



LACY FINN  
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Faith  
Like  
a  
Child

EMBRACING OUR LIVES AS  
CHILDREN *of* GOD



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# Introduction

## *Welcoming the Child Within*

**It's important to know** the way to enter when visiting my parents. From the driveway, all you can see is the garage. But if you enter that garage and weave through the cars, tools, and unimaginable array of glass canning jars, you'll see a staircase at the back leading to a humble door. Over that door is a ceramic sign that reads "Bienvenidos a casa de los abuelos." In English, the sign—a nod to their Texas roots and my mother's love of Mexican culture—reads, "Welcome to the grandparents' house." If you take these grandparents up on their welcome and enter that door, you might feel like you've come home. For they'll be grandparents to you, as they are to everyone they know. Children and adults far and wide call them Big Mama and Grand. They embody the word *welcome*.

The word *welcome* comes to us from the eighth century and means "a wished-for guest." The word itself combines two parts: "to will or desire" and "to come." Woven within the word is an acknowledgment of the will to choose the presence of another. Welcome then requires an intentional action, a literal coming together of those who have been separate.

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Welcome can be found throughout Scripture, both in the Hebrew Scriptures and in the New Testament. In Genesis, God welcomed—that is, desired and then acted on that desire—the world into existence. Eve welcomed Adam into human intimacy. God welcomed Abraham into friendship. Joshua welcomed a nation into a home. Rahab welcomed strangers into freedom. Ruth welcomed her mother-in-law into the family. Samuel welcomed God into speech. Mary welcomed God into her body. And Jesus? Jesus is all welcome. The Gospels tell us that Jesus welcomed women, men, and children into a way of being that birthed new life. The welcome that Jesus continues to offer reweaves all that we once thought separate.

Our welcomes are all connected: how we welcome our childhood selves is connected to how much we welcome the children in front of us, which is connected to how much we welcome the Christ child. And to welcome the Christ child is to welcome humanity itself. Children are the most human among us. They are the most present, most authentic, and most connected with the least effort and intention.

The incarnation is the foundation for the holy act of becoming human. Jesus' life showed us that each developmental stage can be a place of holy delight. He was a child who did childlike and childish things. In him was the delight, awe, and wonder of discovery. He who knew all things experienced them afresh with a human body. He experienced life as an infant, a toddler, a child, a tween, and an adolescent. He encountered the same fears and worries and existential questions that we do.

As we welcome our own childhood selves, we welcome the humanity of Jesus. And in that welcoming, we find a companion for life. And further, when we welcome our own childhood selves

and the Christ child, we will be more able to welcome children in our own lives. The act of welcoming involves a presence filled with acceptance, compassion, and empathy. When we feel with others and accept them, our level of desire for connection deepens. When our childhood memories hold places of fear and rejection, we wall off our childhood selves, and our welcome to children suffers.

### BECOMING LIKE CHILDREN

Back when my children were very young and my soul was lonely, I gathered a group of women once a month in my home for dinner and a book discussion. Dinner was on my grandmother's fine china, and the food was Colorado luxurious, plenty of it and hearty for winter, worth lingering over for hours. Some of us found childcare, others brought their littles. I remember a random comment made while chatting at the dining room table.

“When Jesus said, ‘You must become like children to enter the kingdom of God,’ surely he didn’t mean that,” one mother said, pointing to her son—who was picking his nose and wiping it on my couch. We all laughed that kind of laugh that said, “We hear you, sister, and thank God that’s your kid.”

We are made for experiencing God. Our first and most natural inclination as children is to connect with God in deeply uniting yet often ordinary ways. We adults have much to learn. This book will explore what it looks like to re-member (to revisit and revive what has been part of us) our childhood selves, to let the Spirit heal the childhood wounds that have calloused our hearts. We will re-member the natural patterns of our childhood selves that enabled us to live with freedom in God’s wonder-filled presence. We will unpack seven general ways of being that are natural to

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childhood and suggest healing spiritual practices that can help us grow a whole life with God. We will begin by exploring a shape of spiritual formation that addresses both the wonder we were born with and the wounds that could use some tender care. We will revisit what it looks like to develop a healthy attachment to God and how to cultivate that attachment through play, imagination, creativity, wonder, humor, and simply paying attention.

Each of us must do this essential work, and especially those of us who work or live with children—because children can spot a fake at fifty paces. We can only accompany children where we have gone. If we haven't re-membered our childhood selves, the distance between ourselves and the children in front of us will grow.

### CHILDHOOD AS A WISDOM WAY

“Aunt Polly, would you tell me one of your earliest memories?” I asked while shoveling Milky Way cake into my mouth as fast as possible—I needed a free hand to take notes.

“That’s a hard one . . . let me think,” she replied. Even well into her nineties, her mind was as sharp as her cane.

Family reunions in the Ringener (my mom’s side of the family) way are mainly about cake. There might be brisket, and various versions of potato salad, but there will always be cake. And there will be stories, tall Texas tales that are mostly true. The story I heard that day from my great-aunt Polly stirred something deep in me. I was just beginning to wonder about our early experiences of God and those tender memories that we hold dear throughout our lives: the memories that we may never tell another soul, but that we tell ourselves during hard times, when our knees become wobblier than we’d like.

She reminisced to me:

I remember it was a gray day, and I knew it had been raining because there was mud puddles everywhere. My mama had died, and on this day they were burying her. Her casket was in the back of the wagon and all the adults were walking behind it to the cemetery. I wasn't more than four or five years old, so I was playin' in the water, jumpin' in the puddles. I heard one of the aunties say, "Poor little girl, don't even know her mama died." I overheard her and thought, "I know my Mama is safe with God." I wasn't sad and I wasn't scared.

When I first heard this, I too easily dismissed her experience, falling into the same assumptions as the aunties, thinking she didn't understand the gravity of the situation. It's true that children don't fully understand death, but maybe they know more about God than adults have previously understood. Could it be that Polly already encountered God in her young life? Could it be that overheard snippets of Jesus stories enlivened her imagination and cultivated a connection with God? Maybe little five-year-old Polly understood what was necessary for the moment. Maybe her young faith held her in that knowing.

#### ENGAGING THIS BOOK

In this book we will be exploring the ways of children and reengaging with our own memories of childhood. Do be gentle with yourself. Some memories that come into the light of Christ might be full of delight and forgotten joy, but some might remind you of wounds long buried. Walk gently and let the Spirit lead. Deep healing of tender places can't be rushed or ramrodded. Go slow, go easy.



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At the end of each chapter is a smorgasbord of practices to reunite you with your childhood self and the eternal one who loved you into being. Choose one practice, dear friend, and let it work deeply into who you are. There is no such thing as spiritual Olympics, and anyone who tells you differently is selling you something. (Yes, I know you bought this book. The stick in my eye is quite bothersome.) You can return to the other practices at a later time. My hope is that you will wander through these practices over and over for the next two decades, just long enough to grow young again.

Two tips as you begin: first, be around children. If you don't live with any, you can volunteer to teach the children at your church, or volunteer to help a child learn to read in an after-school program, or volunteer to babysit for some tired-looking parents you know. I can describe children's unique ways of being and offer strategies for you to live out these ways, but spending time with children will lead you much deeper. I'm a better typist, but they know the way by heart. Simple observation and engagement will go a long way. Second, find a traveling companion—a soul friend who can listen and help you to hear yourself and God. These friends will stay with us in the hard spots and celebrate our gains. A formal relationship of this kind is called spiritual direction; if you are looking for a less formal listening partner, feel free to ask a trusted friend.<sup>1</sup> This partner doesn't need to sort us out or coddle us. We only need someone to hold a safe and welcoming space for us and listen with a compassionate heart. (You can show them the previous sentence—as a gentle guide.) A helpful question to live with might be, “I wonder what you notice happening within yourself?”

And now, in the words of every child I know, “Let's play!”



# 1

## *Knowing God. Accepting Self*

*Focusing on God while failing to know ourselves deeply may produce an external form of piety, but it will always leave a gap between appearance and reality.*

DAVID G. BENNER

**It can be hard to hear** the quiet voices of the children in the noisy dining hall at Haven House, a transitional facility for families without homes. It is a large, open space that functions much like a thoroughfare for folks walking between private rooms and the kitchen. Still, it was the best spot that we could find to paint our prayers with watercolors. I sat in a circle with a dozen or so children and asked a simple question: “What is God like?”

No hands shot up immediately. They sat for a bit in wiggly silence, while I wondered if they were bored or just distracted. Jessica answered first, “He’s like big and up there [pointing to the ceiling] and, you know, watching us.” Carlos chimed in, “Like, you

know, Jesus.” And then his sister Amelia said, “Or Mary. God is like Mary.” Then Leslie began, “Once when I was outside and looking at the clouds, I saw a big storm come in, and I think God is like that. A big storm.”

Each child jumped in with their own stories and thoughts about God. Like a grandmother, like a wizard, like a protector, like a friend.

### WHAT IS GOD LIKE?

In his book *Cry of Wonder*, Jesuit priest and spiritual director Gerard Hughes writes that the question “What is God like?” is the question he lived his whole life.<sup>1</sup> This question pulses underneath our everyday living and rises to the surface when we experience the intensity of pain, suffering, joy, and love. And it is in childhood that we begin to ask this question, whether consciously or unconsciously. The question is interwoven with our fundamental questions around attachment and safety. The adults who hold the power to keep us safe and healthy also shape our pictures of God. (Yep, we’ve likely got more than one picture.)

Parents, grandparents, pastors, teachers, and family friends all contribute to our pictures of God. This imprinting can be a good thing when adults keep us safe and healthy. But when they don’t care for us well, our picture of God gets crapped up. *Crapped up* is a West Texas term that means something was good in the beginning, but layers of cast-off muck covered up the good. It doesn’t destroy what was originally there, but the first masterpiece is marred.

Safe and healthy connections with adults are not the only influences that form our picture of God. God longed us into being and then scattered divine fingerprints as invitations to connect within

nature, within our own curiosity, within experiences of awe, beauty, and unity. When as children we encounter the Spirit's invitations, the question "What is God like?" reverberates in our souls.

So, what is God like? After completing a doctor of ministry in spiritual formation and having ongoing conversations with this divine One for fifty years, you'd think I might have this sorted out. Each time I get close to a neat definition, God blows the sides off my tidy box.

For much of Christian history we have thought of God as male, and we have used male pronouns and masculine characteristics. And while the biblical record testifies to a masculine description of God, masculine is not the only description. The biblical record also testifies to a feminine description of God. Sadly, seeing God as only masculine is limiting, harmful, and woefully inaccurate. The Bible is more expansive than that. In Genesis, we read that God made human beings in God's image, both male and female. We notice that *ruah*, the Hebrew word for God's Spirit, is feminine. This feminine answer to "What is God like?" can be found throughout Scripture.<sup>2</sup>

Jesus—who is the answer to the question "What is God like?"—told parables comparing God to a woman. God is like a woman who is determined to find a lost coin that is most precious to her (Luke 15:8-10). God is like a woman who hides the yeast of the kingdom of God in bread (Matthew 13:33). God is like a mother hen who longs to protect her young (Matthew 23:37). As my friend Jean Nevills likes to say, "God is our Mothering Father. God is our divine parent."

In his book *Discovering Our Spiritual Identity*, pastor, author, and spiritual director Trevor Hudson writes, "If we want to get our picture of God clearer, we must look in the direction of Jesus. . . .

Every idea and assumption that we have about God must be measured against the person of Jesus.”<sup>3</sup> If we want to know what God is like, we need to find out what Jesus was like.

Jesus embraced himself as a child of his *Abba*. We see this in the Lord’s Prayer (Matthew 6:5-15; Luke 11:1-13). He could have addressed God in this particular prayer as King, Teacher, Ruler, but he didn’t. He calls out to God using a tender, familial term that acknowledges a particular relationship of belonging—divine parent and child. Jesus too was a child who lived from the wisdom of childhood; in fact, this childlike prayer shows us that he never left his childhood, but even as an adult knew how to perpetually re-member. Jesus is both older than time itself and younger than a heartbeat of the present.

If we learn, like Jesus, to re-member our childhood selves, we will find greater capacity to connect with God’s presence and his kingdom (Mark 10:13-16). As our capacity expands, so does our sense of belonging to the trinitarian community of love (Luke 18:15-17). We read in 1 John 4 that God is love, but somehow, in our innermost selves, we knew that already. When our father passes on the sixth piece of pie in a room of seven people, when an aunt shows up for our basketball game, when a family friend sends us a package while we are deployed, when a teacher takes time out of her lunch to teach us prepositions, when a stranger offers a word of kindness, we know that the essence of life is love. The unfathomable mystery of it all is that God is love.

What is God like? We are invited to follow the answers to this question for all of our lives. Like lovers continually growing in the knowledge of each other, God invites us from our very beginning to fall into love. However, living with the question “What is God like?” will lead us to another: “What are we like?”

## WHAT ARE WE LIKE?

By most accounts, there are eight passages in the Gospels where children are mentioned. Six specific written accounts holding two distinct stories are found in the Synoptic Gospels, Luke, Mark, and Matthew.

An argument arose among them as to which one of them was the greatest. But Jesus, aware of their inner thoughts, took a little child and put it by his side, and said to them, “Whoever welcomes this child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me; for the least among all of you is the greatest.” (Luke 9:46-48)

Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the way?” But they were silent, for on the way they had been arguing with one another about who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” Then he 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.” (Mark 9:33-37)

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” He called a child, whom he put among them, and said, “Truly, I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.” (Matthew 18:1-5)

This story reflects the disciples' pecking war for power. The disciples were an ethnically oppressed people, systematically robbed of power and the simple dignity of being human. So, signing up for this outfit stirred their hopes of a new earthly ruling kingdom. They wanted to be sure that they would be part of the powerful top brass. In contrast, knowing that a child's primary concern is connection, not power, Jesus brought a child into their midst and said, "Be humble, like this." Jesus knew that what they needed was a deep connection to their identity as children of God.<sup>4</sup>

All three passages contain the word *welcome*. Feel free to go back and count the instances of the word. When we welcome the child in front of us or the child within us, we welcome God.

Many of us didn't receive this kind of welcome as children. If that is true of you, please remember that Jesus' invitation of welcome is eternal. Even as you read this sentence, your childhood self is being welcomed by our Mothering Father. Your core identity is as a welcomed child within the trinitarian community of love.

Let's look together at a second story, where we see something a little different unfold.

People were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them; and when the disciples saw it, they sternly ordered them not to do it. But Jesus called for them and said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." (Luke 18:15-17)

People were bringing little children to him 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. Truly, I tell you whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them and blessed them. (Mark 10:13-16)

Then little children were being brought to him in order that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples spoke sternly to those who brought them; but Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs.” And he laid his hands on them and went on his way. (Matthew 19:13-15)

In the first story, Jesus welcomes the children, shifting the power dynamics to make space, and opening his arms wide to their full presence. But in this second story, Jesus invites us, the adults, to the humble posture of a learner. For adults, this way of the child must be learned again; it must be recovered, and it's going to require humility. This story expands to commend the child's naturally humble posture. Anchorite Maggie Ross connects humility to the capability to perceive love and enter into a deep state of communion with God. She writes, “The ability to see this love depends on our receptivity to the gift of humility, which is contemplation, purity of heart, and peace all rolled into one, the single virtue of which the paradoxes of the Beatitudes speak.”<sup>5</sup>

All human beings come into this world in a humble state. We are not only poor in spirit, we are poor in pocket. As newborns, we mourn for the warmth, safety, and comfort of the womb. Our early grief places us in the meekest of all human states. We are hungry and thirsty to receive the gentle goodness of others. We



are merciful beyond measure, willing to forgive again and again those who cannot or will not meet our needs. Our hearts begin in the simple purity of the heavens, and we are literally wired for a peacemaking that leads to secure community.<sup>6</sup> Without one drop of chosen, conscious attention, we as infants lived from a state of connection and wonder.

Children possess a natural, unique to them, connective consciousness. It has not been chosen or even cultivated through hours of meditation or psychedelic trips. Instead, the plasticity of the developing brain offers connective wonder through a lack of previous experiences and an innocent openness to the world. God has wired each and every one of us for this. In his book *Becoming Like a Child*, Jerome Berryman writes, “Children are not easily tempted by evil, because they remain in touch with small pleasures as well as their neighbor’s pain and the excitement of learning new things about a better way to live.”<sup>7</sup>

The previously cited passages from Luke and Mark tell us that “whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” Matthew says that “it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs.” Beyond their lack of concern over power, beyond their born state of humility, children possess a contemplative posture all their own. The contemplation of these *mini mystics*, a term I like to use to describe children and their natural connection to God, includes a wonder-filled receptivity to whatever is before them. They are not bound by systems of certainty but are free to welcome mystery in all its unknowing. They exist in a perpetual state of awe, expanding their minds, bodies, and spirits for wide-open engagement. Mini mystics are free from the judgments and crusty patterns of thinking that tend to mire adults.

The kingdom of heaven is the home of children. It is where the dimensions of both heaven and earth come together in unity with the sacred. For children, this state of connective contemplation is commonplace. Adults may find it unfamiliar, but since every person at some point was a child, the contemplative wonder-way of the child is somewhere within us. And in fact, we are all still children at some level.

Theologians and preachers far and wide, from Mike Yaconelli to Hans Urs von Balthasar, have analyzed these Gospel passages. Theologian Karl Rahner, in his treatise on a theology of childhood, proposed that human spiritual development is not bound to stages. We do not have a childhood spirituality and then trade up for an adolescent spirituality and then again trade up for a young adult spirituality and so on. No, Rahner explained, we carry both our childhood selves and our adolescent selves with us into adulthood.<sup>8</sup>

We may set aside our childish ways, but what is formed in childhood is still with us; both that early state of contemplation and our childhood blessings and wounds are still present and shaping and shifting how we experience God. And how we experience God is how we experience others and the whole world. The work of adulthood is thus bound up in welcoming our childhood selves, allowing the healing of our childhood wounds, reclaiming our earliest experiences with God, and re-mem-bering the child in us who continues to search for connection.

## ALWAYS CHILDREN

Our truest identity is as a child of God. We will age and we may mature, but we are always children of God. In the final chapter of John, Jesus encounters his disciples one more time. They are

(unsuccessfully) fishing and he's making breakfast on the shore. When he calls out to them, he calls them children. I wonder if Jesus was reminding them of what they knew when they were children. I wonder if he was reminding them of the times he brought a child into their midst and taught them what was most important.

Jenny, a dear friend, shared a story with me over iced tea one afternoon. The first experience of God she could remember was while jumping on the trampoline at her grandparents' house. She loved the feel of the wind in her hair, the power and dynamic energy that catapulted her into the sky. She felt wild and free and safe. At home though, her dad worked a lot and wasn't able to connect with her. Her mother, it seemed to Jenny, preferred to lavish attention on her brother. And for a long time she thought God was like them: too busy to connect with her and preferring boys rather than girls.

Still, Jenny could never shake the feeling that maybe God was something like the energy and power that catapulted her into the sky. She wondered if God was safe and wild and free, ready and willing to meet her in the strength of her own legs and launch her into the open. The contrast between her experiences with the adults in her life and what she experienced was a question that seemed to come to the surface in times of joy and excitement.

When as a young adult, she read in John 4 about Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well, she was shocked to see his acceptance for this woman, and the wild, free power Jesus gave the woman to share the good news she'd discovered. The Spirit—the Holy Knitter, who unravels and reknits what is misshapen or broken—unknotted and loosened Jenny's picture of God that did not reflect God's true nature. Then carefully, the

Spirit took the threads of John 4, the images and words surrounding it, and wove it with Jenny's experience on the trampoline all those years ago—and a new picture emerged.

### **Welcoming Practices**

**Reflect on your picture of God.** Think back to the adults in your life whose task it was to provide safety and healthy flourishing. What aspect of your picture of God did these adults shape? What aspect of your picture of God could use the tender attention of the Holy Knitter? Try praying the simple prayer “God, what are you like?” or “God, show me how I am your child.”

**Get curious.** Write the question, What is God like? on an index card and place it in a spot that you can see frequently. Actively live with this question. Intentionally ask this question in everyday places and circumstances that might not seem particularly “religious.” Jesus used bread and a lost coin to ask the question. How might reflecting on traffic, sibling squabbles, a demanding work situation, the family pet, or making dinner offer you an answer to What is God like?

**Learn from a book.** Reading and reflecting on children's books is an excellent way to welcome the child within and make space for the Spirit to reshape our life. The book *Images of God for Young Children* by Marie-Helene Delval and Barbara Nascimbeni can help us get in touch with the many reflections of God that surround us. Spend a full month in this lovely little book and see how your picture of God opens up. Meanwhile, if you are sensing an invitation to discover God as mother, consider reading *Mother God* by Teresa Kim Pecinovsky and Khoa Le. It is beautifully illustrated and rooted in Scripture.

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