

Duke Chapel Sermon  
Reverend Dr. Jason Byassee  
7/3/2005  
Matthew 11:16-21, 25-30

When Jesus tells a story about children we expect it will be a nice story. The image of Jesus with children bumping around his feet is a popular one in churches. “Let the little children come to me, do not hinder them,” is a favorite biblical verse.

The problem is, children aren’t always nice, as anyone who has actually been around them knows. Martin Luther got at this in 1538, perhaps thinking of his six children under the age of 12: “Christ said we must become as little children to enter the kingdom. Dear God, this is too much. Must we become such idiots?”

Jesus isn’t that harsh, at least, but he does say this: “To what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.’” He does not seem to distinguish between his enemies and his followers here. I seem to remember a chant from the playground when I was a kid—yo mommy, yo daddy, yo whole generation. That’s Jesus here--this whole generation is like children saying cruel things to one another on the playground, who will neither weep nor laugh as they should. You’re all children, he says to us—in a bad way.

But it only gets worse. To let you in on a little preacher secret—when something is left out of a Sunday reading, immediately go and look it up—that’s where the good stuff is. “Jesus began to denounce the cities in which most of his miracles had been performed because they did not repent. ‘Woe to you Korazim! Woe to you Bethsaida! If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted up to the skies? No, you will go down to the depths. If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom, it would have remained to this day. But I tell you that it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for you.’” Try putting that in crochet for the mantle

Then Jesus has something of a mood swing. He starts talking about children again—more pleasantly this time—thanking God for hiding these things from the wise and learned and revealing them only to infants. Then we get one of the loveliest verses in the whole New Testament, one that *is* often bronzed in churches: “come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble of heart, and you will find rest for your souls.” Beautiful. The thing is, when you read the passage just before it, it’s not so comforting.

When I was in college I volunteered to help freshmen move in on their first day. This was not, of course, mere altruism—it was a great way to meet girls, and besides we got a free T-shirt. On the back was printed this verse—“come to me, all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” Upperclassmen movers, claiming to be Jesus for young co-eds.

Don’t we do that with religion? Coopt it to some personal desire, make it useful to some project of our own to which God is inconsequential? I want to meet freshmen girls,

I don a T-shirt with a bible verse pretending merely to be helpful. A trivial example. But our politicians and pundits, left and right, are sure they know what Jesus has to say about any and everything, they (we?) whip Jesus out of their pocket like a mascot to bless every cause, wield him like a club to bash their enemies. Just so, they, we, turn Jesus into an idol. A mute, dumb god whom we use to get what we want.

And just so, Jesus blasts us. Jesus expresses ferocious rage, lashing out at whole communities, places he'd preached and lived in, places surely filled with people he loved, and promising them a terrible fate. It's clear here that Jesus is *not* a mascot, not a sword to stab our enemies, but a person—who gets angry, who has enemies as well as friends, whose anger will fall on us if we're not careful. Now we're a long way from gentle Jesus, meek and mild, kind to children and nice to everyone, and we should be. For that Jesus can be the worst of idols, but this one is Lord of heaven and earth, Lord of history and eternity, our maker and our judge. He is worthy of our reverence. It reminds me of the comment about Aslan in CS Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia*, when a child asks if he's safe—he's a lion after all. "Safe, no no no," he's told. "He's not safe. But he's good."

This is a difficult Lord. One who won't let you guess in advance what he will say or do. One whom to follow is an adventure—for it will get you into trouble, and also lead you into unexpected joy. This is why our churches are not museums or mausoleums, but assembly halls, theaters in which anything can happen, anyone might show up, even God.

The danger when we hear Jesus speak of children is that we foist our expectations of childhood onto Jesus. And what we, as a culture, mean by "childhood" can be rather scary. I think of the child beauty pageants that came to public attention ten years ago when the little girl was murdered—images of 5 year olds prettied up and taught that come-hither glance. Where I live in the Chicago suburbs we've had stories recently of weight lifter children—ten year olds with six pack abs, in body building contests. And of other children whose parents hire personal trainers—the money to be made in athletics is so colossal that one can hardly avoid making the investment. We all hear these stories and shake our head. But isn't it extraordinarily hard to keep our children from being jammed into our expectations for them—to be beautiful or wealthy—to be an object of their parents' damaged desire.

We also know about adults who've never really grown up. Nick Hornby's novels are described as "lad lit," about boys who are men in name only. The film versions, *High Fidelity* and *About a Boy*, are so wonderful because we recognize those men—cynically distant from their girlfriends, more interested in pop culture and video games than anything more meaningful. Seems like I've seen a few of those lads around this campus—and not just among the students!

We so badly need the church to help us be mature persons. This is the most exciting part about parenting for me. Teaching my children to pray before they know any better. Having them learn to sit in church as long as they do in front of the television. It's not obvious that tv should be easier to pay attention to than worship after all. If kids are nothing else they're certainly malleable, watching what we do, imitating it—to a frightening degree really. That's how we must be with reference to Jesus.

I spent 9 years of my life in graduate school at this university, finally finished with my last degree in May. The best thing Duke did for me was to provide me with wise mentors. I don't first think of their erudition or scholarship—though those are necessary. It's their skill as wise guides—their ability to pick me up off the floor when I was

discouraged, to point out my strengths when I couldn't see them, to be both kind and resourceful. Under my director's tutelage I became more than I could have alone. This isn't because I'm a carbon copy of him—I worked on quite different things—it's because he gave me space to be what I was to become, within limits, with wisdom and good humor. That's the university at its best. We so often hear stories of the other kind of teacher—the one whose students become commodities for the pursuit of his own greatness—but more often teaching is a sort of wise parenting of children.

Jesus here promises to do something like this for us, children that we are, cruel to one another that we are, undisciplined and unruly that we are. He calls himself the Son of his Father, whom he thanks for revealing these things not to wise, but to infants. This Father takes in infants, not adults, the untutored, not the expert, the undisciplined, not the perfect. And he makes them brothers and sisters with Jesus, having his same Father. St. Cyprian said “no one can have God for a Father who doesn't have the church for a mother.” Another way to say this is God has one son by nature—Jesus, but many by grace or adoption—the rest of us who are baptized into his body. In this family there are high standards, there is great discipline, but there is also unbounded joy.

Discipline first. A Mennonite friend of mine, that is a member of a historic peace church, describes idolatry as service of “Mars, mammon, and me.” Mars, the god of war—so prevalent now in our consciousness we don't even remember it's abnormal to be in a constant state of war, with untold losses in humanity and treasure. Mammon—wealth—another demanding god. Someone my age is told to plan to need some \$3 million to retire with. Not to worry, if I invest now and the stock market hums for 3 decades I'm there. This is a difficult master—one requiring sacrifice, hard work, sweat and anxiety, but one that may finally bless me, if I'm lucky. Then the worst idol—me. It is so hard to avoid a sense that my desires are the most important thing in the world. We're such good consumers we don't even notice the abnormality of our sense that my needs and wants are to be fulfilled and defended against others by any means necessary. The gods of mars, mammon, and me.

And Jesus says, over against these gods, “come to me, all who are weary, and I will give you rest.” It's hard to serve mars, mammon, and me, sure it feels natural, but it's much harder than it is to serve Jesus, whose yoke is easy, and whose burden is light. Who is not safe, but good.

I'm always struck when I ask people who live radical, costly forms of Christianity how they feel about doing so. I've been interviewing people from intentional Christian communities—that is, communities of persons who give up their individual paychecks to a common pot from which they all live. Modern day monastics really, but these are evangelicals, living mostly in inner-city settings. Their work for reconciliation and peace is astounding, and a model for others. But when I say as much to them they tend to say something like, “actually, it's the easiest and best way to live.” What? No paycheck, no private house, no retirement account or health care—and this is the easiest way to live? Well, sure, *you* trust your health insurance and retirement and military, we trust God. Christianity for them might have a difficult Lord, a yoke of sorts, but it's the most gracious Lord and easiest yoke available. Bob Dylan in one of his Christian phases sang “you got to serve somebody, it might be the devil, or it might be the Lord, but you got to serve somebody.” If the question is between mammon, mars, me or Jesus—Jesus wins out every time.

If Jesus is indeed a difficult but gracious Lord, a teacher wise enough to make us good students, grownup adults, then this place, the church, is a playground of imagination. I only realized how much I loved worshipping here when I had to leave. For years my now-wife and I wheeled a retired professor into our spot right there. I love little things about worship in here—watching whether choir members bow before the cross or not—some do, some don't, dunno why. Noticing the wee little man way on top of the thing above my head—what's he doing up there? Noticing the bald headed man carved into the pulpit below me—Will Willimon told us once that was St. Ambrose, writing down what the preacher says for future judgment. Looking at the ragtag army on the stained glass behind me—all holding weapons, but in this case the weapons that would be used against them in their martyrdom—some army, these onward Christian soldiers. Between light and shadow, robe and ritual, pew and organ our minds learn to imagine discipleship, to live into the wise and good lordship of Jesus. And it's a great gift.

It's striking, that in this magnificent building, all these accomplished people, we're all supposed to become children. We're so busy growing up here in this place and Jesus invites us to grow down. Not because kids are cute or Jesus is nice, as I've said. But because we all need wise and good teaching, we all need a lighter yoke and a lesser load than we're carrying. And the cross that Jesus bears, heavy as it looks, when we carry it with him, is the best way to toddle through life.