.

And so we have not just a responsibility to teach our children, but in a profound sense, our willingness to be taught *by* them. May we not think of them simply as “incomplete adults,” but may we honor and respect them as the full human beings that they are, each reflecting the divine image.

My primary spiritual teacher, Jesus, also demonstrated this himself. He was willing to learn, to change, even to be corrected. In Jesus, we encounter a certain *flexibility*, and we see in him *a teachable spirit*.

Stephen Mitchell sees a connection between the character of Jesus and the teachings of other great spiritual leaders such as Lao-tzu, who wrote:

*Humans are born soft and supple;
dead, they are stiff and hard.
Plants are born tender and pliant;
dead, they are brittle and dry.*

*Thus whoever is stiff and inflexible
is a disciple of death.
Whoever is soft and yielding
is a disciple of life.*

“As soon as we blame other people or refuse to acknowledge our own fallibility, we step outside the kingdom of God,” writes Mitchell. “There is nothing wrong with making mistakes; the trouble comes with making mistakes about our mistakes.”

Lao-tzu continues:

*The more powerful you grow,
the greater the need for humility.
Humility means trusting the Tao (the way),
thus never needing to be defensive.*

*When the Master makes a mistake, she realizes it.
Having realized it, she admits it.
Having admitted it, she corrects it.
She considers those who point out her faults
as her most benevolent teachers.*

(The Gospel According to Jesus, Stephen Mitchell, p. 208)

There is something holy about this kind of malleability, about being so teachable, about this kind of flexibility, openness and non-defensiveness. Jesus himself talks about this when he says, “Unless you become like children, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven.” This childlike curiosity, openness and ability to learn is needed to realize our true humanity.

This teachable spirit is what makes the church holy, according to the father of the Reformation, John Calvin:

The church is holy, then in the sense

*that it is daily advancing and is not yet perfect.
It makes progress from day to day
but has not yet reached its goal of holiness.*

Theologian Paul Tillich referred to this teachableness as the “protestant principle.” That is the giving up all pretensions to having absolute knowledge.

The apostle Paul wrote that totally full vision does not happen on earth: “We now see through a glass dimly.” Our sight is distorted, fragmentary, clouded. Perhaps later, when we no longer walk upon the earth, shall we see “clearly” and “face to face,” he said.

Hearing the Word of God means that we decide, in the words of Old Testament scholar, Walter Bruggeman, not to “congeal.” It means that we are open and ready to be changed.

A novel by Gail Godwin (*The Finishing School*, 1988) contains a conversation about congealing. One character, Ursula, instructs the narrator, Justin:

“There are two kinds of people,” she once decreed to me emphatically. “One kind you can tell just by looking at them at what point they congealed into their final selves. It might be a very nice self, but you know you can expect no more surprises from it. Whereas the other kind keeps moving, changing. With these people, you can never say, ‘X stops here,’ or ‘Now I know all there is to know about Y.’ That doesn’t mean they’re unstable. Ah, no, far from it. They are fluid. They keep moving forward and making new trysts with life, and the motion of it keeps them young. In my opinion, they are the only people who are still alive. You must be constantly on your guard, Justin, against congealing.”

Suzuki-roshi, a Zen master, said,

If your mind is empty, it is always ready for anything; it is open to everything. In the beginner’s mind there are many possibilities, in the expert’s mind there are few.

One might say that to be advanced in things spiritual means always to be a beginner. It means that we don’t congeal. It means to be open, willing to be molded, teachable. To grow out of this is to grow out of God.

Now, I want you to understand that not congealing, not having a beginner’s mind, not being like children—I want you to understand that this has very little to do with chronological age! One can be rigid, inflexible, brittle and dry when one is quite young. One can be congealed in one’s 20’s or 30’s, unable to learn in a spiritual way. And on the other hand, one can be soft and supple, tender and pliant when one is at a very advanced age. One can be teachable and open like a child well into one’s 80’s or 90’s.

In a previous congregation I’ve had someone tell me, “I’m too old to learn anything new.” Jesus and many other spiritual teachers, of course, would never buy this. When it comes to the spiritual quest, one never “retires”; one is constantly changing and moving forward. If you think you’re done, you might miss the best part!

During an interview, film director Michael Lessac told an old story:

There are two children in a family, and the younger has just been born. The older child keeps saying to the mother, "I want to be alone with her for awhile. Can I go in there alone with my sister?" And she's only a little baby. The mother doesn't understand, but the kid just keeps on asking, "I really want to—can't I just spend some time alone with the baby?"

So the mother lets the child into the room and listens at the door. And the child asks the baby, "Tell me about God. I think I'm forgetting."

You know, when it comes to things that are eternal, we don't know near as much as we think we do. But that's O.K. It's part of being human. And we should not resist this, but rather we should accept and embrace our humanity. And if we loosen up, if we open ourselves up like a child, if we don't congeal, we will have things revealed to us, like Jesus, even by those considered to be lowly, insignificant or child like in this world.

Later we're going to hear Bob Dylan's great song, "Forever Young." It's as great a benediction as I've heard. And when you listen, I want you to focus not on chronological age; I want you to think of *spiritual youth*.

And may we cultivate the beginner's mind, the teachable spirit and the humble attitude. And may we all stay forever young!

"Forever Young"

Bob Dylan

*God bless and keep you always,
May your wishes all come true,
May you always do for others
And let others do for you.
May you build a ladder to the stars
And climb on every rung,
May you stay forever young,
Forever young, forever young,
May you stay forever young.*

*May you grow up to be righteous,
May you grow up to be true,
May you always know the truth
And see the lights surrounding you.
May you always be courageous,
Stand upright and be strong,
May you stay forever young,
Forever young, forever young,
May you stay forever young.*

*May your hands always be busy,
May your feet always be swift,
May you have a strong foundation
When the winds of changes shift.
May your heart always be joyful,
May your song always be sung,
May you stay forever young,
Forever young, forever young,
May you stay forever young.*

(NOTE: The spoken sermon, also available online, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)