

-This is going to date me a little bit, but one of my favorite movies that stars the late Robin Williams is the film *Hook*. Released in 1991, this Steven Spielberg directed movie plays around with the notion of Peter Pan growing up and forgetting what it means to be a child. After his children are kidnapped by the evil Captain Hook, the now adult Peter Pan (played by Robin Williams) goes back to Never Never Land not only to free his own children but to remember what being a child actually means. Perhaps the most famous scene of the film is Peter's reconnection with the rag-tag bunch of lost-boys (who have not grown up, ofcourse). These boys don't believe that Robin Williams is actually Peter until they have this massive food fight. Then, one of the youngest boys approaches Peter, takes off his grown-up glasses and puts his hands on his face. He scrunches it up and finally says: "there you are Peter!". The movie is really amazing in its embrace of what childhood is. (check it out on your next movie night!)

-It might be a great film for all of us to see and then read/see this gospel text through.

-We are going to be dedicating our new church stained glass window that the Perry family donated to us which is hanging now in the narthex on October 14th. For those who haven't seen it yet, it's this awesome scene of Jesus teaching and this group of children (arm-in-arm) looking at him intently. I think the window really captures verses 37-36 incredibly well: "Then Jesus took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, 'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.'"

-As I have discovered raising my own child, I think we have created a stigma of what "childhood should be", not welcoming what "childhood is".

-Remember Jesus' quite radical statement here because it is quite extraordinary. Kids were NOT celebrated in ancient Israel/Palestine. Children were a necessity, of course (you needed heirs). But in an age of precarious living environments: famine, war, hygiene issues, not to mention disease, children were seen more as parasites than cute. They were defenseless and needed resources and time that were hard to give. One 2016 study estimates that the infant mortality rate of the 1st century Roman Empire was around 30%. Nearly  $\frac{1}{3}$  of all babies died before the age of 1. Compare that with the modern mortality rate here in the USA (which is higher than other developed countries) which sits around .5%. Children were helpless, defenseless, offered no help to the family vocation until they were older (most likely some kind of farming), and thus were probably malnourished and sick a lot. They were, in the Roman Empire social structure hierarchy, dead last (even adult foreigners were seen in a more positive light, because at least foreigners could be laborers of some kind). Thus, you can see in this context, the radical nature of Jesus' response to his disciples: Whoever welcomes one such child (actually the Greek can also be translated literally as "least one") in my name welcomes me."

-It seems like even in our modern age, we have this interesting tension of how we view children. Children are cute and great to be around (they make great baby-Jesus' at Christmas time), but as they soon start acting up or getting squirrely, well, then time is up. I once heard a member of another Lutheran congregation in Missoula say: "If we can only get the kids here, then we'll get the parents too." Clearly the parents must be the better catch I guess.

- I was talking with one of our own OSLC church members the other day who relayed a story to me of her daughter and family feeling abandoned because the kids area near the church sanctuary was being suspended because a group of folks felt it was getting to be too "noisy and disturbing" during worship. It had to be dealt with. There is this distance that has occurred between us as the church and childhood.

-Beyond just noise, we also live in a 21st century age where the church can't be totally trusted anymore for being a safe place for children. Children have suffered multiple forms of spiritual-trauma, racism, and even sexual abuse within the walls of churches. Even reading this text, I get squeamish a little bit when it says: "then Jesus took a child and embraced it in his arms". That's a safe-church violation if I ever saw one. According to technical rules, Lutheran pastors are forbidden to hug a child unless the child initiates it. Jesus wouldn't pass ELCA training requirements here, I guess he needs to study up more.

-Maybe we need a healthy reckoning of our own childhood after all as a church.

-My main-man Soren turned 6 months old this last Thursday, can you believe it? Soren has already in these past 6 months taught me a lot on how to be a patient and loving parent. One of the things that I can't get over is Soren's continual drive to explore new things. A good nickname for him would be Soren-quiet-hands because he is always quietly reaching for something to discover. Most of the time it's good things to explore (like a piece of grass, or a stick, or a book). Sometimes it not so good things to explore (like Dad's beer, a pair of scissors, or a piece of hot food). Soren's quest for discovery has been infectious: never have I looked so closely at the sunflowers in our front yard, or at a book that needs to be read and half chewed on, or at the trees and clouds. Turns out, I have needed a baby in my life in order to be more open minded to the everyday items that haven't fully been discovered or worked out yet.

-I think Jesus realizes the openness of a child when he asks the disciples: "What were you arguing about on the way?" Their response sounds like my brother and I in the back seat when we were pushing each other around and my parents would ask: what is going on?? Nothing.....

-You see that's the thing, childhood openness gives way to something else. We experience all kinds of other things when we grow up a little bit that we have to sort through. It's like we and the disciples have to re-learn what being the "least one"

actually means. Turns out, who are actually being the closed off kids: the children that Jesus embraces or the disciples? Can we see ourselves in this exchange too?

-The question becomes: how do we as the church work to not only not forget about our little ones, but also seek to learn from them?

-St. Paul Lutheran downtown just got a new youth director who is amazing. Now the previous youth director, Amanda Nelson, happens to be one of my best friends in Missoula so don't get me wrong: she was amazing too! But, the new youth director at St. Paul, Rebekah, has brought some new ideas to that congregation which have been really awesome to see. One of the ideas she has started is create an area called a "Pray-ground". There are several ELCA churches that have started to do this and I think it's really cool. Basically, a Pray-ground is an area that is set aside in the sanctuary for children to be during worship. A pray-ground might have some cool bean-bag chairs, or soft-toys to play with, or books, or coloring materials. Now you would think that this area would be nicely tucked away in the back of the sanctuary, but the entire idea of having a Pray-ground (according to Rebekah) is to put it RIGHT IN FRONT. That way, the children can be most engaged with what's going on in worship and be teaching one another (as well as us) how to be respectful during worship.

-St. Paul just introduced their Pray-ground two weeks ago and it has been received very positively. It makes me wonder: what can we do here at OSLC? Ofcourse it takes more than a children's worship area to be open to the "little ones", but maybe it's a start?

-Whatever it may be, may God grant us wisdom and patience to be open like a child: to discover our world in new ways, and celebrate the wonder of our children both today and well into the future. Amen.