A Little Child Shall Lead Them

Unity Church September 28, 2025

Isaiah 11:5-7 Matthew 18:1-6

Whenever I celebrate a baptism, I’m reminded of these two pieces of scripture. This teaching of Jesus’ is repeated a chapter later in Matthew 19:14, where he says,“Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of heaven.”

I think that these three scriptures should make us scratch our heads as to whether we’re practicing our faith right. [We have a three year old at Unity who for some reason loves one particular 80 year old, When he sees her, he lights up like a Christmas tree and runs over to her, squealing.]Each time I see Lucas run up to Norma and watch both their faces light up with joy, I find myself wondering how do we bottle that? How do we replicate that?

Setting this unbridled joy beside how we practice our beliefs, got me wondering where is the joy in our day to day faith walk? How do we hold onto that wide open joy that only a child can seem to give us? I think that part of finding something we lost is recalling where we misplaced it.

Those of us who grew up in church learned at an early age that church was serious business. There was this attitude of sit down, be quiet and don’t ask a lot of questions, this is church after all.

I often couldn’t or didn’t sit still in church, but I was blessed with parents who allowed us to question things that were said in worship. They didn’t encourage it as much as tolerate it, and would share what something meant to them. If there wasn’t a clear answer, they would ask the pastor. After all, he was a well educated individual, his response was considered authoritative. Even if his response didn’t answer the question or clarify anything, it was considered the last word.

I was 11 when on one of my many trips to Cleveland Clinic, mom and I saw a hippie. A skinny kid, probably 18 or 19 years old, wearing an army jacket, ragged bell bottoms, long, unwashed hair and a scraggly beard. We didn’t quite know what to make of him because living in the country we didn’t often see people who worked that hard to look that bad.

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We were sitting in one of those endless waiting rooms, and I not too quietly pointed him out to Mom. She gave me one of those looks that loosely translates as “drop it,” while pretending to be very interested in one of the old magazines she was leafing through. I was fascinated, and surreptitiously kept looking at him. As he put his magazine down, I noticed that his t shirt had 2 words in bold print across the front. I couldn’t quite figure out the second word till he walked over to the receptionist and his jacket fell open. Question Authority. Hmmm.

I turned this over in my 11 year old head, wondering what it could possibly mean. I knew what a question was but wasn’t familiar with that word “Authority.” After the normal three or four hours of waiting, we saw the specialists who told my mom what was going on and what treatment they were going to continue. We headed for home.

No sooner had we hit the open road when I innocently asked, “What does “Authority” mean? I followed it with why would someone say, “Question Authority?” My mother had an eighth grade education. Her standard response when us kids hit her with a question like that was, “Look it up.”

She said, “I saw that too.” True to form, she followed with, “why don’t look it up when we get home.” She followed that with, “After you look it up, ask your Dad.” Never at a loss for something to talk about, I rattled on about something else and we talked the whole way home.

At home, I got out the dictionary and tried to remember how to spell the word. After asking Dad, who was a spelling bee champion, I started looking it up when he asked, “why are you looking that up?” “We saw this guy at Cleveland Clinic who had it on his shirt and I want to know what it means.”

So I looked it up. Authority: 1 power to influence or command thought, opinion, or behavior, 2 persons in command, 3 a citation used in defense or support of an action or idea, 4 an individual cited or appealed to as an expert.

My dad asked again, “Why are you looking that up?” I said, “besides this word he had the word “Question” in front of it, which doesn’t make sense to me.” At this point Mom explained about seeing this guy and noted that she thought he was one of those anti-war hippie types. Instead of commenting about how these ne’r-do-wells were going destroy our country, he suggested that I had probably had something else I needed to be doing. And that was that.

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But that wasn’t the end of the story. As I went to high school, I spent quite a bit of time doing that very thing; Questioning Authority, actually challenging authority, not intentionally, well maybe intentionally, and often unwisely. Some would say that it became my motto, not challenging authority as in breaking the law, (although I did push the boundaries quite a bit,) but questioning statements and pronouncements from “Authorities.”

I figured out that the definition of Authority, an individual cited or appealed to as an expert, applied to pastors. They were after all the last word in things theological for most of us. They were well educated. Seminary grads had a working understanding of Greek and Hebrew, the languages of the Bible. They had seen behind the curtain. They knew things that the rest of us didn’t.

But in my proclivity for arguing, especially scripture and theology, I started to realize that these authorities were human also. There were questions that they didn’t seem to have the answer to either. As I’ve got older and hopefully wiser, I’ve realized that there are plenty of theological and life questions that nobody has the answers to, regardless of education or life experience.

But the church, regardless of denomination, has a system through which they train their clergy, their pastors. In other words making them authorities. By virtue of their training, these individuals have read, studied and argued theology. They’ve also studied the Bible critically. A lot of this theology is based on the the writings of Paul, the first person to try and make sense of the teachings of Jesus in light of the Old Testament prophesies, using Greek logic. Over the last 2000 years, there have been thousands, probably hundreds of thousands of theology books written by well intended, devout, intelligent people.

If you look at the walls of most pastor’s studies, you’ll see shelf after shelf of books. All manner of books covering about any aspect of theology one could possibly think of. I’m reminded of Ecclesiastes, 12:12b, “Of the binding of books there is no end and much study is wearisome to the body”

All of these books might make you a better student of the Bible, give you a deeper understanding of scripture, of how God did what he did, how he loves us, etc. None of them though will show you how to become childlike in your faith. This is all serious stuff and by definition, being childlike isn’t serious. None of them will teach you how to get, have, or maintain that fountain of joy that Lucas seems to carry inside of himself. That joy that not only bubbles, but shines through his eyes, his giggle, his squeal. And there’s the rub. 3

All of us are weighed down, some more than others. Some days we wonder how we’re going to go on. All of us have lived long enough to know that being childlike is a dangerous thing in our grown-up world. Medical issues, financial burdens, emotional turmoil, aging, pain, suffering, grief, just being exhausted. Time spent questioning, weeping, railing against life’s unfairness, yes, even being angry at God. This is where we have misplaced our joy.

All of it, all of the things that over whelm us in life seems to suck what little joy we have out of us. Life leaves us weary, trudging forward, going through the motions of our faith. In the back of our minds, we know we’re missing something, but don’t quite know what it is. And then we see the unbridled, wide open joy of a child and we’re reminded that that’s what we misplaced.

I know I need it, and I know we all need it. I was going to say that I wish I knew where to find it, but I do know where to find it, Galatians 5:22-23, “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,

gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.” There it is, second in line of that list of the fruit of the Spirit.

Maybe these little children instinctively know where the wellspring of joy comes from. As a child, I don’t have to understand the food chain to know that Mommy feeds me yummy stuff. If I’m a toddler, I don’t need to understand the bubbly wonderful explosion of happiness the I feel when I connect with another like toddler. It’s just there, joyfully there.

Maybe we, the adults, need to observe the love that a mother shows to her infant, the warm fuzzies of a kid running full bore at their dad when he walks in a room, squealing and ready to jump up because he knows his dad will catch him. Maybe we need to realize that our Father, our heavenly Dad feels the same way about us as those earthly parents. In seeing that, maybe we can realize that although we’re old enough to know better, the joy, that joy of the Lord is still ours. Our Dad loves us the same way.

May a little child show us the way back to the basics of the fruit of the Holy Spirit and in our joy we find there, once again embrace our God given love and joy like the child that Jesus calls us to be.

Amen

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Isaiah 11:5-7 NIV

Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash around his waist.

The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat,
the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them.

The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox.

Matthew18:1-6

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”

He called a little child to him, and placed the child among them. And he said: “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.”

“If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.

Matthew 19: 13-15

Then little children were brought to Him that He might put His hands on them and pray, but the disciples rebuked them. But Jesus said, “Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of heaven.”  And He laid His hands on them and departed from there.

Ecclesiastes 12:12b

Of making many books there is no end, and much study is wearisome to the flesh.

Galatians 5:22-23,

“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.”