

Wonder and the Kingdom of God

Stephanie Ford, Binkley Baptist Church, October 16, 2011

Thanks to our fine actors, we are able to get a closer look at this familiar scene: Jesus taking time to bless children, despite the efforts of the disciples to keep the families away. In fact, Jesus ignores the disciples' rebuke, calling directly to the children to come to him. He chides the disciples, who seem like political handlers at a rally: "Here, right here is the kingdom of God. It belongs to 'such as these.'"

If you are like me, you may readily call to mind a portrait that graced the walls of many a Sunday school classroom in our childhoods, a comforting painting of a rather Western-looking Jesus with a baby on his lap and smiling children all around him. It's an image I carry, and appreciate even more in the African version on the front of our bulletin—and in the living drama this morning. We, children of God, young and old, belong in the picture; we are welcomed by Jesus, too. Indeed, there's probably a part of us that still secretly cheers when Jesus says "no" to the disciples in order to bless us.

But, for the parents in Jesus' day, the desire for Jesus to bless their little ones was also fraught with anxiety; over half of the children did not survive their sixteenth year. *Could this one, this Rabbi known throughout the countryside as a miracle-worker and healer—could he bless my baby or my children with protection through his touch?* Prayers of healing and blessing are indeed powerful. I would have been standing in line, too! And today in 2011, on this Children's Sabbath, things are not that different. One-third of the world's children are starving, another third are underfed. Countless children around the world and in our own neighborhoods are in desperate need of the blessing of basic protection, like nutritious food, health care, clean water, adequate clothing, education, and the right to a childhood without going to war, or working 18-hour days. Jesus' concern to bless the young reminds us that we, too, must do all we can to save these little ones, those most vulnerable, around the globe.

I do not want to divert our attention from the imperative to do justice and mercy, while at this moment what has been called the greatest humanitarian crisis of our time is going on in the Great Horn of Africa. May children there of all ages receive needed aid; may we remember to give... Yet, even as we are mindful of their suffering, I'd like us to turn our attention to the second part of Jesus' teaching: the moment when Jesus, in strong words, tells the disciples (and the rest of us overhearing) that we have something important to learn from children...about how to receive God's realm ...if we ever expect to enter it.

Like most of Jesus' teachings on the kingdom of God, this one carries metaphor and mystery. Jesus would point to the lilies of the field and their freedom from care for the morrow, or point to a seed with the promise of a mustard tree inside it, or to a woman scouring her home for a lost coin—telling his followers that the way of God was like this. Jesus compared the coming of God's realm to a sower who planted seeds freely and generously, even though far too many of them wouldn't grow. Jesus told a story about a king who invited guests to a banquet, and since they were all too busy to accept—sent his servants to find those on the street. They were the ones ready to say "yes." The kingdom of God, Jesus announced, is right here, coming to life within us and among us—often in ways we do not expect—if we but pay attention and seek it with all of our hearts.

Thus, the passage calls us to likewise imagine: what does Jesus mean when he says, "you must receive the realm of God like a little child"? Is he pointing to the innocence of children, to their lack of prejudice, their willingness to trust, their inner flexibility, their natural inclination to play and to seek joy, their seeming quickness to forgive...? Perhaps Jesus is pointing to all of these characteristics and more. Among the many good choices, let's focus on a particular trait we often recognize in children—their capacity for wonder. I think Jesus could have been pointing to that. As we know too well, this sense of wonder and its twin, curiosity, are quickly stifled in this serious occupation we call "life." Yet, Jesus reminds us, if we want to prepare the soil of

our hearts for God's coming among us, we need to reawaken, strengthen this capacity within. We need to find again that radical openness if we will be ready to receive the creative, life-giving Spirit of transformation for this moment, for this day.

Robert Fuller, in his thoughtful book on wonder, teases out a definition. Wonder, he writes, is an emotion—the astonished awareness of something inexplicable, something perplexing, but also something powerful, real, true, even beautiful. As a little girl, I remember looking up to the top of Yosemite falls, the towering spray tumbling over the cliff. I tried with my eyes to follow some line of water drops from the top to the bottom, but it was impossible; my eyes would get lost, and I would try again. The waterfall kept going and going. I thought about it falling day and night, day and night. How could this be? Later as we walked on the trail near the bottom of the falls, the sound of roaring thunder filled my ears with its power, the spray of water on my skin felt chilly, refreshing.

Wonder compels us, Fuller explains, to consider how such displays of “vitality, beauty or power might reveal of the purpose or intentionality of the universe as a whole.”¹ We are caught, rapt, with a sense that we are part of something bigger. Wonder opens us to new possibilities, to new revelation, and to God's presence. Even when the object of our fascination is to some degree explained—our sensibilities are only opened further. It makes me think of the miracle of the human body, how the folds of our lungs which if laid out flat could carpet an apartment or how the intricate communication among the cells makes movement, breathing, our very lives possible. I begin to get a tenuous grasp on the science, but I am awed nonetheless.

Watching children at play, we see wonder and curiosity enfolded. They try things with their bodies, flipping upside down, crawling through dirt, rolling on cool grass; they stare at butterflies and worms—testing to see how they curl when poked with a stick. They ask questions that may make us laugh because they have not learned the rigid paradigms of our adult minds; more often than not, their questions revive our curiosity, too. A newborn stares at his mother's face quizzically, but the wonder of her voice, her smell, her feel against him is something he seeks for security; this face is trustworthy even though he can't quite distinguish a face from a hand and has no power to make this comforting thing respond to him other than by crying. So he keeps staring at the face, and soon he will know its distinctiveness among all other faces.

So, yes, wonder is a vital emotion for learning, for seeking—but how does it prepare us to receive the kingdom of heaven, the revelation of God's way in our day? I would like to suggest two ways. First, wonder puts our efforts at control, ownership, understanding, and mastery into perspective. In the psalm that Claire read for us today, the psalmist looks at the heavens, the work of a Creator God, and considers how tiny human beings seem next to such a vast universe. There is a story about Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who was talking late into the night with one of his close friends. At last, Roosevelt suggested that they go out into the Rose Garden and look at the stars before going to bed. So, they both went out and looked up for several minutes at the thousands of stars that were visible to the naked eye. Then the President said, “All right, I think we feel small enough now to go in and go to sleep.”²

Second, I believe that this sudden awareness of uncertainty that follows wonder—with its accompanying exhilaration of encountering something more than we could possibly understand—invites a shift in our thinking, brings a glimmer of a Divine order that will not be contained by the way things have been. If we can step out further into that uncertainty and trust that insight will come, we may find that the unknowing is ripe with what is needed next. Wonder can help us change our minds, risk tried-and-true paradigms, and retire old routines in order to discover what could be. This is hard, especially when we have spent years dedicated to a certain vision

¹ Robert C. Fuller, *Wonder: From Emotion to Spirituality* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2006), 9.

² Glenn R. Woodson, sermon, 5 December 2010.

of reality. But the possibility of seeing of seeing God's creativity in the midst...and then to participate in it...slowly and steadily becomes worth the risk.

Jesus tells the story of a landowner who goes out in the morning to find workers. At 9:00 in the morning, he hires some workers, and then he comes back again and again during the day and hires more, even until the very last hours of the workday. Finally, the landowner pays the wages, the first hired the same as the last hired. Those who worked all day grumble at the inequity, but the landowner has paid the agreed-upon wage. Does not the landowner, Jesus says to his hearers, have the right to pay others as he wanted, as long as he fulfills his contract to the first? Yes, in principal, we must agree, but no, no, we get stuck again in closed system of apparent fairness. How could this be just, we wonder? The kingdom of God turns convention on its head, pushes us beyond the expected, and even makes us mad.

Elizabeth Sholtys is a person who was transformed in such an unconventional way. One morning, as a freshman at Emory University, Elizabeth woke up resolved to help create a home for street children in India. Now most of us would nurture the dream, plan our studies accordingly, and wait until we graduated, but Elizabeth didn't. Within four months, she and six friends had founded the nonprofit, Ashraya, which means "hope," "trust," "shelter," and "protection" in Hindi. Inspiring her was a high school experience in India, and well as the writings of Paul Farmer, a physician who created Partners in Health in Haiti while still in medical school. In little over a year, at age twenty-one, Elizabeth had adopted her first three street children in Pune with donated funding. She purchased an apartment there and began commuting between India and Atlanta, since she was still studying full-time at Emory. And she graduated on time. While there have been a multitude of challenges along the way, she, along with Indian and international colleagues, has grown the work of the Ashraya Initiative. The center in Pune provides a home for 12 children and supports the education of more than 200 kids in the slums, along with health care and community advocacy. Reading her story, I spent days walking around, thinking about it. That's not something as a college freshman I would have thought about doing. I was struck by her risk in stepping out and inspiring others to join her in untested waters, and by the tenacity to stay with something hard. She chose a journey like the mustard seed Jesus talked about: though tiny at first, "it becomes the largest of garden plants and grows into a tree where birds can find shelter in its branches."³

All of this may seem like a long way from a child's wonder at a starry night, but Rachel Carson didn't think so. The biologist whose 1964 book *Silent Spring* aroused American readers to the dangers of pesticides and fertilizers, lived a life shaped by wonder. She believed that cultivating wonder in children engenders empathy, reverence for the earth, and inner strength. In a beautiful book, *The Sense of Wonder*, Carson shares her adventures with her young nephew, Roger, as they explore the coast of Maine—the woods, wildlife, and the ocean. One night after a storm, she wraps the twenty-month-old Roger in a blanket and carries him down to the beach; together they laugh at huge frothy waves. Over and over in the book, she encourages parents not to worry about what they know or don't know about animals, tides, plants or flowers—and simply to join their children as co-explorers, sitting still to watch a bug, lying on the ground to watch the rising moon, asking *with them* all sorts of curious questions about the sights, sounds, and smells on an afternoon hike. Carson believed that wonder was a profoundly functional emotion: "I believe," she wrote, "that the more clearly we can focus our attention on the wonders and realities of the universe about us, the less taste we shall have for destruction."⁴

Wonder is alive and well among the children at Binkley. Because of my new job, I have a passport that allows me to drop in and visit all of the church school classes, as well as Worship with Children (which usually meets during this hour). I have observed pre-schoolers discovering ritual as something like imaginary play; seen second and third graders navigating a carpeted desert on the way to the promised land, and been interviewed by inquisitive fourth and fifth graders about my experience of faith and of church. On World Communion Sunday,

³ Matthew 13:31-2.

⁴ Cited in Fox, *American Conservation Movement*, 293.

I sat with the kindergarten and first grade class as we ate tortillas and delicious beans. I learned that they had just spent time talking about how a family in Guatemala shared God's table with others. Later in Worship with Children, I watched kids rewriting the Ten Commandments in their own words, asking hard questions about the meaning of adultery and coveting, and being faithfully guided to age-appropriate understandings that spoke to me as an adult listener. Everywhere I have been, questions are encouraged, spontaneous new ideas are given space for pondering.

It is likely that we older ones could use a little help with wonder, and rekindling what gets stifled in the minutia of schedules, deadlines, and chores. Spending time with children is a good way to start—joining in imaginative play with a child, becoming engaged and delighted while reading a story or listening to music with children, being a model to young ones of surprise, interest, and attraction to the natural world, creating novelty in daily routines, being silly (sometimes even in public!). The good thing is that this openness to wonder that we cultivate to be with them may actually rub off on us.

I have a confession; I like Barney. Of course, Deepmala is too old to watch him anymore, but for many months he was a constant in our household. And I grew to really enjoy the curious playfulness of the dramas and songs. I even sing “Mr. Sun, Sun, Mr. Golden Sun” when I want to cheer up. I also love to dance around the coffee table with Deepmala to story songs like “Here We Go Round the Mulberry Bush” and “Animal Boogie.” I love to listen to her read Dr. Seuss books. Deepmala invents all kinds of stories with a host of characters and play animals that she has; it is fun to join her in their conversations and plans. The harder work for me is not to rush in with answers every time Deepmala asks a question, but to see if we can discover the answer together. Or to simply to spend time playing with Deepmala when the to-do list calls *or* when I have other agendas.

It seems to me that we can go back to this encounter with Jesus blessing the children again and again, bringing other characteristics of children into our meditation on the text. There is much more to discover about how childhood teaches us how to receive God's kingdom in and among us. For this moment, though, I want to close with a reading from the prophet and poet, Rachel Carson, and her invitation to us, as parents and simply for ourselves, on how we might discover wonder on an October evening:

Take your child out on a still October night when there is little wind and find a quiet place away from traffic noises. Then stand very still and listen, projecting your consciousness up into the dark arch of the sky above you. Presently your ears will detect tiny wisps of sound—sharp chirps, sibilant lisps and call notes. They are the voices of bird migrants, apparently keeping in touch by their calls with others of their kind scattered through the sky. I never feel these calls without a wave of feeling that is compounded of many emotions—a sense of lonely distances, a compassionate awareness of small lives controlled and directed by forces beyond volition or denial, a surging wonder at the sure instinct for route and direction that so far has baffled human efforts to explain it.⁵

⁵ Rachel Carson, *The Sense of Wonder* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965; HarperCollins, 1998), 92.