

“Wonderful Counsellor”  
Isaiah 9:2-7; Matthew 19:16-22  
December 2, 2018

Do you ever get the idea that sometimes our Bible appears to contradict itself? For example, Jesus famously said “Suffer the little children to come unto me, for of such is the Kingdom of Heaven.” Yet within a generation of the death of Christ, the Apostle Paul, in one of the most stirring passages of the New Testament on Love, wrote “When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. But when I grew up, I put away childish things.”

And so, listening to Paul, some of us might conclude that we have to grow up, that we are no longer supposed to behave like we were little kids; that it’s time to put away childish things - like Santa, and the Easter bunny, nightmares of dragons and things that go bump in the night ... for something more serious.

And yet, somehow, when Christmas comes, there is something in the back of our minds that says, “Wait! There was another way of living, another way of thinking, another way of dealing with life.” Or, as Paul would put it, there is a “more excellent way.”

For many of us, these thoughts are like pipe-dreams, for life has a way of beating us into its mold. Many of us are often jaded by the mere routine of daily existence, and circumstance can often make us bitter. And so we might say to ourselves, “Christmas is for the children.”

What we really mean is, “Christmas is not for us.”

But we still knock ourselves out with the shopping, the baking, the decorating and the merry-making - not for us, but for memories of a happier time,

in hopes that those to come after us might enjoy, for those few brief years of innocence, that holiday sense of joy and wonder.

But what has happened to our sense of wonder? Why is it that we can no longer skip to the wonderful sound of a babbling brook? Might someone see us, and think that we have gone a little soft in the head? Why do we see in the dandelion a weed, when a toddler sees - in an entire field of them - the brightness of color, the wonder of life, the joy of a gift to a parent or a friend?

Put another way, what has the Apostle Paul done to us? Or have we misunderstood what Paul was trying to tell us?

I guess I'm being a little hard on growing up. But maybe you'll excuse me - after all, my wife accuses me of never having grown up, of still being an eight-year-old. To that accusation I reply, may I always be guilty! So while I'm the first one to say that faith must grow and develop, must be open to new possibilities and new life, let us also remember that except we be like a little child, the Kingdom of Heaven will be beyond us, beyond our grasp, beyond our understanding.

So then, what is it that the little ones have that some of us may have lost? Among other things, we may have lost a sense of wonder. A sense that there is something mysterious about life that can pique our curiosity. And in exercising our curiosity, we seek not so much for all the answers - no one can have all the answers - but that our search proceed in such a way so that further wonders of life might continue to unfold before us. For as soon as we believe we have found the answer - even if we're not sure we've even been asking the right question - as soon as we believe that all the clues have been analyzed and an irrefutable conclusion has been reached, we are only deceiving ourselves.

The Pharisees and the Sadducees thought they had all the answers. Salvation was possible when you obeyed the entirety of the Law. An open and shut case. So though the rich young man who came to Christ, saying, “I have kept all the Law. What else must I do to be saved?” Jesus only demonstrated to him that he had NOT kept ALL the Law. And, on top of that, keeping the whole Law would be impossible. A dead end. That was not the way to go.

What the young man who came to Jesus lacked was a sense of wonder. A sense that salvation comes not from doing certain things while following all the rules, but from a belief in the awesome, wonderful and mystifying majesty of God’s grace. A realization that righteousness is not born of works, but of a faith that goes beyond the bounds of human logic, human routine, and human effort: an awareness that God’s will is not be reduced to a set of formulas like saying your prayers every night and going to church each Sunday, even though both of those are laudable pursuits.

When is the last time any of us were really in awe? When was the last time we had an overwhelming religious experience? When were we lost in real wonder? The young man in our New Testament lesson had sought out Christ’s counsel. He was gravely disappointed. Not wonderful enough for him. Or was it TOO wonderful for him to even BEGIN to imagine? Did he even realize that Christ was the Wonderful Counsellor of which prophets spoke as recorded in scripture?

Christ counsels selflessness: too wonderful for a people who are interested first and foremost in amassing treasures of this world, obscuring our sight of the coming Kingdom. Christ counsels love of neighbor: too wonderful for a people who divide themselves into factions, who put party above the common good, who

deny to others if they cannot have themselves. Christ counsels salvation: too wonderful for a people who see salvation in terms of what it can do for themselves, and not in terms of what it means in the transformation of their attitudes towards others.

Christ's counsel, however, is in danger of falling on deaf ears when we have lost our sense of wonder, for we may have ears, but we do not hear what God is saying. So many of us think we know better, that words of idealism might sound just fine, but must be swept aside all too easily if they interfere with the day to day conduct of our businesses and our lives.

And so, too many of us stumble about, knowing inside that there must be something better, knowing that it wasn't always like this, that somehow something from our long past has been lost. And we mourn those days of long ago when life seemed so much freer, less burdened with care, less filled with concerns.

No wonder so many people become so depressed this time of year. Maybe that is why holidays are so often a disappointment when they should be a celebration. For many of us have lost something, and it seems that we cannot ever get it back, as if the die has been cast. But it is a mistake to believe that we cannot start over, that we are completely bound by our past.

For every time this season re-presents itself, we are reminded that the Child, in whom was Life, offers us all a chance to redeem ourselves, an opportunity to start over. Once again we have the possibility, as the Apostle put it, of burying the Old to give birth to the New ... with a reprieve from the sins, the mistakes, and the burdens of the past. For we who lose our life shall find it; and we who die to self shall find new life in Christ.