

NCC Seminarian Ann Aaberg presented this sermon on Sunday, 8 May 2005 in Marshfield Hills, Massachusetts. It is based on Matthew 18:1–7.

Perfect Children

One afternoon last year, as I entered the women's locker room at the gym, I encountered a mother and her two young daughters, probably about three and six years old, in various stages of drying and dressing after having enjoyed the pool.

The older six year old had figured out how to wrap a towel around her wet head like a turban and get it to stay there and she was very pleased with herself – not only with her accomplishment but with how it made her look! She was sashaying back and forth toward the mirror, attempting a sophisticated woman's voice, saying, "Don't I look daaaazzling? Mommy, don't I look daaazzling?" More parading and then again, "Mommy, don't I look daazling? Mommy! I think I'm going to change my name to Dazzling Daisy!"

Daisy's mom rolled her eyes a little, but she and I exchanged knowing looks and we just delighted in witnessing this genuine child of God! Fresh and innocent and confident and alive – dazzling! And made in the image of God! This story has stayed with me for a long time and I know I have repeated it to several of you over the past several months just to share that image of a child who exuberantly celebrates who she is.

And this morning in our scripture reading from Matthew 18, we are reminded "who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" and Jesus tells us: unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. And don't put stumbling blocks in front of them. Later on in Matthew 19 is the passage we have had the privilege of hearing each time we've had a baptism here this year: Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs.

So what happens to us? I couldn't help but think about Daisy's future and how long her childhood exuberance would last. In a few short years would I see her again in the locker room, but this time with the downcast eyes and slumped shoulders of adolescent self-consciousness? Would she experience pain, loss? What would her high school years be like? Would she fall prey to drugs? Car accident? Which of the statistics would her numbered life join? Cancer? Suicide? What kind of life would she choose or would she choose at all? Maybe life would just happen to her...maybe a couple of kids, a job, so that at

age 50, 60, 70, her original sense of self – Dazzling Daisy, child of God – would be just a dim memory, if she remembered it at all.

Jesus tells us to become like children to enter the kingdom of heaven, but what stumbling blocks have we placed in front of ourselves? As a seminary student here over the past nine months, I have learned a lot. You've heard about my courses on Christian education and history and preaching and money, but many of you may not know that each week I have had to prepare a written theological reflection on my personal spiritual development. I have had to take a hard look at my personal stumbling blocks. What have I observed about myself as I train for ministry? What do I question? What do I embrace? What gets in my way? We all have stumbling blocks that prevent us from remembering we're children of God and one that pops up for me sometimes and one that I find is rampant in our culture is perfectionism.

For our purposes this morning, I'm going to define that term very broadly. It's not that we want to do a very good job and get all the details just right. It's a feeling of "not good enough" – actually, worse than that – "never good enough". Now, this feeling of never being good enough can come from a variety of places. It might come from a strict religious upbringing where the bible verse "be perfect as your Father is perfect" gets misconstrued. It might come from parents who push. We all know you have to get into the "right" preschool if you want to go to an Ivy League college, right? If we buy into it, and I daresay most of us do, the media does a great job of telling us we're never good enough, rich enough, thin enough, just name it. Consumerism is based on it!

Our sense of inadequacy fuels our economy because we never have enough either! And we're not doing enough! Careers and committees, calendars and commitments...can you remember when you all you had to do was just go out and play?(You've heard me say before that we're taking that away from our children, too.) Jesus says this morning "Woe to the world because of stumbling blocks."

Something happened to us or maybe we let it happen to us. In our pursuit to be dazzling grown-ups, maybe we forgot what that famous 20th century theologian Mr. Rogers always told us: he liked us just the way we are. God loves us just the way we are.

So how do we become like children now? Sarah York in her book Pilgrim Heart quotes Thomas Wolfe who says: You can't go home again. You can't go home again because home changes and you change. I'm very mindful of that right now as I prepare to leave North Community Church and go on to Wollaston Congregational Church for a year. Yes, I'll still live down the street, but as the next year goes by, I will change and you will change. But the good news is that our being children of God never changes.

So how do we do remember and become like children after our bodies have aged beyond 16, after our life experiences, some even tragic, have tempered our jubilation? How do we do that when our own memories of childhood may be filled with pain or even trauma? What is it about children that we can still embrace as we live out our adult lives? Let's take a closer look at what God likes about children.

Children are not afraid to ask for what they need. I'm hungry. Can I have a drink? Can I have a cookie? (I still ask that!) Can Amy sleep over? Can I go out and play? And my personal all-time favorite: when are we going to eat? Children of God, ask God for what you need. We adults prize our self-sufficiency. Heaven forbid that we appear needy! But God doesn't expect us to do it all for ourselves. God expects us to live in community and lean on each other and ask God and each other for what we need.

Children share willingly. I know, we do have to teach our children to share, but when they're babies they do it pretty willingly. How many times have you had a toddler feed you the Cheerio with absolute delight? God nourishes us and blesses us with countless gifts – to be more like children, we need to share those gifts.

Children learn new things every day. I love observing children when they are awestruck – eyes and mouths wide open. Awestruck at the moon, at the behavior of animals, at the size of tall buildings, at fireworks. How many times have we heard the suggestion to view the world through the eyes of a child? As we become like children, we rediscover the wonder of God's creation.....the birds are back! The daffodils are out! The sun rose today!

And, oh my goodness, their imagination! Watch them play. Yes, they mirror what they see around them, but they also escape to their own world where all is safe and good. The teddy bears sit where they're supposed to at the tea party, the plastic trucks roar in the sandbox, and summers last a very long time. My dear church family, this is where God calls us – to become like children and imagine a better world, imagine a healed creation. Dream big! Dare to imagine world peace, imagine enough to eat for everyone, imagine enough homes, and clean air and clean water, imagine racial harmony and civil liberty and equality – because if we don't share in God's imagination of a mended world, how can we possibly make it happen?

So many times we look at children wistfully and say – Ah, look, she has her whole life ahead of her. Friends, here's the good news: as God's children, we do, too! We have the promise of eternal life, of endless possibilities, of another chance over and over again. John tells us: "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are." (1 John 3:1)

So, when you go home later today, if you are able, try dancing across the kitchen floor instead of walking; in fact, try twirling! The next time you take out the trash, try skipping back into the house. Or maybe try to score a basket with the dirty laundry instead of just placing it into the hamper.

If your feet or legs no longer work on command, then while you're in your chair today, open and lift your arms up in the air and just wave them with wild abandon. And if your arms can no longer reach that high, then lift your eyes. Open them wide and look all around you and below you and above you and drink in the world, your world, and imagine a better one, knowing you are surrounded by God's love, you are God's precious child, beloved and cherished in God's embrace.

And if your eyes have become dim, then open and lift up your heart, allowing it to burst forth in celebration with this proclamation: I am a child of God, made in God's image and I am dazzling!!!