

Sermon ✝ September 19, 2021
Mark 9:30-37
Frank Maxwell

There are certain events in life that make such an impression that they are always remembered. Of course, the “biggies” are weddings and the birth of a child. We remember other events as well . . . a special vacation or moving into a new house or apartment . . . or perhaps a play or a concert. I’ve been to hundreds of concerts over the years: classical, rock, jazz and everything in between. It was thirty years ago that Mary and I attended what can certainly be termed a memorable concert.

Founded in Milwaukee, Present Music is one of the nation’s leading ensembles specializing in the commissioning and performance of new music. New music should not be confused with *new age* music. New music is written in the classical style but usually much more free form. It can be kind of wild. The founder and creative director for 37 years was Kevin Stalheim, a member of my parish in Menomonee Falls.

In the fall of 1991, we attended the opening concert of the 1991-92 season. It was held at Renaissance Place (about four blocks south of St. John’s on the Lake where a number of our members live during the winter months).

While the entire concert was excellent, it is the last piece played that will remain etched in our memories forever.

Before the piece began, all of the lights were turned off. The room was pitch black. Next came the sound of water dripping which got louder and louder. Musicians could be heard playing from all around the perimeter of the room. The lights came up, but they were black lights, revealing musicians dressed in black with fluorescent colors on their sleeves and instruments. Next a number of gigantic weather balloons were dropped from above. The black tie/evening gown crowd instinctively began to bat them about. Finally a shower of ping pong balls descended upon the room! Mayhem ensued! In an instant, a somewhat stuffy and predictable audience was set free . . . and we were children again. It was a grand night!

This brings us to today’s gospel. Jesus apparently saw children as the automatic heirs of the kingdom of God. On at least two occasions, he reminded his disciples of the place of children in the eyes of God. Today's gospel being one.

It is interesting to note that both of these occasions occurred at a crucial point in his ministry, just before he journeyed to Jerusalem to be killed. They seem to form a necessary counterpoint to the intensity of the conflict with the scribes and pharisees. As the evil grew stronger around him, Jesus' thoughts turned increasingly to the innocence of children.

Perhaps one reason why Jesus glorified the childlike state is because children are innocent. The Garden of Eden still lives in the eyes of children. You cannot watch the face of a little girl making mud pies or a little boy playing with a toy car without thinking that you are looking at a little bit of heaven. There is nothing sweeter or softer or better smelling than a little baby that has just been cleaned and changed and given their bottle in the middle of the night.

Sometimes, if I think hard enough, I can even remember my own innocence . . . the days when I knew nothing about divorce and crime and violence and hate and deceit and contempt. I am then reminded why Jesus said we must become like children in order to enter the kingdom of heaven.

The disciples were arguing about which of them would occupy first place in the kingdom. How human of them . . . the jealousies and competitiveness of the adult world . . . people trying to get ahead of one another . . . sales people slighting each other to get ahead in the company. Jesus stopped it cold!

Putting his arm around a child, he said *“Here. This is the secret of the kingdom. When you put a child ahead of yourself, you will be receiving me.”*

A child can understand this . . . for a child is alive to mystery . . . to the miracle of grace. Children are naturally curious, and want answers to many things, but they are often satisfied with the simplest of explanations.

“What makes the leaves turn red and gold in the autumn?”

“A little fella named Jack Frost paints them.”

“When does he paint them?”

“Before you get up in the Morning,” we reply.

And they are delighted. It isn't that they fully accept the answer; their young minds are already questioning such responses. But it's fun and they like it. They see the universe as music and poetry. Jack Frost or photosynthesis, it is all the same—a world of wonder.

We also find clues in the books that children read: *Alice in Wonderland . . . The Wizard of Oz . . . Dr. Seuss*. There is a world where rabbits talk and robots can earn a real heart and Grinches steal Christmas.

It is a world of fantasy and make believe. It isn't that they don't understand the real world. They do. They understand it better than grown-ups because they see it whole. They haven't yet compartmentalized it and rationalized it. They accept their environment as miraculous and don't relegate God to a book and ancient history. For children, Jesus can still turn water into wine and make the blind see and the lame to walk. For them, the world is still mystery and life is grace. They can see God in a puddle of water or the glow of a firefly.

We have, perhaps, lived in the world so long that we have forgotten how to trust and to have faith. We become cynical and distrusting and disbelieving. We know about all of the fine print of life. We long to trust and believe . . . but we don't know if we can.

It is the children who know how to believe in the kingdom. They have no history of disappointment. They can still believe with a whole heart. And we can, too, if we so desire. However, it will take some work on our part.

These childlike qualities become repressed as we grow older. They are buried deeper and deeper inside us—covered by the debris of life and experience. We need to get in touch with these feelings . . . to give them new life in our adult existence. That's what the experience of Christ is all about. Innocence, mystery and trust can be renewed. As tired and guilty as we are . . . we can get in touch with innocence again. As rational and matter-of-fact as we have become . . . we can have a new sense of miracle. As abused and burned-out as we feel . . . we can discover a new kind of belief and trust. All we have to do . . . is let our guard down. It won't be easy at first . . . but in time it will slowly come back to us.

It is like adjusting your eyes to the light of the sun after emerging from a matinee at the local theater. It is like a shower of ping-pong balls at a high-brow concert.

Let us pray. Forgive us, O God, for our adulthood; for the wrong kind of maturity; for having divided the world instead of seeing it whole; and give us the hearts and spirits of children that we may enter your kingdom. Amen.