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“I Asked For Wonder”

Matthew 18: 1-7
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Wonder is an interesting phenomenon, most frequently associated with children.

Wonder could be defined as the capacity for sustained curiosity, delight, amazement and enjoyment. It is a sense of freshness, anticipation, and openness.

It is what most of us lose as we become mature and responsible adults.

Just empty out the pockets of a 5 year old boy and you get a glimpse of wonder.

In a little boy's pockets you will find some string, a burned out fuse,
a genuine imitation sheriff's badge, a small pine cone.

You'll find a piece of candy (unwrapped and covered with lint), and some rocks.

None of these things have real value, but they all have tremendous value.

Nothing has been classified, catalogued, or judged for its usefulness.

It's all to be treasured; it is all good.

To a child everything is a source of wonder, except maybe spinach and shots.

Physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer once said:

“There are children playing in the street right now who could solve some of my top problems in physics, because they have modes of sensory perception that I lost long ago.”

Clearly that is why Jesus said we've got to become more like kids to understand the reality of God. The Message puts it this way: “Unless you return to square one and start over like children, you won't even get a look at the kingdom.

Whoever becomes simple and elemental again, like this child,
will rank high in God's kingdom.”

To regain that openness, anticipation, sense of wonder takes effort.

We start life simple and elemental, but we lose those qualities along the way.

We have to work hard at maintaining openness, awe, the capacity for delight.

Because it is in precisely such a state of heart and mind that we glimpse the divine around us and within us.

I don't know when we lose it, when our capacity for wonder dries up, but it does.

At some point complacency replaces curiosity, apathy replaces awe.

Does it happen when we learn that the world is not a warm and welcoming place?

When we can no longer tolerate mystery and uncertainty?

When we witness too many tragedies, too much heartache?

Somewhere between childhood and adulthood we lose our capacity for wonder.

And when we do, we lose our capacity to experience the living God.

I gratefully received the gift of wonder this past week.
 I volunteered to accompany the Senior High Youth to Church Camp this year,
 because I really want to get to know these incredible youth better,
 and because I had never been to Luccock Park Camp in Montana.
 I had heard so much about it, Jim has been taking our youth and Mission Teams
 there for several years.

How many of you have been to Luccock?

One of the most beautiful places on the planet.

Located 11 hours from Denver, near Bozeman, Montana, it is heaven on earth.
 Our Minister of Youth and Missions Jim Marshall, Amber Johnson, Gary Dyer
 and I accompanied nine of our youth:

Kayla Lindholm, Celia Smith, Andrea Schwab, Margo Swanson, Rachel Slama,
 Katie Rosa, Will Thomas, Ian and Connor Black.

We joined 12 youth from Montana and about 13 youth from Trinity UMC.

In total there were 34 youth and 10 adults.

While it was a delightful experience, and something I will always remember,
 I am going to be very annoyed if somebody comes into my office Monday morning
 and asks, "How was your vacation?"

I learned a good response to that question:

"When was the last time you took 34 teenagers on vacation with you?"

It was not a vacation for any of us.

We got up at 7:00 every day and tried to have lights out at 11:00, but it was much
 closer to midnight when things finally settled down.

From dawn to dusk we were busy eating, singing, dancing, hiking, learning,
 listening, praying, sharing.

Now I had worked as a camp counselor many years ago, in college, but I can tell
 you that church camp has changed in 25 years. It is really cool!
 Church camp is no longer about making craft projects with yarn and popsicle sticks
 and singing Kum Bay Yah.

This camp, designed by Jim Marshall and continued by Cami Twilling,
 who is the awesome Youth Director at Trinity UMC,
 is a fun, exciting, and profoundly transforming experience.

It is designed to engage teenagers on their level, with their style of music,
 games, activities and small group experiences that involve them in a personal way.

It was designed so that they would go deeply into themselves and
 think about their lives, their values, their faith.

Those kids heard again and again that there is nothing they could ever do to make

God love them less, and nothing they could ever do to make God love them more.
God accepts them completely, and loves them as if they were the only one to love.
Who doesn't need to hear that message?

The theme of this camp was "All The Same" based upon a song by the same title
sung by the Sick Puppies. You all know the song, right?

We invited these kids to think about the ways that we are all the same.

Although we are all uniquely created by God, and different in many ways,
we all share this human condition and we all hope for the same things in life.

We have similar worries, fears, hopes, and dreams.

There were several kids at camp with certain challenges, various special needs.
There were also kids there who were troubled, who had a lot on their minds and
had already lived through more than we can even imagine.

I was so proud of the way that all of our youth reached out to those kids.

They were completely gracious in the way
that they extended their love to those who were different, sad and alone.
By the end of the week those kids who would be outcasts anywhere else
felt accepted and loved.

It made me think of the story that Jim Marshall tells about when he was a college
student in Iowa.

In the cafeteria they served pats of butter on those cardboard squares with
waxed paper on top. Students would take the paper off and put lots of butter down
on the linoleum floor.

Inevitably somebody would come along and fall down to the uproarious laughter
of everyone present.

One day, Jim was walking along with his tray, when it happened to him.

He slid on the butter and fell down hard.

Everyone was laughing and pointing at him.

He was mortified and considered sitting there until everyone left the room.
Then somebody he did not know came over to him, started picking up his spilled
food, and helped him to his feet.

Last week our youth behaved just like that person, extending a helping hand
to those who needed help. I was so proud of them.

Spending a week with these awesome young people reminded me that
teenagers today are dealing with so much more than we can imagine.

They are worried about the future.
 Some of these kids are going off to college, and that is always an uncertain time.
 Some are moving, some ending relationships, some changing schools.
 Some are wounded and worried. They are exposed to everything an earlier age.
 They have concerns, fears, experiences, temptations, and family problems we
 cannot understand. And, they are growing up in a toxic and shallow culture.
 They are told that the are how they look, that money and beauty are everything,
 that getting bigger and better stuff actually matters,
 that the world rewards the strong and punishes the weak,
 that sex and violence are always acceptable.
 Would you want to grow up in this sort of culture?
 The church exists to offer them a different way.
 We offer a radical alternative to the values of this world.
 We offer them gentleness, humility, forgiveness, compassion, kindness.

And if they go to church camp for one week out of the year,
 they get to be what teenagers should be.
 They get to dangle their feet in a cold creek, and listen to it's soothing music.
 They get to see hundreds of stars in they sky.
 They get to play really stupid games wearing reindeer antlers made of balloons
 and pantyhose on their heads.
 They do things with potted meat and shaving cream.
 They get to sing silly songs and do the Hokey Pokey
 and the Chicken Dance and the Cha-Cha Slide.
 They get to sit around a campfire every night and think about God.
 They get to make S'Mores and sing their hearts out.
 They get to cry if they feel like it.
 They don't have to worry about what anyone thinks of them
 or even try to be popular or cool.
 They don't have to constantly compare themselves to others.
 They don't have to send a single text message all week long.
 They get to be kids for an all too brief moment in time.

I took some pictures last week, and I wanted to give you a glimpse
 of what we experienced at camp.

(Camp Photos shown to music “All The Same”)

As you can see, it was a wonderful experience for us.

My longing is for you to have a similar experience this summer.

We all need a space in our lives where we don't have to do anything,
impress anybody, be responsible or productive.

We all need a space in our lives for silliness and silence.

We all need to be told that there is nothing we can do to make God love us more,
and nothing we can do to make God love us less.

I hope you can create such a space in your life.

A space where you can rediscover wonder, listen, laugh, and let yourself be loved.

One of my favorite Jewish Rabbis is Abraham Joshua Heschel, God rest his soul.
Born in Warsaw in 1907, Heschel was a descendent of an illustrious line of rabbis.

He was recognized as a holy person from the moment of his birth.

At the age of 4 scholars would place him at a table and interrogate him
for the surprising and amusing answers he would give to their questions.

Heschel wrote books on the Bible, the Talmud, medieval thought, theology,
and contemporary moral problems. He was truly a renaissance man,
and for many years his was the most respected Jewish voice
for both Protestants and Catholics.

On his death bed Abraham Joshua Heschel said:

“I never asked God for success. I asked for wonder, and God gave it to me.”

Ask God for wonder, and God will give it to you.

Amen.