

## Hearing the Kindness of Children

Sixth Week of Epiphany

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II Kings 5: 1-14

*Once, when the Arameans were out raiding, as they were wont to do, raiding, pillaging, causing general mayhem, they carried off a young girl from the land of Israel. There is a whole story here, isn't there? I wonder whether this young girl left a whole family—mother, father, sisters, brothers—back in Israel? Or had they also been seized and carried off elsewhere to serve Aramean masters, never to see one another ever again? Had they all been slaughtered before the young girl's eyes before she was seized and carried off? The text tells us none of this. With that parsimony of expression that is so typical of biblical narratives, she is carried off, and in the next scene there she is in Aram (modern Syria), where she has become an attendant to Naaman's wife. The text then tells us that she said to her mistress, "I wish Master could come before the prophet in Samaria; he would cure him of his leprosy."<sup>1</sup>*

Now I find it deeply touching that this young girl, snatched away from her family and carried off into slavery in a strange land, nonetheless expresses care and concern for those who had abducted and enslaved her and done who knows what to the rest of her family and friends. She isn't portrayed here as angry, vindictive, and cunning. She's not hatching some plot to exact revenge from her captors. With the natural innocence and trust, perhaps naiveté, of a child, she simply wants to be helpful to these people who have become the significant adults in her life. She wants to use and share something of which she has special knowledge, special competence—her knowledge of Elisha the prophet. With lack of affectation, forethought, or design, she does what children do so well, she says what she is thinking, and what she is thinking expresses kindness, generosity, and—dare I say it?—compassion.

And by so doing this young girl becomes the actual agent of Naaman's healing. She sets into motion the chain of events that leads Naaman to his king, and then to the king of Israel, and then to Elisha, and then to the Jordan. The young girl—who remains nameless—is the instrument of healing and restoration for her master. How did Naaman thank her for the good deed she did for him? Did he free her from bondage? Did he adopt her as his own dear child? Of this we know nothing. She drops out of sight and we hear no more of her.

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<sup>1</sup> II Kings translation from *Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures*, Jewish Publication Society, 1985.

I wonder how often it is children who are the unacknowledged and uncredited agents of restoration, recovery, and hope. Sometimes that is literally so, as when a child offers a suggestion or makes an offhand comment that brightens and transfigures the day. I think of the day recently when my wife Judy was putting our three-year-old grandson Sam in his special chair in the back seat of the car before I was to drive him home at the end of a day he had spent with us. She adjusted the straps of the harness that holds Sam securely in his seat. Then she was hugging him in his seat and saying good-bye, and he was hugging her, when he said to her twice, “I help you to love yourself. I help you to love yourself.” Why did he say this? Why in particularly this way? What did he actually mean by it? We don’t know. But we experienced it as an awesome expression of his care for Judy and his desire to do something to show his love.

When Sam stays with us, he usually is picked up by his mommy or daddy at the end of the day. Either Judy or I carry him out to his car and put him in his seat. After exchanging good-bye hugs and kisses, Judy and I go through an elaborate ritual of waves and thrown kisses and what Sam calls “funny dances.” He likes us to dance around in our driveway in the most loony and ludicrous way we can devise so he can laugh once more at the end of our day together. (We only imagine what our neighbors think of us.) But part of the ritual includes Sammy shouting at me from the car, “Don’t stub your toe, Grandpa! Don’t stub your toe!” He already recognizes my klutziness and wants to help.

Sam now has a new baby brother—Benjamin, who was born just a little over a month ago. Ben’s arrival has been very hard on Sam. He has undergone a considerable grief process, letting go of the exclusive rights to his mommy and daddy that he has enjoyed for so long. “I want my mommy and I can’t have her,” he was heard to wail, sitting mournfully on his bed. But he is adapting. He seems to be learning that it isn’t the end of the world to share mommy and daddy with this new tiny creature. Sam is now visibly distressed if Ben starts to cry. In fact, if Ben starts crying and adults don’t immediately move to help, Sam will say, “Pay attention to the baby!” The other evening we were coming home from a restaurant. Mommy was sitting in the back seat of the car with Sam on one side of her and Ben on the other. Ben was whimpering and just beginning to cry, when Sam said to his mommy, “Give the baby a kiss,” and then, “Give the baby more kisses. He’ll feel better”

Meister Eckhart, the medieval mystic, wrote,

If I was alone in a desert and feeling afraid, I would like to have a child with me, for then my fear would disappear and I would be strengthened—so noble, so full of pleasure, and so powerful is life itself. If I could not have a child with me, and if I had at least a live animal with me, I would be comforted. Therefore, let those who bring about great wonders in big, black books take an animal—perhaps a dog

—to help them. The life within the animal will give them strength. For equality gives strength to all things.<sup>2</sup>

Matthew Fox explains that “this excellent testimony to the ‘power of life itself’ and to the equality that ‘gives strength in all things’ is Eckhart’s memorable way of underlining the importance of the equality of all creatures that derives from their all being in God and in the divine circle of being.”<sup>3</sup> Fox writes, “It is because of this equality of being that we share with all creatures that we can learn from all creatures instead of lording it over them.”<sup>4</sup>

“People were bringing little children to Jesus in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, ‘Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.’” (Mark 10:13-14)

When, after having set aside his initial embarrassment and indignation, Naaman finally did go down and immerse himself in the Jordan seven times as Elisha had instructed him to do, we are told “his flesh became like a little boy’s,” and it goes without saying that that is good, though the text does add, “and he was clean.”

I am thinking about children this morning—Iraqi children, Israeli children, Turkish children, Kurdish children, American children, Korean children, Iranian children. I am thinking of that young girl of ancient Israel whose words restored the bloom of youth to her master Naaman. I am thinking of that other young girl who bore the babe of Bethlehem and of the baby Jesus gurgling at his young mother’s breast, his cries calling forth his own mommy’s kisses and caresses. What is their wisdom for us during perilous times? What might they teach us and our leaders about love, compassion, care, about the nobility, pleasure, and power of life itself? In the eucharist this morning I suggest that we are sharing with the Christ child and with all the children of the world the strong life and health and hope that come from God.

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew Fox, *Breakthrough: Meister Eckhart’s Creation Spirituality in a New Translation*. Doubleday 1980, p. 99.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 98.