



New Day Church

Need a fresh start?

THE NEW HEIGHT OF GREATNESS

*Jeff Peabody
New Day Church
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When you hear on the radio that Jesus was struck by lightning, it makes you stop and listen. That's what I caught on the news while I was driving across town the other day. In Monroe, Ohio, they had the tallest statue of Christ in the United States. It was just his torso and arms, and it was over 6 stories tall and weighed more than 16,000 lbs. It stood in front of Solid Rock Church, next to a man-made reflecting pond right off the Interstate. It was a major landmark and tourist attraction for the area.

But it was made out of wood and foam and fiberglass over a steel frame, so when it was struck by lightning on Monday, it burned completely to the ground. The reporters lost no time noticing that the insurance companies were calling it "an act of God".

You can make what you will of the incident, but I found the whole thing incredibly symbolic. Because I believe we all can have these big, fake images of Jesus in our heads that really should be struck by lightning and burned to the ground. We build up an idea of him that's nothing but wood and foam, nothing true or solid about it. And often he is the opposite of our mental picture. Instead of a statue that is frozen and static, Jesus is a living breathing person who challenges all our presuppositions.

That's what this new summer series is all about. As I said last week, I'm calling it "Life in Flip Flops" and we're exploring the unexpected, radical truth in Scripture that runs counter to everything the world we live in would have us believe. We said last week that God's ways are not our ways. They don't come naturally to us. But when we begin to grasp them, we discover a power and beauty far beyond what we could come up with on our own.

Last week we looked at Paul's surprising instruction to lead a quiet life, mind our own business and work with our hands. Those are typically NOT the sorts of things we get really ambitious about, but in God's view, they are more worthy pursuits for our ambition than the things we normally chase.

This morning, we're going to look at another flip flop in the New Testament. This is one that Jesus presented to his disciples and caught them completely off guard.

Matthew 18:1-4

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"

He called a little child and had him stand among them. And he said: "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."

Here again we have a complete reversal of normal human thinking. The disciples are asking about influence, and Jesus points them to the least influential person in the crowd.

This incident comes right on the heels of a great even that occurred in the chapter before. Jesus had gone up on the mountain to pray, and he took his three closest disciples up with him. While they were up there, Jesus was transfigured into this dazzling white figure before their eyes. Moses and Elijah came down and talked with him, and God spoke from the cloud, affirming who Jesus was. It was a powerful shift in the way the disciples saw Jesus.

Now they can totally picture him being a powerful leader. Now they think they're starting to understand what he meant by the kingdom of God. They're envisioning him setting up a new government, and they're starting to get excited. Because it's only natural that if Jesus is coming into power, he's going to take his closest friends with him. So now the question becomes: Who will rank highest? Who will get the choicest seat?

Most of us have probably heard this story before, or parts of it. So when Jesus points to a child and says "You have to become like this to be the greatest," we're not all that shocked. The image has lost its edge for us. But it really does go against human nature, still to this day.

I just saw a copy of an ad for Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid who is running for re-election in Nevada this year. Do you know what his tagline is for his campaign? "America's most powerful senator." That's as close as you could find to a modern-day equivalent of being greatest in the kingdom. He's basing that on the number of things he's accomplished in his career, the committees he's served on, the amount of sway he has over votes, etc. His assumption is that the people of his state want the highest ranking voice they can have in Washington, D.C. Being the most powerful matters.

What if the ad had said, "America's most childlike senator?" That would have been seen as nonsense. The term doesn't sound right in politics.

Now I'm not trying to pick on Harry Reid – I'm just saying his commercial shows exactly the same mentality the disciples had when they approached Jesus that day. We haven't changed much since then. They had an eye on power and influence and strength and so do we. The human mind likes to categorize people in terms of importance. We like to jockey for position and make sure we're on the winning team.

It seems like a natural question the disciples asked, even if it was somewhat self-serving. In this new government you're forming, who is going to be the key member of your staff?

When you look at their question, you can see that the disciples are concerned about three main things. Number one is **power**. They believe Jesus is going to be coming into lots of it with his kingdom, and they want to know if they're going to be able to have access to it, to put it to use and wield it.

It's easy to fall into that trap. There are all kinds of Christian books that will talk about how to unlock or unleash the power of God in our lives, as if he were a vending machine.

A second thing the disciples are interested in **making a name for themselves**. Who will it be Jesus? Give us the person you've singled out. Each one was secretly hoping they'd be named. We talked last week about that desire to be recognized, to be acknowledged and seen as special.

For the disciples, it was more than just being special – it was being specialer. They wanted to see things in **comparison** to other people. They want Jesus to rank great, greater and greatest. They want to see how they stack up against each other.

We're always comparing ourselves to one another and doing our own ranking. We're always looking from side to side and either feeling one up or one down when we evaluate the person next to us.

Jesus comes back at the disciples with an answer that goes in the opposite direction of all three of those concerns. When they were interested in power, he singled out the least powerful, least influential and weakest person in any culture -- a child. When they wanted name recognition, a specific "who" – he said, "It's not who, it's WHOEVER. Anybody who follows the childlike path can be great in God's kingdom." There is no one person to be named. And because of that, the concern about comparison goes away as well. There's no competition or ranking at stake.

So Jesus turns the conversation on its head and calls into question everything the disciples imagined God's kingdom was like. And at the heart of a new understanding for them was this idea of becoming like a child. What is Jesus talking about?

Before we can answer that, it would help to define what we mean by a child. What makes a kid a kid? The author Pia Mellody has identified core characteristics of childhood that I find extremely clarifying. Some of you who have been in the Feelings Defenses and Family Communication class heard about these last week. Bill Bedell is the one who introduced these concepts to me. He's worked with Pia directly, and I asked him if he would come and walk us through these essential qualities of children.

[BILL]

Valuable
Vulnerable
Imperfect
Dependent
Immature

Those five qualities give us a good basic foundation for understanding what a child is. Take away one or more of those characteristics and you introduce dysfunction that stays with that person into adulthood.

Now let's take these traits back to our text for this morning. The disciples had asked who was greatest in God's kingdom. Instead of answering them immediately, Jesus began by backing them up and saying, "Hold on. You can't start by talking about who's greatest until you know how to even get inside this kingdom. There's only one way in: You've first got to become like a child."

The word Jesus used there for become means "to turn" or "to be converted". He's looking for a major shift.

In order for any of us to enter the kingdom, we have to take on the essence of a child. Of course Jesus isn't asking us to pull a Benjamin Button and reverse our physical aging process. He wants us to become like children spiritually. So when we take the concepts Bill just described and translate them into the spiritual realm, what would it look like to become, to turn into, to be converted to a child?

First, I would need to **understand my value**. Our value comes from being created and loved by God. This is the foundation we need for everything else in life: to know first and foremost that God loves us. He values us – not for how well we perform or what unique talents we have or what we've done with our lives. He just loves us because we're his, the same way a parent loves a child. That's the whole motivation of John 3:16:

John 3:16-17

This is how much God loved the world: He gave his Son, his one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life.

Do you know you matter to God? Some of you may have a hard time believing that. You may think he cares about humanity in general but not you individually. But that's not true. He knows you by name. Scripture says he knows every hair on your head. And he gave everything for your rescue. You have tremendous value to him. He wants more good for you than you could ever want for yourself.

Becoming a child spiritually means to let that love of God sink in to the point where I believe it and am willing to trust it.

As I trust it, I **expand my vulnerability**. Being vulnerable is risky. It opens me up to the possibility of being hurt. Maybe I've been wounded in the past and so I've put up some walls to protect myself. But if I'm not open to God, I won't be able to receive anything from him.

In his book, *Blue Like Jazz*, Donald Miller tells the story of a Navy SEAL operation to free hostages from a compound in some dark corner of the world. They burst in the door and saw the hostages curled up in a corner. The SEALs said, "Quick! Come with us! We're Americans!"

But the hostages had been so terrorized that they didn't believe them and stayed frozen on the floor. Then one of the SEALs got an idea. He put down his weapon and took off his helmet. He softened the expression on his face and laid down next to the hostages on the floor in a way he knew their captors never would. He spoke softly and gently to the hostages to let them know he was one of them. And one by one, they came around and trusted him enough to follow him to freedom.

God is offering us a rescue. And the way we know we can trust him, the way we know it's safe to be vulnerable with him is because he made himself like one of us. He entered our condition in a way the devil never has. And we can know that God will be nothing but careful with us. One of my favorite verses is in Isaiah:

Isaiah 42:3

*A bruised reed he will not break,
and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out.*

When we are damaged and broken, God takes great care of us. It is only to our benefit to be vulnerable with him.

The more I trust God, the more I will see my need to **own my imperfection**. This is usually the threshold we trip over at the front door as we try to move into God's household. We have to admit we're sinful and have no right to be there.

We'd rather do almost anything than own our imperfection. It's like the old Calvin and Hobbes comic strip. The first frame shows Suzie getting hit in the back of the head with a snowball. She goes and confronts Calvin. "Did you throw that?" and he says, "Who, me?" The next frame shows him flat on his face in the snow. The final shot is of him standing in front of his mirror, practicing his denials.

That's how we roll most of the time – we look for any escape route we can find so we don't have to face up to the consequences of our actions.

Owning our imperfection is when we see and admit how deep the problem is. Owning it is when we quit trying to deny or explain or defend ourselves and simply acknowledge the truth. We get to the same place King David was when he said,

Psalm 51:3

*I know how bad I've been;
my sins are staring me down.*

This is the critical point where we decide whether or not we want anything to do with God's kingdom. Because if we're not willing to own our stuff and say, "Yes, I'm a sinner," then we can't get to the true meaning of being God's child.

Have you come to terms with your own broken state? When we do, we are faced with another reality: we're powerless to do anything about that brokenness. As I own my imperfection, I discover I need to **accept my dependence**.

It's kind of like the terrible oil spill in the Gulf. The oil company knows it's their fault, but so far it has been beyond their ability to repair it. The break is so deep in the ocean that it has defied attempts to fix it. There's no equipment designed and tested to work at that depth. Every news report seems to say it's worse than they thought. They desperately keep attempting patches and ways to contain the oil, but it just keeps gushing. It's a big mess.

That's how it is with our sin – it's so deep we have no good method of dealing with it on our own. It's beyond our reach. It's much worse than we thought. We try to patch things up ourselves and contain the damage, but it just keeps gushing out of us.

Even Paul saw that in his own life:

Romans 7:21 & 24

So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me... What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?

Fortunately, in the very next verse, Paul points to the solution:

Romans 7:25

Thanks be to God-through Jesus Christ our Lord!

We not only have to recognize that we're sinners, but also that we need a Savior. We are dependent on God to rescue us from our plight. And that's what the cross was all about.

Jesus took the punishment for all the sin of the world when he died. He lived a perfect life and died a sinner's death. In doing so, he became our substitute.

To become a child of God is to depend on what Jesus did for our relationship with him. There's nothing within us that can restore the connection – only Jesus could do it. And as much as we like to be self-reliant, this is one place where we just can't make it on our own. Jesus made it pretty clear when he said,

John 14:6

No one comes to the Father except through me.

Am I depending on Christ? Until I become like a child in that way, Jesus says, I don't understand what being in his kingdom is about.

The final piece of childhood that fits into our spiritual journey is that I need to **engage my immaturity.**

Did you see the story in the news about the two year old in Indonesia who smokes 40 cigarettes a day? It's a shocking picture to see a baby picking up a bad habit that is normally limited to people much older. You see it and you think how sad it is that he has already been introduced to something that is going to rob him of his childhood.

There is something to be said for letting kids be kids. One of the pieces I found refreshing about Pia's work is that she doesn't look at immaturity as a bad thing when someone should be immature. Children shouldn't be expected to act older than they are. We don't expect a 1 year old to sit at a fancy table and eat a steak dinner, using a knife to cut it into pieces, chewing each bite 12 times, carrying on polite conversation. Instead we take into consideration their size, their appetite, how many teeth they have, and what they need for their body to grow. A bottle and some cheerios may be far more appropriate than filet mignon.

Sometimes in our faith, we feel bad about where we're at, like we should be acting older and knowing more. I should know more Bible verses. I should be able to pray better. But that just shuts us down. God would rather have us engage our immaturity, to take a good look at ourselves and say, "This is where I'm at. What do I need for my current level of spiritual development? How can I grow from here? What can I process and what do I need?"

1 Peter 2:2-3

Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good.

What are you hungering for from God? What appeals to your spiritual taste buds right now? Feed that craving and you will begin to grow.

These five core characteristics help us understand what is involved with becoming children to enter the kingdom of God. But if you remember where we started, the disciples weren't originally asking about how to enter the kingdom. They wanted to know who was greatest. And Jesus finally comes back to it and says this:

Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

In other words, the same things that apply to entering the kingdom give the new definition to greatness within the kingdom. It's not like we move on to something bigger

and better: We stay in that childlike state of knowing we're valued, practicing vulnerability, owning our imperfection, depending on Christ and engaging all our areas of immaturity. We never outgrow the need for those traits. We can spend a lifetime developing those qualities.

I want to point out one more somewhat obvious thing about becoming a child, and that is the very nature of the word implies relationship. Children are all the product of parents. No one is a self-generated child. There is a biological connection to someone else.

Becoming a child of God means establishing relationship with him, and some of you may be feeling fuzzy on that point. You hear what I'm saying about these character qualities, but you're still unclear about just how to enter into a personal connection with God.

If we go back again to our story, there's a piece you could almost miss, it goes by so quickly. But I think it helps us out on this point. I'm talking about the interaction between the actual child in the story and Jesus. We only get one sentence:

He called a little child and had him stand among them.

Jesus calls the child and the little boy comes over to him. Then it says Jesus had him stand among them. The idea is actually a little more hands on than it sounds in this English. We could say "Jesus stood him among them." You can picture Jesus lifting up the little boy and placing him right where he wants him.

Two simple actions sum up what the child did: Respond to Christ's call, and let him place him where he wanted him. He gave Jesus the freedom to act in his life.

That's all we're doing when we enter a relationship with him – responding to his call and letting him move us to where he wants us. That's what we're asked to do all through our life with him.

Maybe you're thinking, "I've never heard a call. I don't know what that is." Well you're in luck. Because this IS the call. Paul says that when the gospel is shared, we are making an appeal on God's behalf. We are speaking for him. So behind my words and through them this morning comes God's call specifically to you to come to him. Now it's simply a matter of whether or not you will respond.

Christ wants to take you and set you in a new spot. To establish you, to steady you and to help you stand. He wants to point to you as the latest example of what it means to be a child of God. Today can be your entrance into his kingdom. This Father's Day can be your day to have a Heavenly Father who loves you and values you. Having that relationship is what is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

If you haven't already responded to Christ's call, is there any reason why you shouldn't do it today? If you're ready for that, I'm going to pray a simple prayer and invite you to pray it for yourself in your own heart.

Jesus, I know you love me. Thank you for showing that by coming and dying for me. I know I'm a sinner and I need what you did on the cross to take care of my sin. I want a relationship with you. Please forgive me, come into my life, and help me grow as your child. Amen.