Like a Little Child

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Luke 18:15-17

Sermon Series: Life is Messy

Jesus wants us to understand that the kingdom of God is here and now and that we really can experience the abundant life he has already given us—a life full of love, joy and peace. And today’s passage shows us the way to that kind of life. Listen to God’s word to you:

People were bringing even infants to him 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.

Thanks to our wonderful Children’s Ministries team and so many faithful volunteers, almost 300 children were given the opportunity through our VBS to come to Jesus, to learn more about him and what it means to live life in the kingdom of God. Our 11:00 a.m. service is going to be a celebration of the week, but all the services this morning are using the same passage. And the truth is that the theme of our VBS, Kingdom Rock, fits very well into our summer Life is Messy sermon series, because God’s kingdom really does rock.

In this passage, Jesus is making abundantly clear that the way to enter the kingdom of God is to receive it like a little child. Jesus was fond of pointing to the attitudes and character of children because they are innocent and trusting and have little self-consciousness. They have very little authority or power and live each day in dependence and trust, receiving everything as a gift. And this is the kind of life that Jesus is advocating.

Jesus wants us to understand that the kingdom of God is not achieved, or earned, or acquired by human effort or will power. The kingdom of God is received. Jesus makes it clear that the kingdom of God is all about grace—God accomplishing for us what we cannot accomplish on our own.

Having said that, we need to understand that learning to live by grace rather than human striving is more difficult than it may at first appear. We have learned well the ways of human striving to accomplish and achieve status, significance and success. But those who wish to enter the kingdom of God must
turn away from their own power and self-sufficiency and turn to God to receive the kingdom of heaven like a little child.

In his book, *Desiring God’s Will*, David Benner says there are really only two basic directions we can go in life—we can hold on to control, human effort and striving with gut-wrenching, willful determination, or we can learn the way of a child by willingly surrendering to the protective love and care of our heavenly Father and trusting him to do in and through and for us what only he can do.

We are either living in the kingdom of self or the kingdom of God. Either we are living a life that reflects it is all up to us, or we are choosing to believe that God is loving, caring and providing for us. Benner provides a helpful contrast of these two kingdoms. Look carefully at the following comparisons to see which column better reflects your life.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Kingdom of Self</th>
<th>The Kingdom of God</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Willfulness</td>
<td>Willingness</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ruled by self-interest</td>
<td>Ruled by love</td>
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<tr>
<td>Grasping</td>
<td>Releasing</td>
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<td>Achievement</td>
<td>Gift</td>
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<td>Effort</td>
<td>Consent</td>
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<td>Independence</td>
<td>Interdependence</td>
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<td>Holding</td>
<td>Releasing</td>
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<tr>
<td>Clenched fists</td>
<td>Open hands</td>
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<tr>
<td>Closed heart</td>
<td>Open heart</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hard and brittle</td>
<td>Soft and malleable</td>
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<tr>
<td>Determination</td>
<td>Transformation</td>
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What is clear from our passage today, and from our chart, is that life in the kingdom of God is a life of dependence and vulnerability. But as I said, this is much harder than we think because our natural tendencies are so strong and our adaptive patterns so ingrained. What we need is an adult rehabilitation center that will help us live life in the kingdom like a little child.

We really do need help in learning how to *let go* of our achieving mindset to *receive* life in the kingdom as a gift—to turn around from the kingdom of self to live life in the kingdom of God. How does this happen?

One might say, Life in the kingdom = learning to live my life as Jesus would live it if he were I. How do we learn to live life in the kingdom of God? The same way we learn anything, whether it’s reading, driving, playing the guitar or tennis, or learning a new language or new skill at work. It takes intention and practice, practice, practice. But mind you, practice doesn’t mean just doing more to achieve more. Practice is a way of giving ourselves over so that we can truly change from the inside out and so become a different kind of person who is then able to do what needs to be done. I want to become more like Jesus so I can live life in the kingdom the way he wants me to in the course of my every day, ordinary life.

We cannot change by saying we want to change. And we cannot even change by sheer willpower. We have to honestly
examine our lives and recognize the false beliefs of the kingdom of self and then find the appropriate practice that will help us to change in order to live life as it was meant to be lived, in the kingdom of God.

So, what I want to do for the next few minutes is to look at some intentional practices that help us learn to receive the kingdom of God like a little child. The most basic is simply sleep. I recall how, as a new mother, I spent a lot of time and attention trying to help my babies learn rhythms of sleep, because I knew they would be happier babies and my husband and I would be happier parents when they could sleep well.

But many of us live by the Caribou Coffee motto: “Life is short; stay awake for it,” and so we push ourselves with caffeine to keep going rather than sleeping. The false belief that many of us live by is, “I don’t have time to sleep. I have to get things done. If I don’t do it, nobody will (or you name what you believe).” These false beliefs are a reflection of the kingdom of self and will power. And the truth is that lack of sleep and exhaustion are the number one enemy of the spiritual life. Everything we do in life we do in our bodies, and if our bodies are not sufficiently rested, our abilities will be diminished.

In his book, *The Good and Beautiful God*, James Bryant Smith writes, “Sleep is an act of surrender. It is a declaration of trust. It is admitting that we are not God (who never sleeps), and that is good news. We cannot make ourselves sleep, but we can create the conditions necessary for sleep.”

This week, try to arrange a day when you can sleep as long as you need to without being awakened. It may take some arranging with a spouse to be able to do it, but try to sleep as long as you can, and see how it feels to be truly rested.

Another helpful practice for learning to live like a little child is margin. Margin refers to the space on the edge of a page (top, bottom and sides) that has no text. It is a great concept for helping us to live life in the kingdom of God rather than life in the kingdom of self. Too often, we live as if we have no limits, so we add so much to our schedules that we have no “margin,” no space for leisure, rest, health, family, or God.

Dr. Richard Swenson has written a wonderful book called *Margin*, and in it, he say this: “The conditions of modern-day living devour margin…. Marginless is being thirty minutes late to the doctor’s office because you were twenty minutes late out of the hairdressers’ because you were ten minutes late dropping the children off at school because the car ran out of gas two blocks from the gas station—and you forgot your purse.

“Margin, on the other hand, is having breath left at the top
It really takes a willingness to resist the cultural norm and the false belief that more is better.

There is a secret to creating margin that is very simple but very difficult to do: just say no. The question then becomes, “What do I say no to?” Anything that is not absolutely essential to the well-being of your soul or the welfare of others. This can be difficult, because much of what fills up our time is good. This is not about good versus evil but good versus good. It really takes a willingness to resist the cultural norm and the false belief that more is better. Practicing margin helps us to resist the achieving, producing, accomplishment mindset of the world to live life in the kingdom.

This is an area I continue to wrestle with in my own life. I often commit to trying to do too much, and then my health, capacity for sleep, and my family suffer most. Recently, I made a commitment to do something I really wanted to do, felt I could do, but over the next week I realized my life was not going to hold that commitment very well given other realities, and so I needed to go back and say no, or at least not now. The words of a very wise man kept echoing in my mind: “The really important thing is to try not to do too much.”

Related to the practice of margin is the practice of slowing down. The deepest part of the soul likes to go slow so that we can delight in the one who created us and loves us. If we hurry around like hamsters in a wheel, we are not living or enjoying life in the kingdom of God.

I recently heard a speaker share something very helpful. In ages past, ascetic practices like lengthy fasts and self-flagellation were popular ways of growing closer to God. But in our day and age, we need something different. Paul Evdokimov aptly writes: “Today the combat is not the same. We no longer need added pain. Hair shirts, chains, and flagellation would risk useless-ly breaking us. Today, mortification would be liberation from every kind of addiction—speed, noise, alcohol, and all kinds of stimulants. Asceticism would be necessary rest, the discipline of regular periods of calm and silence, when one could regain the ability to stop for prayer and contemplation, even in the heart of all the noise of the world.”

The truth is that we can’t slow down until we practice margin. We have to cut out activities before we can change the pace of our lives. We can slow down by putting space between appointments, choosing the slow line at the store or in traffic, cooking slowly and lingering over meals, taking a slow walk, noticing the beauty and wonder of creation.

Just last night, I returned from two weeks of vacation.
The first week my family enjoyed hiking in the mountains and playing on the beach at Lake Tahoe. The second week was spent in a small rural town with my parents. I was blessed to be able to live slowly, and my soul is in a good place because of it. I am so wanting to continue this practice as I transition back into my life here in northern Virginia. I encourage you to try to make at least one whole day a “slow day,” creating space to linger, enjoy, observe—to simply be.

Silence and solitude are also important practices to help us learn to live life in the kingdom of God. Silence is the radical reversal of our cultural norms to use words to hype, exaggerate and spin. As we outwardly let go of our addiction to noise, words and activity, and inwardly let go of our clinging, controlling, possessing compulsions, we relinquish ourselves to God and allow him to control our relationship.

Solitude provides the freedom not only to sit still in a room but also to be alone, not in order to be away from people but in order to be fully present to the God who is always present with us. Dallas Willard observes, “When we go into solitude and silence, we stop making demands on God. It is enough that God is God and we are his. We learn we have a soul, that God is here, and this world is “my Father’s house.” This knowledge of God progressively replaces the rabid busyness and self-importance that drives most human beings, including the religious ones.”

Sabbath may be the practice that will help us most in resisting the kingdom of self-tendencies. From the very beginning, at creation itself, Sabbath has declared that the Living God is the one source and aim of all our lives. Not possessions. Not the striving after them. Not dominance over others. Keeping the Sabbath enables us to take our hands off of our work for one day in seven so that we are truly able to trust that God is the one who is working, even when we are not. We stop our doing and rest in God and enjoy being his beloved child. This sacred rhythm of work and rest are vital to remembering who we are and to continuing to rely on God’s grace in Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit rather than on our own human will and striving.

Norman Wirzba notes, “Sabbath rest is thus a call to Sabbath trust, a call to visibly demonstrate in our daily living that we know ourselves to be upheld and maintained by the grace of God rather than the strength and craftiness of our hands. To enjoy a Sabbath day, we must give up our desire for total control. We must learn to live by the generosity of manna falling all around us.”

I have to confess that by nature I am a serious-minded, competitive and often driven
Children live freely and lightly, and that’s how God wants us to live, too.

person, so the practices I have already mentioned help me to detach from the false beliefs and patterns that hinder me from living like a little child in the kingdom of God. But the spiritual practice that has been the most helpful to me lately is the practice of play. Yes, you heard me right. In the past few months, I have played more card and board games and sought out more opportunities to laugh and celebrate than I had in the previous year. I am finding that play actually cultivates a lighter, softer, kinder, more joyful side of me that is a reflection of my truest and best self.

James Bryant Smith writes, “Jesus told us we must enter the kingdom as a child, with trust, joyful expectation and very little self-awareness. Play is an act of self-abandonment: we stop taking ourselves so seriously and simply enjoy life. In one sense the kingdom of God is like a playground. Safe within the confines of a play area, with trusting parents overseeing their children, kids are free to slide and spin and climb and enjoy every moment. Because our heavenly Father watches over us, we are free to let go and play. When we play, we are training our bodies and souls to live with genuine excitement. That is what the kingdom of God is all about.”

If we honestly reflected on our lives, most of us would recognize that our lives are compulsively driven by the false beliefs that “It’s all up to me. I can’t stop because things will fall apart or something bad will happen.” These are beliefs we live by and sadly are often imposing on our children. But Jesus invites us to a different way of living in the kingdom of God.

I have shared Jesus’ words from Matthew 11:28-30 many times with you before, but they bear repeating. Listen to them from Eugene Peterson’s The Message: “Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly.”

To enter the kingdom of God, we must receive it as a little child. Children live freely and lightly, and that’s how God wants us to live, too. We must recognize the beliefs and adaptive patterns of the kingdom of self and intentionally choose to replace them with the life-giving rhythms of grace that God can use to transform us into people whose lives are characterized by love, joy and peace.

Summer often provides a different pace of life and an opportunity to practice new rhythms. Jesus is inviting you and me to let go of the kingdom
Learn from Jesus how to live like a little child, fully enjoying God and the gift of life he has given.

I confess that I am concerned not only about how adults are living but about the way we are imposing expectations on children and even stealing the practice of play from them. We are scheduling their time so intensely that they do not have time and space to enjoy being, relating and creating. Even playful activities like sports, music and other hobbies become characterized by adults’ obsessive compulsions to achieve and produce. This, my friends, is not a good thing. It may help them get ahead from the world’s point of view but, in truth, children are actually being formed to live life in the kingdom of self rather than the kingdom of God where life is slow because we have all of eternity. Joy and peace abound because we live by grace; it’s not all up to us. There is time to rest and play and enjoy and be because I trust God is God and I am not.