

“The Child Inside”  
The Reverend Michael L. Delk  
St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky  
1<sup>st</sup> Sunday after Christmas – 26 & 27 December 2015  
Galatians 3:23-25; 4:4-7; John 1:1-18

Everyone has a little child inside of them, a piece of our past that never goes away. Most of the time, we keep that little child tucked away out of sight, though sometimes it rears an ugly head, in the form of insecurities or selfishness. Yet at this time of year, the best part of our inner child comes out to play.

We adults may not receive toys from Santa Claus anymore, but a sense of awe and wonder and anticipation bursts forth at Christmas, especially when we spend some time with children. We live vicariously through them, catching some of their excitement and joy, which often causes our most treasured memories to surface. But pretty soon, the season passes and a New Year begins, laden with all of our adult obligations, and we send that child back into a corner, while we wrestle once again with what we call the “real” world.

Of course, it doesn’t have to be that way. Yes, the childlike innocence, the naïve sense of invincibility and immortality, have long since passed, either because we have grown wise or shrunk into cynicism, but it’s really a matter of perspective, and the perspective of scripture, specifically the parts written by Paul and John, is that we can be children again. As Paul wrote in his Letter to the Galatians, “Christ came . . . so that we might receive adoption as children.” Likewise, John in his Gospel reveals that for those who embrace Jesus, “he gave power to become children of God.”

Now some of us may not like that idea. We like to think of ourselves as sophisticated grownups, powerful and self-sufficient and independent. Others may have trouble with the concept of being a child of God, because childhood was not a good experience. Physical or

emotional abuse, a dysfunctional family life, overly stern discipline, or rejection by one's peers could cause us to feel that childhood is something to be escaped and left behind. But being adopted children of God transcends our objections and reluctance.

For those who suffered during childhood, God is the perfect parent, loving and kind, who can bring some measure of redemption and healing to that difficult period in life. For those who chafe at the metaphor out of pride, settling down into the notion that, in God's eyes, you are a child can bring humility, because we begin to realize that any power we possess comes from God and that we are not self-sufficient or independent. Instead, we rely and depend on God for everything.

John makes this clear at the outset of his Gospel. To him, Jesus embodies the creative force of God, the Word of God that literally spoke creation into being. Here John connects with the first chapter of Genesis, where God's method of making the universe involved a very simple formula. God said "Let there be," and whatever God said became reality.

Referring to Jesus, John wrote, "All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What came into being in him was life." So our assumption that we are in any way self-made, no matter how hard we've worked, is arrogant. All that we are, have been, or will become are gracious gifts of God. Our presence here now, the air that we breathe, none of it would exist without the Word reverberating throughout creation, holding all things in being.

However, it is possible to merely exist, to be connected with God at an ontological level, without actually having a relationship with God, and this is why the Word came into the world as Jesus. The Word, the Son of God, became a human being to make it possible for us to share in a more intimate relationship with God as child and parent.

It is in this personal relationship that we find freedom from sin, the mercy of forgiveness, the hope of promise, and fullness of joy. Yet entering this relationship with God depends on accepting Jesus. John emphasizes this heavily throughout his long, complicated Gospel. If we accept Jesus for who he is, and not for who we would like him to be; if we accept Jesus as an intrinsic part of our hearts and lives, then we become brothers and sisters with him and with each other, part of a new family that goes beyond blood, because this family is forged in the sacrifice of Jesus' blood.

Paul fleshes out the nature of this relationship more fully in his Letter to the Galatians. A little background might be helpful here. The Christian community in Galatia was terribly confused, and Paul was very frustrated with them. He had been the first to share the good news of Christ with them, and then he left to spread the Gospel elsewhere, as was his practice. Apparently, not long after Paul had gone, some more people visited Galatia, with a slightly different message, and now the Galatians were divided about whom to believe, which triggered a passionate letter from Paul.

Some sided with the more recent visitors, who said that to follow Jesus one must first be a good, observant Jew, following the strict rules of Sabbath, eating kosher, and circumcision that had been revealed in the Law of Moses. Some stuck with Paul's teaching, which didn't require any of those things. Paul felt that faith in Jesus alone would allow the grace of Christ to transform someone. Anything else was not only unnecessary, but a potentially dangerous distraction. In fact, Paul refers to the Law as a guarded prison and as a disciplinarian, whose only purpose was to help keep people in line "until Christ came."

So on the one hand, you have people who think you can work your way into God's grace by scrupulously observing a set of rules that create a particular way of life. This is somewhat

similar to the false idea some people have about being independent, self-sufficient, self-made adults. On the other hand, you have Paul insisting that faith is the only requirement, indeed the only way, to become children of God and, furthermore, that this faith is not something we can earn or manufacture, but is rather a gift of grace God offers to any who will receive it. In other words, God makes salvation possible, and our role simply involves responding with acceptance and humble gratitude. Salvation just happens. It's like a train that stops at a station, and we either get on, or we don't. The ticket's already paid for, bought with the blood of Jesus.

Now this doesn't mean that there's nothing for us to do. When we receive faith and become adopted children of God, it fundamentally alters us, just as the lives of children radically change when loving parents adopt them. Our perception shifts, as does our behavior. Things that once seemed vitally important, like wealth, prestige, power, reputation, become much less of a concern. Our ambition to succeed gets redirected away from ourselves and toward what God wants for His world. We notice things that we used to ignore or that simply weren't in the field of our awareness before. We start to understand that what is commonly called the "real" world is a lie. The only real world is the one where God is present and honored and worshipped and obeyed.

We stop become less childish and more childlike, with the best parts coming into the fore, like awe, wonder, irrepressible joy, gentleness, and yes, even a renewed sense of innocence – not of the naïve type, but an innocence that softens our callousness and banishes our cynicism. It's a liberation from what weighs us down, and an invitation to a whole new life, where "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness," are magnified and gradually become second-nature to us.

So, how about it? Are you ready to be a child of God, or if you're already one of God's children, are you eager to renew that relationship? The child inside us doesn't have to go into a corner, just because Christmas has started to fade away. That little child can stay out and play every day, if we let go and abide in the faith of Jesus. Amen.