

Family Values Revisited
9 May 2010 | Dan McCoig

Luke 18:15-30 (*The Message, a paraphrase by Eugene Peterson*)

15-17 People brought babies to Jesus, hoping he might touch them. When the disciples saw it, they shooed them off. Jesus called them back. "Let these children alone. Don't get between them and me. These children are the kingdom's pride and joy. Mark this: Unless you accept God's kingdom in the simplicity of a child, you'll never get in."

18 One day one of the local officials asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to deserve eternal life?"

19-20 Jesus said, "Why are you calling me good? No one is good - only God. You know the commandments, don't you? No illicit sex, no killing, no stealing, no lying, honor your father and mother."

21 He said, "I've kept them all for as long as I can remember."

22 When Jesus heard that, he said, "Then there's only one thing left to do: Sell everything you own and give it away to the poor. You will have riches in heaven. Then come, follow me."

23 This was the last thing the official expected to hear. He was very rich and became terribly sad. He was holding on tight to a lot of things and not about to let them go.

24-25 Seeing his reaction, Jesus said, "Do you have any idea how difficult it is for people who have it all to enter God's kingdom? I'd say it's easier to thread a camel through a needle's eye than get a rich person into God's kingdom."

26 "Then who has any chance at all?" the others asked.

27 "No chance at all," Jesus said, "if you think you can pull it off by yourself. Every chance in the world if you trust God to do it."

28 Peter tried to regain some initiative: "We left everything we owned and followed you, didn't we?"

29-30 "Yes," said Jesus, "and you won't regret it. No one who has sacrificed home, spouse, brothers and sisters, parents, children - whatever - will lose out. It will all come back multiplied many times over in your lifetime. And then the bonus of eternal life!"

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1.

First of all, Happy Mother's Day!

My own mother was found of quoting an ancient rabbinical saying:

"God could not be everywhere, therefore he made mothers."

My brother and I believed it, mostly.

Some of you may be familiar with the origins of the day.

Ancient Greeks kept a festival in honor of Cybele [suh-belly], the great mother of the Greek gods, around the vernal equinox.

Ancient Romans celebrated a similar festival, Matronalia, dedicated to Juno – the daughter of Saturn, the wife of Jupiter, and the mother of Mars, Minerva, and Vulcan. In Western Europe, the tradition was Christianized and became Mothering Sunday. In the United States, Julia Ward Howe drafted and published her Mother's Day proclamation in 1870.

Howe was a prominent abolitionist, social activist, and poet.

She is most famous as the author of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic."

Howe's proclamation was a pacifist reaction to the carnage of the American Civil War and the Franco-Prussian War.

Howe believed that women had a responsibility to shape their societies at the political level.

A portion of Howe's proclamation reads:

*From the bosom of the devastated Earth a voice goes up with our own.
It says: "Disarm! Disarm! The sword of murder is not the balance of justice."
Blood does not wipe out dishonor, nor violence indicate possession.
As men have often forsaken the plough and the anvil at the summons of war,
Let women now leave all that may be left of home for a great and earnest day of counsel.
Let them meet first, as women, to bewail and commemorate the dead.
Let them solemnly take counsel with each other as to the means
Whereby the great human family can live in peace,
Each bearing after his own time the sacred impress, not of Caesar,
But of God.*

Mother's Day as we know it, a day on which to honor mothers, on the second Sunday of May dates to Woodrow Wilson's administration.

There, that's probably more information about Mother's Day than you bargained for.

Once again, Happy Mother's Day.

2.

Families are important.

The family may be humanity's indispensable institution.

One of my favorite authors is Eudora Welty.

Welty has remarked that "Children . . . use all their senses to discover the world [and God]. Then artists come along and discover it the same way all over again."

Lakota Sioux Medicine Man Black Elk wrote,

Grown men can learn from very little children for the hearts of little children are pure. Therefore, the Great Spirit may show to them many things which older people miss.

Jesus' says something similar in our lesson from Luke.

Let's do some scene setting.

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem where he will be arrested, tried, and executed, which will appear to be a victory for the religious leaders and the Roman officials.

In reality, it is God's way of redeeming humanity through the loving and sacrificial death of God's Son, Jesus.

Jesus' teachings provide the content by which we are to make sense of Jesus' death.

Jesus' reception of the young children and his encounter with the rich young ruler address the issue of what it means to accept and enter God's kingdom.

In the words of NT Wright, retiring Church of England's Bishop of Durham and newly appointed professor of New Testament in Scotland's University of St Andrews:

There is something about the helplessness of children, and their complete trust of those who love and care for them, which perfectly demonstrates the humble trust [Jesus] has been speaking of all along [in Luke]. Jesus doesn't offer a romantic or sentimental view of children; he must have known, in the daily life of a village, and through growing up as the oldest of several children, just how demanding and annoying they can be. But he sees to the heart of what it means to receive God's kingdom; it is like drinking in one's mother's milk, like learning to see – and to smile – by looking at one's mother's eyes and face.

In direct contrast, we have the rich young ruler.

He is everything a small child isn't.

He comes across as confident and organized and determined.

He wants to impress Jesus with his piety and his devotion.

He calls attention to his clean moral record.

He knows the commandments and has kept them.

He is a thoroughly religious man and fully expects to reap all of the benefits of a thoroughly religious man.

The Thoughtful Christian Sunday school class has been studying Tim Keller's book *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* this spring.

Keller is the pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City.

Keller distinguishes between religion and gospel.

Religion refers to salvation through moral effort.

Gospel refers to salvation through grace.

According to Keller, religious persons attempt to obey the divine standards out of fear.

They believe that if they don't obey they are going to lose God's blessings in this world and the next.

By contrast, persons who have said "yes" to the gospel of Jesus Christ are motivated by gratitude for the blessing already received because of Jesus Christ.

Keller writes, "While the moralist is forced into obedience, motivated by fear of rejection, a Christian rushes into obedience, motivated by a desire to please and resemble the one who gave his life for us."

3.

The rich young ruler in our lesson is religious, he a moralist.

Jesus' words sadden him.

The rich young ruler learns that in order to inherit the life of God's kingdom, he would have to abandon the values of the old and trust himself totally to the new, "like a diver throwing himself forwards into the water."

Abandoning the symbols of the old proved too much for him.

His wealth with its accompanying power and status and social privilege identified him.

Without them, who would he be?

He knew the commandments.

He loved them.

But he was too wedded to his possessions.

Accepting God's kingdom like a child, with humble trust, was asking too much.

4.

The closing words of Jesus from our lesson echo everything else that Jesus has said.

What hampers our discipleship?

What gets in the way of our ability to follow where Jesus leads?

For the rich young ruler, it was clearly his wealth.

Luke describes the man's countenance as sad upon hearing Jesus' words regarding what it would take for him to enter God's kingdom.

Luke says no more about the man, nor does Jesus really.

Luke intentionally leaves the conclusion of the encounter open-ended.

His sadness could have motivated him to change?

We don't know.

His sadness could have motivated him to despair?

We don't know.

The story is written in such a way that we are to place our feet in the rich young ruler's shoes.

Just as he considered things that shackled him to the kingdom of this world and in turn excluded him from God's kingdom, we are to consider the things that shackle us to this world and exclude us from God's kingdom.

Loyalty to Jesus puts all other loyalties in perspective, even our loyalty to family.

Family values have received a lot of attention over the past several years, and rightly so.

Of course, there is always the question as to whose family values we are talking about.

The emphasis upon the nuclear family as a higher good than the extended family or the human family is a relatively new concept.

The values of Jesus certainly embrace the family as good, but only as the place where we learn virtues on the order of faith, hope, and charity – faith as steadfast trust in God; hope as the expectation of the ways in which God will keep every one of his promises; and charity as selfless and unconditional loving-kindness toward neighbor.

Family is a means to an end, the end being discipleship.

Amen.