

Matthew 18:1-20 – Aging in Faith

Luther once said everyone becomes ugly when they get old. He was not judging others, just looking in the mirror. The ravages of age to body and beauty are not pretty. Nobody knows that more than we do. In our youth culture, old age is offensive. The only good old people are those who do not act or look old. People try to look and act like kids no matter what their ages.

Contrary to what it appears, this is not what Jesus meant when He said, **“except you become like a little child, you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven”** or **“do not despise the little ones.”** In Jesus’ day, age was valued, and children were best not seen and not heard. Yet Jesus is not taking sides here between youth or old age. He is calling people to humble faith.

No matter what people say, the old are not automatically wiser than the young. Age does not bring wisdom, but it surely does teach skepticism. Longevity buries hope under a lifetime of disappointment. Old age has discovered that the world is full of liars and all their lies. Don’t believe what people tell you. The old prefer the past because they don’t know or cannot control the future.

Jesus condemns the elders in the faith because they should have known better than anyone the Law and the Prophets, but in the end, they did not get them and could not recognize Jesus. So what does it mean then that Jesus says become like a little child (little – meaning very small, infant and toddler)? Would a child have known the Law and the Prophets to recognize Jesus? No, our Lord is not pitting one group against another. He is holding up faith and appealing to trust in a world skeptical and suspicious of words. He is talking to you and me.

The little child is born to trust, having not yet had his trust disappointed over and over again. The little child believes the word and does not doubt it right away. The little child wants to believe and wants to trust. Little children believe their parents are the wisest people they know and they believe all people are generally good. As they grow they will learn that neither is all that true. And with this knowledge, faith becomes harder. We all know that.

To the child the promise is real. If mom says it or dad says it or God says it, it is real and true and you can count on it. That is what Jesus is talking about. Age makes some of us wise but it makes all of us suspicious and skeptical. Israel taught its children the saving acts of God and they believed them. But the same people who taught them the great stories of God’s deliverance doubted the Word of the Lord and forgot what God had done when their faith was put to the test. So Jesus holds up the faith of a child and asks those of every age to believe as simply, humbly, and absolutely as the child believes the Lord.

As old age comes to me, I am not sure Luther was wrong. Hair grows where it shouldn’t and doesn’t grow where it should. Eyes grow dim and body parts fall apart and also come aches and pains. Living to old age may mean that the world finds us ugly or a burden or useless. Neither age nor youth commends us to the Lord. Only faith. The Lord calls us all to faith. The instinctive faith of a little child has not been worn down by a lifetime of struggle and sorrow, disappointment and dampened hopes. But children have much to learn from the elderly whose faith has endured test and struggle, for the children are the flowers whose bloom has not yet been tested and tried. Both the aged and the youth meet on the same holy ground – faith.

Age has knowledge on its side but not always wisdom. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. This wisdom is the path of faith. God’s ways are not our ways. His mercy is shockingly illogical. Who loves and values those who can do nothing for them and who cost them everything? Only God. Who leaves the 99 to find the one lost sheep? Only God. Who bothers with someone who has sinned against you once and will do it again and again and again? Only God.

This is the power of faith and the power of forgiveness. Our God loves the same – the child in the womb, the youth in his glory, those in the middle of their lives, and those near the end. How much does He love us? Enough to suffer for our sins, die the death we should have died, and then to rise to freely bestow upon us His salvation. The old have heard it all before but they need to hear it like the child who has heard it for the first time. The child, yet untested by the hardness of this mortal life, needs to learn endurance from those who have been sustained by grace through it all. Together we are the 2 or 3 into which Jesus comes to manifest His grace, to bestow upon us His gifts, and to lead us through death to everlasting life.

So repent you who are old. Repent of your doubts and your suspicion and your skepticism. Believe. And repent you children, so full of yourselves, for you depend upon God for all things. Young and old together meet the Lord on the holy ground of His amazing grace. Salvation is by grace and faith grasps hold of the rich promise and never lets go. May God grant this faith to our children and grandchildren, whose futures no one knows. May God grant it to our parents and grandparents, whose lives this side of glory are already lived. And may God grant it to us all in between.