The Beloved Childlike Elder

Return to Childhood

“Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Matt. 18:3)

Henri Nouwen writes that “entering a second childhood–is essential to dying a good death.”[[1]](#footnote-0) He does not advocate a “second immaturity,”[[2]](#footnote-1) but instead highlights trusting dependency. Instead of immaturity, Nouwen sees the return to dependence:

What characterizes this second childhood? It has to do with a new dependence. For the first twenty or so years of life, we depend on our parents, teacher, and friends. Forty years later, we again become increasingly dependent. The younger we are, the more people we need so that we may live; the older we become, the more people we again need to live. Life is lived from dependence to dependence.[[3]](#footnote-2)

Nouwen points out that in this entry into childhood dependency, we imitate Jesus who “came as a child and died as a child. His life and death allow us to “claim and reclaim our own childhood.”[[4]](#footnote-3)

And yet, “There is nothing little, weak, or naive about being a child of God. In fact this election allows us to keep our heads erect in the presence of God even while we walk through a world falling apart on every side.”[[5]](#footnote-4) The correlation between childhood and old age is about more than dependency; it highlights a critical and positive embrace of God's tender love, a putting aside of defenses, and a return to radical trust.

Least or Greatest

Our culture values children highly and the elderly very little. In Jesus’ day, while children were not valued highly, older men were accorded great respect. Jesus’ challenge to his disciples to put aside ambition and choose the stance of a child was profound. He was asking them to put aside their privilege and agency as adult men in a patriarchal world to be humble like children.

As usual Jesus stands our values upside down. This was a hard teaching for the disciples as it still is for us today. We are called to choose humility at every stage of life, but late life imposes it on us in the diminishment of age. When our bodies and minds weaken, we need assistance.

Does the humbling reentry into childlike neediness mean we are of less value to God? We naturally measure our worth by our achievements. But Jesus clearly values and loves the humble children. While his disciples were thinking about who would be greatest in Jesus' kingdom, he pointed them toward “the least among them,” assuring them that the least is the greatest in the kingdom. (Luke 9:48) Paul echoes him in assuring us that God has chosen “what is weak in the world to shame the strong.” (1 Cor. 1:28)

Peter calls on all Christians to humble themselves in the confidence that: “after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you” (1 Peter 5:10). In the meantime, he counsels them to “Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you.” (v. 7)

When Jesus addresses anxiety in the Sermon on the Mount, he urges his followers not to worry:

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing?Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?And which of you by worrying can add a single hour to your span of life? Matt. 6:24-27

In the current culture in the US it is natural for elders to feel undervalued. We read the account of the disciples wanting to turn children away from Jesus with shock. We have learned to value children enough that we expect Jesus to care for them. But we have lost the reverence that ancient cultures had for the elderly (at least for older men). In our culture it is the elders that we might turn away from Jesus by ignoring their spiritual needs or concerns, by losing patience with their slowness, by failing to listen to their perspectives.

## Knowing our belovedness

Jesus’ blessing of the children (Mark 10:13-16, Luke 18:15-17) is the assurance of their belovedness. We are invited into this blessing as we enter our second childhood, the blessing of knowing in our bones that we belong to our loving God. As Nouwen writes:

Once we have come to the deep inner knowledge–a knowledge more of the heart than of the mind–that we are born out of love and will die into love, that every part of our being is deeply rooted in love and that this love is our true Father and Mother, then all forms of evil, illness, and death lose their final power over us and become painful, but hopeful reminders of our true divine childhood.[[6]](#footnote-5)

What does it look like to accept Jesus’ teaching that we must become like little children? It consists in resting from work to please God and others, and allowing ourselves to be cared for, vulnerable, and needy. It is to live like the birds (Matt. 6:26) that God feeds and cares for.

Elders fear a loss of identity and status as they age. It is undeniable that in our culture they have reason for feeling this way. As much as lies within our power, we must push back against the devaluing of elders. For the sake of our communities we should honor and include elders, hearing their stories, and learning from them. Caring for them calls out what is best in us too and allows them to minister to us.
As Nouwen writes: “To care for others as they become weaker and closer to death is to allow them to fulfill their deepest vocation, that of becoming ever-more fully what they already are: daughters and sons of God.”9

When my grandmother died she asked for “Jesus Loves Me” to be sung at her memorial service. This song expresses well the heart of the surrendered elder, the childlike beloved.

* Jesus loves me! This I know,
For the Bible tells me so;
Little ones to Him belong;
They are weak, but He is strong.
	+ *Refrain:*Yes, Jesus loves me!
	Yes, Jesus loves me!
	Yes, Jesus loves me!
	The Bible tells me so.

Anna B. Warner

The “little ones” do not fret about their weakness but trust in the strength and love of their savior. But the song highlights the weakness of our evangelical culture which depends so heavenly on what “the Bible tells” us. The words of scripture are profoundly important, but are there incarnational ways to assure elders that they are dearly loved by Jesus, and indeed by the whole divine community of the Trinity? Must the elder rely solely on words in a book to know they are loved? What about the touch of a visitor's hand, the faithful care of their faith community, and the warmth of the Holy Spirit in their soul growing stronger as they learn contemplative prayer?

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## Witness of the Spirit

Gordon T. Smith writes about the witness of the Spirit in our hearts that allows us to feel rather than know intellectually the depth of God’s love for us. He notes that experiencing the love of God is fundamental to our Christian journey.[[7]](#footnote-6) But how do we move beyond an intellectual idea of being loved by God to the experience of that love?

Smith emphasizes the essential work of the Spirit to pour the love of God into our hearts. This can only happen if we open our hearts in humility to the ministry of the Spirit.[[8]](#footnote-7) He sees suffering as one agent that opens our hearts and breaks down our defenses. As we suffer, we become more ready to let go of our self sufficiency and open ourselves up in humility to the spirit. Smith is not writing about aging, but he could be. He builds his argument on Paul’s progression in Romans 5:

we also boast in our afflictions, knowing that affliction produces endurance,and endurance produces character, and character produces hope,and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. vv. 3-5

The affliction of aging can lead us through endurance, character, and hope to the experience of God’s abundant love, but, Smith writes, we have a choice. We can choose to respond to pain with anger and bitterness, shutting us off from the Spirit.[[9]](#footnote-8) But, “if we embrace suffering, rather than cause us to doubt the love of God, it becomes the context in which we come to learn, know and appropriate God’s love as our own.”[[10]](#footnote-9) He recommends the practice of gratitude as an exercise in putting away bitterness and opening our hearts to the blessing of the Spirit.[[11]](#footnote-10)

Gratitude asks us to name our blessings and turns our eyes away from our trials and inconveniences toward God’s provision. It grounds us in the love of God. As we turn our eyes toward gratitude, we begin to see that “all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.” (v. 28)

Then we are able to exclaim with Paul,

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will affliction or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or peril or sword?...No, in all these things we are more than victorious through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers,nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (vv. 35, 37-39)

Could the elders in our contexts find second childhood to be such a powerful experience of the love of God that they would say, “We are convinced that neither death, nor age, nor illness, nor dementia, nor trials in the present, nor future challenges, nor dependency,nor pain, nor grief, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord?”

1. Nouwen, Our Greatest Gift, 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. Nouwen, greatest gift 18 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. Nouwen, GG 14 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. Nouwen GG 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. Nouwen GG 18 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. Nouwen, GG 17 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
7. Smith, Gordon, 74. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
8. Smith, 81. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
9. Smith 84. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
10. Smith, 85. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
11. Smith 85-87 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)