

The Radical Rabbi Who Didn't Act His Age

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



Superhero Window Washers Bring Joy at Children's Hospital

Prayer of Illumination

Startle us, O God, with your truth
and open our hearts and our minds to your wondrous love.
Speak your word to us;
silence in us any voice but your own
and be with us now as we turn our attention,
our minds and our hearts, to you,
in Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Gospel Reading: Luke 18:15-17 (NRSV)

People were bringing even infants to Jesus that he might touch them; and when the disciples saw it, they sternly ordered them not to do it. But Jesus called for them and said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it."

*The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.*

SERMON – The Radical Rabbi Who Didn't Act His Age

Leonard Sweet in his book *"The Bad Habits of Jesus"* tells about Evelina London Children's Hospital. It's a giant facility with an even bigger heart—this hospital is "all in" about their mission—caring for children. Like all buildings do, they need window washers.

The children's hospital has only one pre-condition for the company they hire: the window washers must be dressed up like superheroes.

The children in bed, many suffering from serious illnesses, light up when they see Spiderman or Superman dangling inches from them, outside the glass. It's one of the best parts of the week, for both the children and the adults.

Jesus went against the grain of his 1st century culture by putting children first. Kids were to be seen and not heard. They were deemed "non-adults." Dirty, noisy, stinky, and annoying.

Of course Rabbi Jesus didn't want to be bothered by the likes of rambunctious, runny-nosed children. But the Radical Rabbi surprises us once again saying,

"Let the little children come unto me—do not stop them."

And, "If you want to enter the kingdom of God, you must receive it like a little child."

Or in another gospel,

"you must change and become like children."

They say babies are the only ones that like change, being changed out of their dirty diapers. This is a time for us to be babies and be changed. In Jesus' hierarchy, it's the smallest that's the greatest.

Jesus says, "Come and follow me..." not just to adults.

He says, "let the children come to me, don't stop them."

The wifeless and childless Jesus absolutely loved kids. Here's the good news Immanuel: Jesus wants to spend time with us, to hang out with us. We're not in any "Cat's in the Cradle" parent/child relationship with God. He's not too busy for us.

And if Jesus welcomed children, so should we. We talk about childproofing our homes, childproofing medicine, and childproof car windows, all for the safety of our children. It's an act of love to look out for them. In the same way, Jesus did the opposite and showed his love for us by adult-proofing our faith. There are no adults in heaven—only children of God.

Children teach us how to keep laughing and smiling—because we adults get so serious and take ourselves so seriously. Children loosen and lighten us up. This is an important reminder for me, when I so easily slip into being a grumpy old middle-aged man.

Maybe the reason Jesus loved to take up children in his arms was because that very same God, who so loved the world, became a child that allowed us to pick him up and risked letting us hold him in our arms.

Jesus seemed to be saying that the innocent souls of children were closer to the angels, closer to the kingdom of God, than anyone else. We need to walk not only in the footsteps of Christ, but humble ourselves, get down on our knees, and crawl behind the children who lead us.

Children teach us so many things—how to trust, how to forgive, and how to be innocent.

Kids teach us indispensable lessons about how to be:

- receptive,
- inquisitive,
- open,
- ever asking questions, and
- always learning and growing and changing.

Children can be disarming in their honesty. In the original ending of Hans Christian Anderson's children's fairy tale *"The Emperor's New Clothes,"* the vanity of the high and mighty were not the only ones satirized.

Also the groupthink of the crowds was called out—when they attacked with sticks and canes the child who had the gumption to tell the truth about the emperor: "But he has no clothes on at all!" In a world crowded with emperors of religion, emperors of state, and emperors of business that wear no clothes, Jesus gives us the child-like cry,

"But he has no clothes at all!"

The good news is that whether we're a king or a pauper, Jesus not only warns us, but he outfits us with new clothes for our wardrobe—clothing us with love, and taking from us our tattered and filthy rags of our self-righteousness and self-importance.

Jesus picks up a child for his children's sermon—it was show and tell time. His illustration was animated—a little child. Notice Jesus didn't pick up an adult. Didn't lift up a pastor or politician. Didn't hold up for everyone a scholar or soldier, but a child.

If you want to become the greatest—become like a child. To be truly great in God's eyes—make yourself small, little, of no consequence. Be humble—knowing not only your strengths but your limitations. When you're humble, you're not too proud to joyfully receive God's good gifts. And you use them and you share them with your friends. Tap into your inner-child of God. God delights in you because you are God's child. God loves to be in your presence—no matter how much trouble you've gotten yourself into. God sees no one as a problem child, just a prodigal son or daughter that hasn't come home just yet.

Part of our discipleship means that we're to grow. To grow up by becoming more mature, no longer being entitled and spoiled brats. And we're also to grow down—by becoming like children. So faith involves growing wise and growing young, simultaneously.

Pablo Picasso believed that it took him about six or seven decades to figure out how to become young!

And CS Lewis said, "Now that I'm fifty... I put away childish things, including the fear of childishness and the desire to be very grown up."

For followers of Jesus, aging should involve the process of younging. No matter our chronological age, let's all change and become like children.

The Jesuits have a saying, *Day-os semper mai-or* which means "God ever greater." An adultlike faith allows the ego to get bigger and bigger, and God gets smaller and smaller. But with a childlike faith, God gets bigger and bigger, as our ego gets smaller and smaller.

Let's not act our age, Immanuel! Let's kick off our shoes, go outside and play, and enjoy being children of God together—all of us!

Day-os semper mai-or—God ever greater.

Amen.

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