

Unwrapping the Child-like

In 1995, Barbie Doll came out with the Collector edition doll, Scarlett O'Hara in her picnic dress. This white and green dress, as described by the Barbie website, is "ideal for the fun and fancy barbeque" she attends in *Gone with the Wind*. This doll was, for one year, what my sister wanted more than anything. She talked about it for months leading up to Christmas and when Christmas arrived, it was a surprise when I unwrapped my gift. Inside, was the 1994 release, Scarlett O' Hara in her green velvet drapery dress ("Only Scarlett O'Hara could look stunning draped in lush green billows of fabric that once hung as curtain"). My sister received no Scarlett O' Hara Barbie doll at all and she was distraught. I was, delighted, although I hadn't asked for any kind of doll, but my sister had so much desire for a Scarlett O' Hara Barbie that I knew this was something very special. She was wounded by this misgiving and for some tense hours it was a real question for her if she would ever be happy again. How could the world be righted after an incident, an injustice like this?

Over-time, she has forgiven my parents and me. She has found other sources of happiness, figured out a new direction for her life and, after moving past this life-shaking, incident is one of the best gift givers I know.

There is an aspect of the child-like, those qualities we have as children, that is good to leave in childhood. It did not occur to me then that I could have shared the Barbie with her, that we could have made a dress like the picnic dress. Today, I can imagine all kinds of ways to

make that situation better, but I did not know those then and accepted my gift and my sisters grief. Thankfully, as we grow we gain perspective. It is helpful to find out that there is more. We need not fret so much, there is more than that moment of despair, time will heal, something else will come along. There is an aspect of the child-like, of our being like children, that is good to leave in childhood, but there are also elements of this time that are good to remember and to hold on to. And Jesus teaches us this.

In the gospel today, Jesus says the way of heaven, the kingdom is not revealed to the wise, the intelligent, but to babes, infants. Look again, and the Greek translates wise and intelligent also to the sophisticated or cunning. The wise and intelligent Jesus speaks about are those who use their minds to gain advantage over others, who use their minds for the good of themselves. For these persons, who are meant to know all things, what is not shown to them-- what they cannot find themselves-- is the kingdom of God. That, is reserved for the infant. There is something about the child-like that enriches our lives and deepens our faith and our openness to know and follow God.

Madeline L'Engle, late author of the Wrinkle in Time series and Episcopal theologian described how she maintains elements of her childhood as she "grew up:"

I am still every age that I have been. Because I was once a child, I am always a child. Because I was once a searching adolescent, given to moods and ecstasies, these are still part of me, and always will be... the delayed adolescent, the childish adult...They are in me to be drawn on; to forget is a form of suicide... Far too many people misunderstand what *putting away childish things* means, and think that forgetting what it is like to think and feel and touch and smell and taste and see and hear like a three-year-old or a thirteen-year-old or a twenty-three-year-old means being grownup.

She concluded that if she could retain a “child’s awareness and joy” as she ages she would “really learn what it means to be grownup.”¹

We are not called to be trapped in our youth or to give up our minds, our minds are a gift given to us who are made in God’s image. But there is the element of child-like wonder, when things seem new or more defined, special—in a way that is not rubbed away by experience, routine of the superiority we can feel when we are smarter, wise or more cunning. There is an appreciation and openness for what is at hand for these little ones, which we all once were, that teaches us about how to follow God and have faith. And that is, after all, why we are here—Jesus says the Kingdom is revealed to those who still retain wonder at what is more, what is more than they can see or understand and there is always more when it comes to God.

We are not able to manipulate our way to God. Seeing the kingdom of heaven more and more is a gift. The Holy is not new to the world, it has moved upon, abided in the world since the beginning and there is an openness, an ability to welcome in the newness of the day, of the moment, of this experience or that one—to see what we do each day as infused with God, the presence of the holy and sacred—that is done best by the child and the child-like. And it is available to us.

Joan Chittester, a prolific Benedictine nun, writes about discovering the newness of childhood as we age:

¹ Madeline L’Engle, *A Circle of Quiet*, 1984.

“It is not change [or rediscovering our childhood] that will destroy us. It is the attitude we take to it that will make all the difference. The frame of mind we bring to it gives meaning to the end of one phase of life, of course. But more than that, it also determines the spiritual depth with which we start this new phase. ..It is the willingness, the eagerness to try, that makes all the difference...we must choose to begin a new kind of life, related to the past, of course, but free of strictures that bind us to it. We must see what we do in it as good. We must find it life-giving ourselves. We must be a gift to the world some way, somehow, for someone.”²

To walk with a child-like wonder, an openness to hearing God, eyes to see things as new again--these open us to receive a picture of God’s kingdom and thus be gifts to those around us.

To hold onto the child-like does not mean I need to forever go on oblivious to my sister’s despair or she knowing there is no hope without the picnic doll, it does mean there is an opportunity to rediscover the way of seeing, the newness that belongs to the child-like. And this is available to us always. We are all young in God’s eyes. God is eternal, all ages are His, we are always children to Him. The perspective God has is far greater than what we can see day to day.

The holy is here and when we can receive it as infants, we are welcomed into God’s loving arms with all our knowledge, experience and achievements, but we are recognized first of all as who we are deep within, ones made in God’s image from the beginning—children of God. We need never lose that aspect of ourselves for it is in embracing the child-like that we are shown more and more the kingdom of God.

² Joan Chittester, *The Gift of Years*, 2008.

Amen.