

# “Regressing to Greatness”

*Learning from God's Word*

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Matthew 18.1-5

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Here's the thing with children, those offspring we humans produce. They take so long to get rid of.

Don't get me wrong. With Caleb heading to college this fall, our nest is feeling a bit too empty. We were in no rush for our kids to leave. Still, it took them long enough.

Robin chicks lift off from their parents' nest 2 weeks after hatching. At 2 weeks, my "chicks" were just able to lift their heads. Baby giraffes are up and walking within hours of their birth. It took mine 4 months to roll themselves onto their tummies. Lots of animals never have an adult looking after them at all. They're on their own from day one. We live under our parents' or other adults' protection, provision, guidance, and teaching for years and years. It takes a long time for us to make it on our own. That's human.

II

With thoughts of childhood in mind, let's listen to God's Word, what Jesus has to say to us today.

*At that time the disciples came to Jesus.*

*'So, then,' they said, 'who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?'*

*Jesus called a child and stood her in the middle of them.*

*'I'm telling you the truth,' he said. 'Unless you turn inside out and become like children, you will never, ever, get into the kingdom of heaven. So if any of you make yourselves humble like this child, you will be great in the kingdom of heaven. And if anyone welcomes one such child in my name, they welcome me.'*

(Kingdom New Testament)

III

We do not need to guess at which aspect of childhood Jesus has in mind. He tells us what he means. *"Make yourself humble like this child. . . ."*

When Winston Churchill was the prime minister of Britain, he was once told that his opponent, the leader of the opposition, was a very humble man. *"Well,"* replied

Churchill, "*he has a lot to be humble about.*"<sup>1</sup>

We can think of humbleness in different ways.<sup>2</sup> Maybe a humble person says, "*I am nothing.*" Compared to others, I don't measure up. Certainly that's what Churchill thought of his opponent. Is that the best sort of humbleness?

Or, maybe humbleness is saying, "*I am nothing, compared to what I could or should be.*" I have not achieved what I should have. I have failed to accomplish what I expected of myself, or what others of me. It's like we have Churchill grumbling around in our minds, quipping dark thoughts. Scary to imagine. Not helpful, either.

What about this idea of humbleness? I am humble when I realize I cannot be something on my own. I can't exist on my own. That makes me like every other person, like every other creature in all God's creation.<sup>3</sup> It's not that I can choose to be this way, as if existing on my own is ever an option. Necessarily, I am bound to others. Necessarily, I depend on them. Humbleness is accepting this truth, and celebrating it. It's human.

Saying "I am nothing," or "I am nothing compared to what I could or should be," that's humbleness that compares. "*I can't be something on my own*" is a humbleness that connects.

#### IV

I think this is what Jesus is talking about, when he tells us to make a child our teacher.

A child has no illusions of independence. Sure, they make tentative stabs at it. A toddler insists on doing it "*all my byself.*"<sup>4</sup> A preteen pushes boundaries. Still, they know, they count on, that there are people looking after them and out for them. People who love them. (If a child does not have that, it's not the child's doing. It's a tragedy.)

Children know they belong with others, and they are who they are because they belong. They know they are dependent, and that it is good.

Apparently we grow up. We suppose that becoming an adult is leaving the illusions of

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in John P. Bowen, [The Unfolding Gospel](#) (Minneapolis MN: Fortress, 2021), 9.

<sup>2</sup> What follows comes from an essay by Miroslav Volf, quoted in Andrew Root, [The Congregation in a Secular Age](#) (Grand Rapids MI: Baker, 2021), 237f.

<sup>3</sup> Volf writes, "Along with other human beings and the rest of creation, my own self is not the kind of [being] that could be something on its own."

<sup>4</sup> That's how one of my children would put it, insistently, seriously, and hilariously.

childhood behind. Truthfully, adults simply have new illusions. Illusions that we can be non-dependent, self-sufficient, that we make ourselves.

This was true in Jesus' time. How much more is it true for us modern people. We have turned un-dependence into a goal, being self-made into a virtue, and self-sufficiency into an idol.

Not for Jesus. He knows childhood is not a stage we pass through onto something more important. Childhood is when we are true to our basic, God-crafted nature.<sup>5</sup> God forms us for relationships.<sup>6</sup> We belong to others, and they belong to us.

When we are lost to that, a child is what we need to re-become. Repent. Turn around from the wrong way, and start going right. Regress to childhood dependence. That is greatness is God's Kingdom.

## V

In this episode of Jesus, he calls us to make 2 moves. First, an away-move. To fit into what it is like when God reigns, when the ways of the world are finally made into God's ways, when the kingdom comes . . . to fit into that, we need to move away from who we have been, toward who we truly are. Humble, not trying to be something on our own, like a child.

The second move that Jesus calls us to is an embrace. To be Jesus' people together, welcome children. "*Jesus called a child and stood her in the middle of them.*" She (or he; we don't know the child's gender), Jesus made her their teacher. Our teacher.

We need children to show us the way of Jesus.

When we get down to play with a child . . . when we get eye-to-eye, we enter into his world. We join in his imagination. We become with him, for him. It's his gift for us.

A child, whatever else might be going on, lives in that moment. The sorrows of that

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<sup>5</sup> A young Dietrich Bonhoeffer—he was 22 at the time—gave a talk to the German-speaking congregation he was pastoring in Barcelona, Spain. It was titled, "Jesus Christ and the Essence of Christianity." After quoting Matthew 18:2-3, he said, "For Jesus, the child is not merely a transitional stage on the way to adulthood, something to be overcome; quite the contrary, he or she is something utterly unique before which the adult should have the utmost respect. For indeed, God is closer to children than to adults. In this sense, Jesus becomes the discoverer of the child." Quoted in Root, 231.

<sup>6</sup> Root says, "'To be a child is to be a person who reminds us all that we are the kind of creatures who have our being in and with others. We are persons who need relationship in order to be.'" Root, 238.

moment; tears are part of childhood, so we need to cry. Also the joys of that moment.

Richard Burt passed on to me this photo. His colleague Karen Hayes took it. These kids are in East Kivu. That's a region in central Africa torn by generations of brutal conflict, poisoned by human evil and suffering. In this moment, though, they are joyful. Because they are kids. Mugging for the camera. Playing.

Children play. Do you play? I think our congregation could use a good play.

To welcoming a child, you've got to be patient. You've got to be open, to wherever the play will take you. Welcoming a child is being free. Not free-from, but free-for. Free for another. Free to give and receive. Free to be who you are. That's true freedom.

Become like a child. Welcome a child. That is greatness.

## VI

Welcome a child, and we welcome Jesus.

Jesus,

*because he was in the form of God,  
did not regard equality with God as something to cling to,  
but emptied himself, became human . . . .<sup>7</sup>*

. . . became a child.

The fullness of God, depended on his mom's milk. Was held in his parents' protection. Needed to be changed. Played with toys.

When we welcome a child, we welcome Jesus . . . *this* Jesus.

A space opens up, and Jesus gets to working with us. He changes us. He slows our striving, and teaches us to receive and give. A child is vulnerable, and through them Jesus touches our vulnerabilities. By caring, we discover our true identity. We are made to care, not compete.<sup>8</sup>

When we welcome children, we receive Jesus. God's kingdom comes in among us. We become like them. We regress. And it is great! Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>7</sup> From Philippians 2:6-8.

<sup>8</sup> David E. Fitch, Faithful Presence: Seven Disciplines that Shape the Church for Mission (Downers Grove IL: InterVarsity, 2016), 135-140.