

David C. Myers
June 12, 2011
Pentecost and Youth Sunday

“Being an Incurable Child”

Matthew 19:13 – 15

Matthew 18:1 – 5

Text: “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” . . . Matthew 18:3

I can think of no better example of how to observe Youth Sunday and Promotion Day in a local church than to recall this story of James Russell Lowell, when, while traveling along the outskirts of Boston, once passed a building which bore the inscription, “Home for Incurable Children.” Always one to make a play on words, Lowell commented to his traveling companion, “They’ll get me in there some day.”

As I reflect on his comment, I began thinking of this morning’s Scripture readings and realized that might also be an apt name for the church: “Home For Incurable Children”. Jesus tells us that unless we become as a child we shall not enter the Kingdom of Heaven. I think that is what being a member of the Realm of God is – an incurable child.

I have a few, but not exhaustive thoughts, as to what that means.

First is to consider the innocence of trust. When Nate, our firstborn was a very young child, I was amazed at how trusting he was around people. He used to love being tossed in the air and caught (fortunately no one dropped him), he would surf down our carpeted stairs, and was always eager to meet new people. He was fearless, perhaps having no reason to fear.

But I also have seen such trust displayed, much to my embarrassment, on the ski slope by other young children. Deb doesn’t think – with good reason – that I know anything about skiing. But I did have one day of experience. And from that I have become an incurable chicken when there is a possibility of physical harm to my body.

The year was 1981 and my monthly spiritual formation group decided that we would ski during the day before our evening of deep spiritual sharing. It was a warm sunny day for February in New Hampshire. The ski slopes were, by skiing aficionado’s definition, well packed – I had another name for it – ice. Suffice it to say I had never before, nor since, so willingly submitted myself to such frustration and personal humiliation as I did that day. I couldn’t even make it down the “powder puff” kiddy slope. And yet, everywhere I looked there was a presence of 4 – 10 year olds skiing with a reckless abandon that only caused me to cringe as I tried to envision myself doing the same. The only trouble was, during a 2 hour group lesson, in which the instructor was trying to teach us “snowplow turns and stops” – mind you with no snow, only ice, I still had no idea how to stop or to turn; . . . well, except by falling down.

Perhaps I had watched “the agony of defeat” on the old “ABC’s Wide World of Sports” where the ski jumper tumbles off the ski jump head-first too many times. This is the predominant image in my mind when I think of skiing. So, please, give me the safety – and warmth – of a golf course, any day!

Nonetheless, it is my fear that keeps me from learning how to ski. On the other hand; it is a young child’s trust that enables them to grow and experience new things. That’s how they learn! Had I taken up skiing at 6 or 8, instead of my mid-thirties, I might have had a chance.

Such trust is part of entering God’s Realm. And in Jesus’ words there is ample cause for trust to be basic: “I will not cast out those who turn to me.” . . . “Why be anxious and troubled about what you drink, what you eat, and what you wear. God knows that you need such.” . . . “In God’s house there are many rooms. I have come to prepare a place for you.”

Secondly, being a child means living in the present. To a child at an amusement park there has been no yesterday, there will be no tomorrow. There are no regrets about the past, no worries about what to do tomorrow – just the joy of the present. Yet, the older we get the more we live trying to undo our past, or prepare for our future.

However, the contamination of our so-called “maturity” may not reflect the wisdom of our God Who says, “as far as the east is from the west, so far does God remove our transgressions from us.” The assurance that God forgives our sins might help us be freed from a past that can otherwise entrap us. And as God frees us from the past, and so also are “all things made new!” We are promised that God will not leave us or forsake us;” and this can be assuring as it lifts the cloud of future fears.

It is significant that the religion in the time of Jesus knew only two days – yesterday and tomorrow. It is more than coincidental that the first recorded word of Jesus public ministry (in Luke’s Gospel) was the word “Today.” “Today the Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” “Today is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad!”

The third thing about being a child is being humble. I don’t know, but it seems to me that when children are being swamped with newness, learning new concepts in school, learning about new technology, learning and seeing new animals at a zoo, discovering the joy of learning to ride a bike, to play baseball, to play an instrument – during that time of life it is a lot easier to be humble than it is when our basic understanding of the world has already been established. When we are constantly being bombarded with new things to learn, it is far easier to realize that we don’t know it all, or that we have made a mistake.

As we grow older we tend to get set in our ways, we think we know how the world works, and we certainly know how we work and how we would like the world – and the church – to be ordered. And when that happens, humility and awe become difficult.

Parents of teenagers find this out fairly quickly – and often the relationships they have with their children depends on the level of humility and openness they have as their

teen-age and college-age children bring them into a new world of technology, customs and values. So it might be helpful for us to remember that Jesus commends humility when he said, "Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the Kingdom of heaven."

Well, that is certainly not an exhaustive listing of the joys of being a child. But perhaps it can all help us understand a little better what Jesus meant when he said to the disciples, "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." (Mt. 18:3 – 4)

As I grow older, I discover I learn more and more from those so much younger than me. And it is my hope that, as James Russell Lowell commented, someday I may become a resident in a "Home for Incurable Children."