

## Neoteny and the Grace of Growing Down

a sermon by J. R. Luck, Jr.  
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Over the years I have struggled with my professional identity. Until recent years, when I was a pastor, I struggled with whether I was really supposed to be in ministry. And when I had so-called secular jobs, I struggled because I'm too much of a pastor. But the one identity that has fit me like a glove from the beginning is that of father.

If you're ever in the market for a good book on dads, you might want to consider The Emperor's Embrace by Jeffrey Masson who explores fatherhood and family life in the animal kingdom. Surprisingly there are some fathers in the animal kingdom that make excellent dads, especially emperor penguins, wolves and beavers. But the grand prize undoubtedly goes to sea horses. Not only are the males excellent with the kids, but they get pregnant and give birth as well. Yes Mandy, I know... I should have been a sea horse.

But much of the author's attention is focused not on seahorses but on wolves. He hypothesizes that humans intentionally domesticated wolves because both species share neotenistic characteristics. Now if you are unfamiliar with the word neoteny, and I was until I read the book, it refers to a love of that which is juvenile. In other words, neoteny is what makes wolves and humans so enthralled with kids. In fact, wolves and humans may be the only two species that will act like kids, simply for the sake of acting like kids. Even the most bitter of adults will sometimes smile at laughing children.

So why are we fascinated with kids and child-like stuff? Masson writes, "Juveniles in all animals are more playful than adults. They are less dangerous, tamer, slower and weaker than adults. This is true of human children too." Now as a father I'm not sure that I agree with him on juveniles being slower, but I'll let that go for now. Back to Masson: "It seems to be true across evolution as well. Cro-Magnon man was bigger, stronger, all together less gentle than the male homo sapiens. It seems we are slowly evolving... away from an earlier model. We seem not to want to be killing machines." In other words, Masson is arguing that when we evolve and mature, we become more like children.

I think the Bible agrees with Masson because it attests to our need to grow down and to become more like them. In the first lesson today from Isaiah we are told that the Spirit of the Lord shall rest on God's chosen who shall have a spirit of wisdom and understanding. Now we associate wisdom with age and understanding with experience. Isaiah, however, tells us that this spirit shall rest, not on an adult king, nor upon a warrior, nor a general, nor upon an ancient sage, nor upon any other reasonable, reserved, austere, boring or serious adult. Instead Isaiah points us to a child who will lead us to a day of peace when even the wolf shall lie down with the lamb.

And yet, we still don't look to children as models of faith. Indeed, too many believe, as did Jesus' disciples, that children and the holy are neither compatible nor congruent. No, we may not say explicitly that our Lord can't be bothered by the likes of them, but our worship services tend to be rather inhospitable for children. Sssshhhhhhh!!!! Would you sit still! And let's face it: in most churches, children's sermons are for the adults, not the kids. And so Jesus looks at us in our quiet, proper sanctuaries and says, "Look, not only are you not to keep the kids from me, but isn't it about time that you became a little more neotenistic yourselves?" Okay, Jesus didn't use the word "neoteny." But he, Immanuel, God-with-us, did embrace children just as they are. Furthermore, the religious adults accused Jesus of being irreverent and not taking his religion seriously

enough. And so Jesus looked at them and looks at us today and says, "Look if you're going to become a brighter reflection of God's kingdom, then you are going to have to start acting more like children."

The Bible does not speak of our need to "grow up," so much as it speaks of our need to "grow down." In short people, we have it completely backwards: kids aren't here in church so they can become more like us; they are here so we can become more like them.

So what does our Lord see in children that he wishes us to emulate? While any answer would be speculation, all preaching involves some speculation, so let me speculate. I would argue that children are lifted up to us as models at least in part because they know how to play. While it's a touch early to pull out Dickens, it is worth noting how Ebenezer Scrooge is portrayed before and after his conversion. Before his encounter with the spirits he was rigid and cruel. Afterwards, Dickens describes Scrooge feeling as light as a feather and as a playful soul both open and generous. It's also worth noting that the part of our brain used for play and recreation is the part where bonding and intimacy happen. Play and intimacy are biologically connected. You see churches that pray may or may not stay together, but congregations that play are very likely to stay together. Healthy churches play and laugh. I can tell you something about the psychological/spiritual health of any consistory simply by counting the number of times the group laughs during meetings. And if you think about the word recreation, is it the word re-creation. The ancient rabbis tell us that when God plays, creation happens. Children don't need to be taught this. They innately know it, at least they do until adults drive it from them.

I would also add that children know how to let go and to trust. They don't spend a lot of time worrying about where their food and clothing is coming from. Now yes, kids do spend a lot of time asking for stuff and we as a society have taught them and allowed them to ask for far too much stuff, but the apple doesn't fall far from the tree. For the most part however, they assume their basic needs will be provided for them. If only we would do much the same with God. If only we would trust a little bit more. If we could figure out how to do that, I think life would be far less complicated, far less chaotic and far more refreshing.

Once upon a time, in a beginning.... well in Genesis, scripture tells us that the Spirit of God danced over the face of the waters. Some translations say the spirit hovered. But if we are to translate it as poetry it is not a stretch to use the word dance: The Spirit danced over the face of the waters. And in the New Testament we are told that in the beginning was the Word and the Word was God and yet the very Word of God came as a helpless baby. And yes he cried. That line from Away in a Manger isn't biblical. He cried. And when the child born into poverty grew into adulthood Jesus took children and held them up as models of faith, which makes a lot of sense. After all, they play and dream and imagine. Recently during some of our small discernment groups I told you, that so long as this church can dream and imagine the future will be bright. Well there's nobody who dreams and imagine better than a kid. Well... unless it's an adult who still has a kid's heart. So how about you folks? Do you have the heart of a child? And that is the question folks: Will you listen to Isaiah? Will we follow our Lord? Will we recreate and therefore re-create? For the sake of the church, for the sake of our world, for the sake of our souls and their salvation, may God grant us the grace of growing down. Amen.