

## Who's Gonna' Clean Up All this Wrapping Paper?

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In some previous years, it might have embarrassed you to be in your pastor's home on Christmas morning. So many gifts under the tree we had to move the furniture to make room for the people. A good Marxist would have had a field day pointing out the "capitalist decadence" in our living room Christmas morning.

But in those years, before the sun rose on Christmas morning, a different issue presented itself: "What are we going to do with all this wrapping paper?" It depended on who was there. My mother-in-law saved it—all! We had to carefully peel the tape so as not to damage the paper, and fold each piece neatly for storage. She was raised during the depression. For her it's an issue of economics.

Jo Lynn kept some of the paper; but for her it was an aesthetic issue: she kept the "pretty" paper.

Me? I asked Jo Lynn or her mother what to do. My grandkids rip it off and throw it in all directions! One year we carried four lawn bags of wrapping paper to the curb, which triggered lively conversations about trees and conservation.

Now, all of this is leading to allegory, because, we all wrap our lives in some way, either to decorate it, or to hide what's inside. There's a degree to which I'm not ever going to fully reveal myself to you, because I'm afraid you'll...

- ▶ ...laugh at me
- ▶ ...get mad at me
- ▶ ...make fun of me,
- ▶ ...reject me

And the wrapping I choose for my life is calculated to get you to ...

- ▶ ...pat me on the back.
- ▶ ...tell me I'm important.
- ▶ ...include me in your life.
- ▶ ...like me.

With all that in mind, look with me at the Scripture for the morning:

<p>(MATTHEW 18:1-4; 19:13-15 NRSV) <i>At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"<sup>2</sup> He called a child, whom he put among them,<sup>3</sup> and said, "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.<sup>4</sup> Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heav-</i></p>	<p><i>en. ... {19:13} Then little children were being brought to him in order that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples spoke sternly to those who brought them;<sup>14</sup> but Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs."<sup>15</sup> And he laid his hands on them and went on his way.</i></p>
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These are difficult times with issues of self-identity. The advertising and

marketing industries have convinced us that "image is everything," and since most of us don't look like cover models, we sometimes "fake it" and wrap our lives to look like something we're really not. It's hard to be real in our culture of image-obsession.

As I reflect on our family's Christmas wrapping paper ritual, *I wish* I could do with my life what my grandkids do with their Christmas presents. This Christmas I became more acutely aware than usual of a significant theme. Listen:

- › "...unto us a child is born."
- › "*The wolf will dwell with the lamb, and the leopard will lie down with the kid, and the calf and the lion cub together, and a little child will lead them.*"
- › "*Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.*"
- › "*Unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of God.*"

In the late 1960s, Tom Harris wrote a book called, *I'm OK—You're OK*. He updated the language of Freud's "ego states:" Id, Ego, and Super-Ego. He called them, "parent," "child," and "adult." At any point in our lives we act out of one, or some combination, of these three ego states, and each one has an important function.

It's also important to note that social groups and organizations—including the church—exhibit these ego states. Some denominations are basically parent; some are basically child; and some (obviously us) are adult.

The parent is the rule-maker—generally rigid and inflexible, but also protecting and nurturing. The Child is playful and spontaneous; but also is frequently irresponsible, insecure and frightened. The adult is the integrating part of us that helps us balance the rules and the playfulness. Harris says that, under the supervision of our adult state, we need to let our "child" out to play occasionally.

A lot of mainline pastors and Christian educators picked up on this. It was good stuff—it still is! It's a little simplistic, but it lays a foundation for understanding a lot of human behavior and human relationships; and it's easily adapted to Christian principles. On the other hand, Christian fundamentalists greeted the book with predictable platitudes: "More Bible, less psychology"—overlooking the fact that this same stuff has been in the Bible all along!

What's amazing is that the one to bring it to public attention was not a Bible scholar or a theologian, but a psychiatrist. He said, "Let your child out to play." Jesus said, "Unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of God." How do we do that? How do we "become like children?"

Traditional responses urge us to have "simple faith"—easy; no complications, so we don't have to work at it—"blind faith"—no questions. "God said it; I believe it; and that settles it." (*Actually in too many cases it wasn't God who said it; it was my fourth grade Sunday School teacher or some preacher with control issues!*)

And yet, have you ever been around a small child? A most frequent word on a

child's lips is... (Why?) Childlike faith is inquisitive. It's okay to ask questions. That's how we learn. Right?

And children are creative. They have wonderful imaginations. "Let's pretend." A broomstick becomes a horse. Grandma's old Easter hat transports a little girl into a world of glamour and sophistication. At age two children are said to be 90% creative. I don't know how they measure that, but by age seven, because of rules and restrictions in the family and in the schools and in the church, they are said to be 20% creative. Child-like faith is inquisitive and imaginative.

And, children are spontaneous—especially with their feelings—until we teach them to hide those feelings.

I remember sitting in church—that hasn't happened very often over the past 50 - 55 years, so I tend to remember those times—but, there I was, enjoying the role of participant in the pew. On the row in front of me was a little boy, oh, maybe three years old. His mother was wrestling with whom I assumed was his baby sister—not yet walking, but neither was she into sitting still.

The little boy was standing in the pew, chewing his fingers and looking around. When his eye caught mine, I made a fatal mistake: I winked at him, and I had his full attention. He turned around to face me, and stood there, smiling. He wasn't disturbing anyone or anything; he wasn't climbing over (or under) the pew, he wasn't tearing pages out of the hymnal, he wasn't laughing out loud. He was just smiling. But his mother rather harshly jerked him around by the arm, sat him down roughly, and, in a stage whisper audible for several rows, said, "Quit that! You're in Church!" (Have you noticed, or is it just me? Parents usually make more disturbance correcting a child than the child was making to begin with!) As the little fellow rubbed a tear from his eye, his mom actually said, "That's better."

Has it come to that? Can we not smile at each other in church?

Children are spontaneous with their sense of celebration—squealing and jumping in ecstasy over the simplest of joys.

And they're spontaneously forgiving...

...and spontaneously honest. Disarmingly honest.

But somewhere along the line, in varying degrees, we lose a part of that, or all of it—in life, in business, in our relationship, and in our faith.

One of the best gifts Jo Lynn ever gave me was a little book by Keith Miller. She sent it to me when I was in Vietnam. The title was *A Taste of New Wine*.

(Read excerpts from pages 21-23)

*"Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."* Whoever can rip off the wrapping paper...