

Christmas is for Children...Us!

*A sermon preached in Christ Church, Aspen, by the Rev. Bruce McNab, Rector.
1st Sunday after Christmas, December 26, 2004. (Text: John 1:1-18)*

The conventional saying, “*Christmas is for kids*” has a lot of truth to it – though nobody means it literally. The whole paraphernalia of the celebration – toys, Santa, stockings hung by the chimney with care... all this is child-oriented. Adults enjoy watching the kids have their fun – from the time they help put ornaments on the tree until the crack of dawn on Christmas Day when they wake everybody to tell us that Santa has come.

Older people always seem to get more out of the Christmas festivities when little ones are on the scene. Mom and dad, grandma and grandpa, older brothers and sisters — everybody enters into the fun of the youngest members of the family. And when our children and grandchildren are far away we want to phone them and talk to the children and hear about the day. When we have to celebrate Christmas without “little people” in the family group, it always feels as if something is missing.

The Scriptures for this First Sunday after Christmas make a connection for us that truly fits our experience of the Christmas celebration: they speak of God’s *purpose* in sending his Son into the world. And that purpose was *that we could all become his children*, be adopted into his family and know him as our own dear “Abba,” our own beloved father.

Today we listened to what I think is the most beautiful passage in the New Testament, the beginning of the Gospel according to John. It says about “the Word made flesh,” Jesus the Son of God, that “*he came to his own home, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed on his name, he gave power to become children of God.*”

St. Athanasius, back in the fourth century, said about Christ that *he became what we are* [that is, a flesh and blood human being] *so that we might become what he is* [that is, children of God].

We say “Christmas is for kids.” So, let’s think about children for a bit. Children in a family – at least, in a healthy family – have an assured, secure and protected status. They belong. They’re special. They are the *heirs*, the *future* of the family – bearers of the hopes and dreams of their parents. AND: (this is important) children have a privilege of access to their parents, along with a rightful claim on their parents’ attention.

We can take certain realities about ordinary, healthy family life and use them to help us understand how God wants us to relate to him as his children. For example:

It’s always o.k. for children to ask mom or dad for anything they want. Even though it’s 6 a.m. on Christmas morning and your daughter has already emptied her Christmas stocking and eaten two Snickers bars, a bag of M&M’s, a candy cane, and one of those little boxes of raisins (all before you have had your first cup of coffee) it’s perfectly o.k. for her to ask you if she can now have Cocoa-Puffs for breakfast. You might say no – in fact, I hope you *will* say no – but she’s totally free to ask you for anything she wants. —Not just on Christmas, but any time.

By the same token, the children of God are permitted to ask our heavenly Father for anything we need, anything we want. It’s never wrong to ask. God’s answer might be “No, that wouldn’t be good for you.” But we’re free to ask.

It's normal and expected for children to address their parents (and grandparents, too) with affectionate names. We're never "Mr." or "Mrs." or "Dr." or "Rev." to our children. My kids called me "Poppy," when they were little. (In fact, they still do.) When my oldest two were pre-schoolers, all the other little kids in the church where I served called me "Poppy" too, because they picked the name up from my own children. I didn't mind that at all. I thought it was neat. I felt closer to those little kids, and I hope they felt closer to me.

Jesus addressed God as *Abba* – which is surely what he called Joseph, too – and it means about the same thing in Aramaic that "Poppy" does in English. He taught us to use that same intimate name when we pray. That's the original word used in the Lord's Prayer, where we say in English, "Our Father". Jesus teaches us to approach God with loving intimacy and in complete freedom.

It's always o.k. for children to tell their parents how they feel... whether they're happy, sad, glad, or mad. Mom and dad want to know. Good parents delight in hearing anything that their children want to tell them. Good parents *want* to listen. It's *important* for parents to listen to our children (not just when they're little, but always). That's how we grow to really know them.

And so it is that when we pray, God wants us to open our hearts to him. Prayer is the occasion for telling God everything that's on our minds. —Just as it's o.k. to ask God for anything, so it's equally permissible – even essential – that we tell God how we feel: not just when we're happy and grateful, but also when we're unhappy, angry, or confused. It isn't that he doesn't already know; but he wants to hear it from us.

Finally, children are expected to be "beginners" at everything. They're learning and experimenting, testing the limits, asking questions. They aren't expected to behave like grown-ups yet. They still have a lot of learning to do. Loving parents put up with childish behavior; and the children of loving parents instinctively trust those parents, take their hands and go with them wherever they lead them. Jesus said, "*Unless you become as little children, you shall never enter the kingdom of heaven.*"

Today's gospel tells us that *to all who receive Jesus, who believe on his name, he gives power to become the children of God.* "He became what we are, so that we might become what he is" —not in some hazy, distant future, but right now. We don't need to wait for some magical Christmas-yet-to-come in order to be able to claim the rights and privileges that are ours as children of God. Baptism assures us that we have these rights. They're a present reality, if we decide to believe Jesus, claim those rights, and live them out.

So, what special behavior marks those who are children of God by grace? —It's not moral perfection. After all, we're children; we're still learning. We're still "on the way" to what we'll ultimately be in the age to come. We're "works in progress," whether we're six or sixty. It's not moral perfection that shows we're children of God. No.

What, in fact, *does* mark us as God's children is simply our *recognition of the relationship* – our readiness to know and love and claim God as our own "*Abba.*" And I believe that, in God's eyes, we're all like very *young* children. I figure that in this mortal life, even if we're 75 or 80 we're really not much more than kindergarteners on the divine scale. "Maturity" will come much later, when we're with God in his kingdom.

John's gospel says that the Word became flesh so that we might become children of God. What better time than Christmas to celebrate our childhood?