

August 1, 2016
Like a Child
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Scripture: Matthew 18:1-5

Thanks, Quincy

He brought a great word. It's really the only word that I could preach about today because there is so much our whole world could gain from what Jesus meant in that scripture and from what we get to see as the kingdom of God that's built at camp, that God creates at camp when all of us come together like Joe just described.

Let us start with a quick word of prayer, and I will try to bring a few of those insights back to bless all of us today. Let's bow. Dear God, thank you for the ministry of the last two months. It fills us, and we struggle to put words to it. So, I can only do this with your help. Please allow the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts to be acceptable to you. In your Son's name we pray. Amen.

So, before the summer could start, like many of our campers, or maybe all of our campers, I had to finish school. My semester ended in the first week of May at Andover Newton Theological School, where I'm pretty much half way through with my program for my ministry training, and I needed to take a Summer Intensive. So, this is typically a time where I would go to Boston. Two times a year, I go to Boston to take a course, but they were pretty cool with me, and they let my professor, my advisor Adam Hurlstone, come and teach a preaching intensive here in May to a class of Kai Brewster and I. So, it was a very, very fun class, and it was in that class on preaching that we learned not just about the spoken word, and the importance of that in worship, but also we took some time one of the days to talk about the use of audio and visual - which are all around me - expressions in worship, and we learned about iconography, which is basically the representation of icons. For the Christian faith, it's usually the person of Christ. Sometimes it's Mary or other saints, but the use of iconography, the images of the icons of our faith and how that has been important in worship settings for many people over time.

It was interesting to realize that iconography, these pictures of Christ, are really like the accumulation of many layers of tradition. It also shares with us the perspective of the artist, whoever made this image of Christ. It has a theological statement about their perspective, but it also, if you think about it, it has a theological statement about whoever would hang that picture of Christ or commission that work of art. There's a lot to be gained by looking at our images.

So, it was with this kind of theological construct in my head that we arrived on Bay Lake, on Church Island on Bay Lake, where as you heard, while summer camp has been happening now for seven years, this is our third home in three summers. We've done a

lot of moving. I've made jokes that Moses' people did this for 40 years. I really hope that's not going to be our way. It is tricky and exhausting and not just for the staff but for my camp board and the committees of wonderful people who faithfully tend camp all year long, it's hard to keep finding a new home, but we were really grateful to be at Bay Lake. We were really grateful to arrive that day on Church Island, and we went up into the chapel, and I saw a picture of Christ, and it's to me an important image for us today, because it is a picture of Jesus laughing – Jesus laughing not just like a little laugh, but like head thrown back, mouth wide open, a full body laugh. You can almost hear it even though this is just a visual depiction of Christ.

And I needed to know more about this. I needed to know more about this picture that was beside the stained glass cross in their chapel. We did take it down if some of you are saying, "Wait, I didn't see that." We did take it down because we tend to be hard on places, and we did not want to hurt this beautiful picture of Jesus – Laughing Jesus as we called it. But, I had to know more about it because when the people at Bay Lake Camp selected this as their iconography, as their image of Christ, they did it knowing they could have chosen many pictures.

So, I started looking up Laughing Jesus. I wanted to know more. It was actually, I found, not 91 years old as the actual camp is. Ninety-one years they've been welcoming campers there, but it is actually a piece that was commissioned in 1973, and an artist named Willis Wheatley was commissioned to make four portraits of Christ, and the four of them are all beautiful and lovely, but one of them became wildly popular, and maybe some of you know the Laughing Jesus I am referring to. It became known as the laughing Jesus and is sold worldwide – this beautiful picture of Christ, head back, laughing, but what it's really called is not the Laughing Jesus. What it's really called is *Christ the Liberator*.

Christ the Liberator is the image of laughter, of head-back triumphant laughter over the things that we need to be liberated from. And, so, why was that selected for camp? What do we have to be liberated from at camp? What do our campers have to be liberated from? I think I can only start to answer this for you by telling you some things about the community that is so unique at camp. Joe talked about the safety, the safety for each individual, and I would say that safety, that singular focus on safety being emotional, physical and spiritual, it creates a place where no meanness is tolerated. No meanness is tolerated, and only kindness is there room for, only kindness.

I would say an example of this is like our joke time. We do joke time maybe once a week. We get to hear, especially from the children's campers, the best jokes of the summer, but there are rules to joke time, and to me this is kind of a symbol of camp because the rules of joke time are (a) you have to be audible, we all want to hear so we can laugh, (b) you have to be brief so that we can all keep our attention and find it funny, and (c) you have to be clean. You have to be clean. Clean means kind. We don't laugh at anyone. Our laughter is kind and inclusive. It's safety, and every choice that's made is with safety in mind, and the result is one of the kindest communities that you could be part of.

The next thing comes from the idea that by living in community, there's really nothing that we don't share. This is the equal sort of world that maybe we only dream of in our world outside of camp, but when you have a serving dish, you make sure that everyone at the table gets some of it each time, or if there's just one shower and a group of 10 girls, everybody has to take a fast one to get everybody through. There's not anything at camp that's about just one person. Even the rules we have, like not swimming without a life guard, apply to the staff even when the campers are gone, or even the rules like not having a cell phone. The only one who gets one is me, and that's because I have to because parents trust me to have a connection to the outside world if we need it, but all the counselors, just like all the campers, don't have cell phones so that we're immediately and always intensely focused on the people that we are with. I think that's a beautiful thing and hard to imagine in the life outside of camp – the idea that there's not rules for campers and rules of everyone else. These are community values, community rules.

I see this come across in wonderful sportsmanship. One of my favorite examples of this - I didn't ask you guys if I could do this - but there is this great moment in the middle of the summer. We always start our first morning with volleyball tournaments, and even competition at camp is kind because it's gotta be safe, and, so, they started a chant at the boy's cabin where, if they lost a point (Remember people cheer mostly when you make a point.), but if they lost a point, they had this great cheer. They went, "We tried." Cutest ever! The thing is, if meanness is not tolerated, if kindness and safety are our values, community and the equality of each person in that becomes not just a beautiful image and something to strive for, but a reality.

The result of this kindness, and the result of community is a realization that it is just not all about us. We have that mentality in the staff. It's all about the campers. It's just not about us, and what we realize is when we say that enough, and when we live that enough is when we don't make it about us, then we make it about everyone. When it's not just about "I," it becomes the whole community that is lifted up.

In the scripture for today that Quincy read, Jesus tells us very clearly and unequivocally what we need to do to make this world the kingdom, to enter his kingdom on earth. He gives us really one command. He says we have to be like children. We have to be like children, and he names very clearly the one attribute that is going to allow that to happen, and that's humility. To me that is the scriptural name for the reality I just described. If it's not really all about me after all, there is room in my life for humility. There's room in my life for kindness and safety and clean fun, and there's room in my life for everyone else.

The disciples, when they were told this, they were busy doing what we see in our culture a lot these days - posturing, competitive in an unhealthy way, talking about who was the greatest, trying to either win praise from Jesus or maybe win some standing in their estimation of who was the best. This is the kind of thing that is often rewarded, unfortunately, in our culture of selfishness, of bullying, of the need that we put on to posture ourselves into something greater. It is the exact opposite of not-really-being-about-me humility, this everything-is-about-me adult culture. And this is what Jesus

spoke to when he said you would have to become like a child. You'd have to become like a child and become humble. That was the only way to find God's kingdom, to enter the kingdom of heaven. So, this is how we're liberated. This is how we're liberated, by a life of safety and kindness, humility for all. Those things, when we achieve them, produce a community of joy and love, and we've seen this play out at camp in so many ways.

So, what are our campers needing to be liberated from? I would say sometimes it's obvious like the pains and losses in our lives or the stress that we put on ourselves or have put on us by our culture and others in our lives. But, sometimes, I think the liberation is more subtle, like the creeping reality that life abundant like we hear it in the Bible or we feel it at camp isn't what we're currently creating in our lives outside of this place as a Christian community or place like it that we have in our lives, the creeping reality that some of the things that we're working toward are not based in kindness and equality and community that point us toward joy.

So, what are we liberated from? Well, we're liberated from those things that confine us. I would give one last example with the permission of one of my counselors. He had his family come to church camp this year, two of the ninety of so people who come to church camp, and we do some messy fun. The messy fun is very purposeful. It's very hard to laugh out loud like Jesus, head thrown back, mouth wide open if we are too neat and tidy. So, we get a little messy, and at church camp there's often some kids and some adults who choose to be involved and participate from the outskirts of the mess. That's fine. No one's going to come and chase you into the mess, but there are some of us who jump right in and realize that it's really only one day or two days a year that you get to be covered in bubbles and mud.

So, on the last night of camp while the staff and I were circled around a fire pit enjoying a time for us to say so, a time for us to testify about the work God has done in us during our time at camp, this counselor whose parents came to church camp for the first time shared about seeing a middle aged man running across the mess-fest, two hands full of mud chasing a middle aged woman. (Laughter) We all giggled, too, we were excited to hear about this, and, then, he got a little choked up when he said, "And that was my dad chasing my mom."

The thing is none of us is too old to be liberated, to be liberated by Christ who would teach us that if we are only kind, and if we bring that kindness to everyone that there is joy and peace to be produced by that and liberation for others through our example. It doesn't have to be muddy. Sometimes it helps, but it doesn't have to be muddy. We can be liberated any time that we remember that we could be like children in our humility and that is how Christ reaches to us and we can enter this kingdom of heaven.

Please pray with me. Dear God, we thank you. We thank you for Christ who laughs, who laughs when we discover that the things that confine us do not have to confine us and that there is abundant life that we're seeking, and we will find that abundant life when we help all people to find that through kindness and safety, inclusion and

community that lifts up everyone and not just ourselves. Help us translate this from camp or other experiences in our lives that we might be blessed by it every day moving forward from here. We pray all these things in your Son's name. Amen.