

GREATEST???

Kids. They can be noisy, nose-y, and nutty. They can break things, get things dirty, eat things they're not supposed to eat, say things they're not supposed to say, touch things they're not supposed to touch. After all, they're kids – little ones. They're learning and growing. And even as they learn, and grow, and head toward maturity – they still do things differently than their adult counterparts, such that the elders are often prone to lamenting “the way things used to be.” “The younger generation” – “X, Q, Z... Millennials – etc. etc. And maybe they even sometimes throw up their hands in the air and say, “I don't understand.”

For my parents, it was long hair, rock music, and the concern about drinking, pot, and LSD. Reasonable things. And today, the modern parent worries about cellphone addiction, personal irresponsibility, social media, opioids, sexual recreation, obesity and the like.

Little ones. Kids. Young people. Yet Jesus, today in our text, brings one in the middle of them all and says to the responsible, hard-working, mature adults, “Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

“Hey, Jesus ... what? Isn't there something to be said for experience ... for the school of hard knocks ... for education and learning and wisdom? Why would you pick them as the examples? Go to the grey hairs, and the wrinkles, -- those whose proven track records mark them as responsible, reliable, hard-working. Glorify the elders in our midst, not the babies.

But no. Jesus brings a child, and he says “greatest.” And why? Well, let me share with you some characteristics that I think Jesus had in mind.

1. Trust. Have you ever seen a dad ask his child to do something that clearly out of the child's comfort zone? “Jump off, I'll catch you!!” “Eat that thing, it'll taste good.” “Wear this.” “Try this.” “Go up in front of the church and listen to the pastor.”

Children have, it seems to me, an instinctive ability to trust the ones they love – to unswervingly accept the things that many adults would probably question simply because they have confidence in the one who is telling them to do it.

Many years ago, when she was just a toddler, my daughter Becky trusted her parents when it came to foods she could eat and food she couldn't. You see, she had a milk allergy, and she wasn't always sure what foods might taste good, but ultimately bring nausea or discomfort.

Sometime in the middle of her younger years, however, I can remember an incident that told me this trustful attitude wouldn't last forever. All of a sudden I put some of her soy milk in front of her and she looked at me funny and said, "Is that my kind of milk?" I couldn't figure it out. Why no, after literally hundreds of times of successful provision, did she suddenly not trust me?"

Well, it turns out that, during a visit to my mom's house, one of my sisters had inadvertently given Becky a glass of regular milk causing her to get sick. Now she was gun shy. Cause people make mistakes.

Our God, however, does deserve our ultimate trust. He created us and made us what we are; and He loved us enough to send His only Son to die for us. He got into our skin, knew our temptations and struggles, carried our sins and bore our punishment – all so that we might have life the way He wanted it to be for us. In every way He has proven His commitment to us – in every way He has shown Himself to be faithful. There need be no reason to doubt Him – He always keeps His word.

But we older folks, we're weathered. We've had so many examples of people failing us, that we have trouble trusting anything. Our implicit trust has been broken down by lies and failures and broken promises from others.

This is one reason God commends children. He wants us to recognize His trustworthiness and return to that strong faith, by the power of His Spirit. He wants to renew, in us, that ability to believe in Him not because we understand, that it's logical, that we are comfortable – but because He is who He is. Our Father – our Heavenly Father who will never, ever fail. #1 Trust.

#2. Teachability. Children are so anxious for knowledge – so thirsty for new pieces of information. When I watch Pippa on Mondays one of her favorite things to do is just point to things. Yes, that's your aunt Michelle. Yes, that's a green truck. Yes, that's something you can eat. No that's something you shouldn't touch.

Kids most common question: why? That's why they devour books and conversation and information.

Unfortunately, when children grow older, they often begin to lose that thirst for lifelong learning. They think, "I already know that, or they get bored or apathetic, or distracted."

Our God, however, calls us to be constantly learning and growing – open to new truths, a new way of looking at things, open to new ideas and ways that He might lead us. Like children, He wants us to yearn for His voice as the voice of wisdom and guidance, and to listen to His voice of truth. That voice, of course, can be found in Holy Scripture, And I am so glad to see our young people coming to Sunday School and hearing from this word. It is my most fervent prayer that they will keep doing it for the rest of their life and not take the road that so many do, thinking once they know the way of salvation in Jesus, that there's nothing left to learn. #2 Teachability.

#3. Thrill. Children get so excited about things – they see the beauty and the value of the little things many adults overlook, and they appreciate them as much as they can. I look at how excited Pippa is over a simple flower, a picture of someone she knows, a goofy face, a truck on the road, a bird or dog.

At VBS I see the joy and enthusiasm with which children sing songs. The verve with which they play games. The passion they have over their simple craft project. This is a third quality that God wishes to see in His people: enthusiasm. After all, why be so stoic when it comes to Him who made the earth, the sky, the stars, the birds, the trees, and everything there is – the God who cared enough for you and me; tiny specks of dust though we be in the scope of His universe – that He became one of us, to suffer and die for us, to offer His body and His blood to us, and to open up His kingdom so that we might live.

My friends, if there's anything worth getting excited about, it's that! And God wants us to be excited about it – excited enough to share it with others – excited enough to worship with joy – excited enough to live as His people reaching out with His love. #3. Thrill.

A fourth quality of children that Jesus seems to praise – in fact, the one that is specifically mentioned by Jesus in our text is humility. "Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." He says. And what is humility? Generally humility is

defined as unassuming, unpretentious, not always needing to speak or to tell others what to do, but instead, to listen and to hear. Not always needing pat on the back or to achieve a high stature among others because of accomplishments, but to walk the sometimes inglorious road of doing what you should, even when you don't want to and even when no one notices.

When I hear these words, I picture a little child in his mother's arms, but not a bit concerned about the different opinions of others, not at all a glory seeker or a stubborn, "my way is the right way" thinker. No, not at all. He is simply content to be what he is – a baby – a baby who needs to learn, to grow, and to be cared for by others. A baby who is not embarrassed to imitate what is good and to avoid what is bad as taught to him by those who may know better.

#4. Humility: a willingness to lower one's selfish guard and to receive from others.

And finally, though I'm sure there are many others we could consider today: #5
Helpfulness – a willingness to serve.

Children, I've observed, love to do things – they love to be involved and active. They love to serve God and others. I know my confirmation kids enjoy the opportunity to help out in the church, maybe by helping at VBS or acolyting, ushering, assisting with little kids. They like to do what they can to make a difference.

How many people get involved in civic or church activities like kids get involved in school activities? Many of us just stay at home and do our own thing. But children are blessed with incredible desire to share themselves with others, and they do it regularly in a way, sometimes, that could make an adult stand up and take notice. For adults, you see, are so busy, so consumed with things to do, that they often fail to find the time.

This is the fifth quality God is looking for in His people: service. Giving of one's time, treasure, talent for His word. God wants His church to grow. God wants His word to be spread. And we are His instruments. He is counting on our hands and our time to make it happen. #5.
Helpfulness.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ. On this day, as we think about childlike qualities, may we truly honor the Father who made us by being the children He created us to be -- three T's and two H's. Trusting, teachable, thrilled with His presence. Humble and helpful serving Him

and in reaching out with His love. Will we ever be perfect? Of course not. That's why we come here – to be nourished and encouraged by the brothers and sisters that surround us.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.