

I, Robot

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Grace Presbyterian Church
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Mark 10: 13-16

You may recognize today's sermon title from the classic 1950 Isaac Asimov science fiction work that explored the interactions of humans and robots and morality. But I'm actually interested in a more recent true story that touches similarly upon those same topics—humans, and robots, and ultimately, perhaps, a glimpse of the kingdom of heaven.

The story, which I came across on the internet ([Article linked here](#)) concerned an institute in Paris, France that was advertising a Summer Innovation Fellows program in July of 2016. The website promoting the conference stated:

“What happens when 20 bright young minds are given 2 weeks of funding, tools, space, and mentorship to start prototyping the change they want to see in their city? We'd like to find out.” The organizers, in other words, were aiming to pull together a sort of a think tank, where the best and the brightest could come together and brainstorm the next big thing or things...projects that would be beneficial—and potentially profitable.

With the prospect of funded research, mentoring, and, let's face it, 2 weeks in Paris, applicants from around the world applied, from computer science PhDs to urban designers. But amid the learned luminaries, one application stood out. It came from a 10-year-old girl named Eva, and it began, “The Streets of Paris are sad.”

Presumably, Eva's observation related to the still-recent Paris terrorist bombings that had taken place in November of 2015. In response, suspicion of foreigners and strangers had spiked, politicians promoting stringent anti-immigration policies were gaining traction, the public was fearful, and Paris, in the Spring of 2016, felt more like Gray Paree than Gay Paree.

But back to Eva's application: “The Streets of Paris are sad. I want to build a robot that will make them happy again. I've already started learning to

code on Thymio robots (I had to look that up—Thymio is a variety of robot toy designed to introduce children to basic robotics) I've started learning to code on Thymio robots but I have trouble making it work. I want to join the program so the mentors can help me." Clearly, Eva had mistaken a PhD-level think tank for a sort of youth summer science enrichment institute.

But in a heartwarming public relations coup, board director Kat Borlongan responded by accepting Eva's application: "Dear Eva—the answer is yes. You have been selected as one of Paris' first-ever Summer Innovation Fellows among an impressive pool of candidates from across the world: accomplished urban designers, data scientists and hardware specialists.

I love your project and agree that more should be done—through robotics and otherwise—to improve Paris' streets and make them smile again. I am writing to you personally because your application inspired me. There was nothing on the website that said the program was open to ten-year-olds but—as you must have noticed—nothing that said it was not." The director went on to say that it was her hope that Eva's work on robotics would inspire other young girls and the Institute would provide Eva with the latest Thymio robot and Thymio's company president himself would serve as personal Eva's mentor. Her letter concluded, "Welcome aboard our spaceship, Eva. We're very much looking forward to meeting you in person. All the best from Paris, Kat.

PS: Please ask your dad to call me."

Now the thing that makes this a news story to me is not just the gracious gesture on the part of the Summer Innovation Fellows Program to invite and include a ten-year-old, when they so easily could have disregarded her or turned her away. It is also and primarily the little girl's application itself—"the streets of Paris are sad. I want to build a robot to make them happy again." I'll return to that in a moment...but first I'll say that the story caused our scripture lesson for this morning to come to my mind.

In our scripture, Jesus is teaching and people keep bringing their young children forward so that they can interact with Jesus, be touched by him. His disciples have begun to turn the parents and children away, sternly telling them not to bother Jesus, he's a busy man.

And Jesus utters the familiar words, “Let the little children come to me. Do not hinder 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.”

I’d like to make a few observations here—the first has to do with the nature of the kingdom of God, which Jesus also calls the kingdom of heaven or sometimes simply the kingdom.

In his teaching throughout the gospels, Jesus does not describe the kingdom as a distant or simply spiritual reality—in other words, the kingdom of heaven or of God is not a place you get to go when you die if you are truly good or properly faithful. Throughout Jesus’ teaching, the kingdom of God is an unfolding PRESENT state and an EARTHLY reality...or at least an earthly potential. That is why, in the Lord’s prayer Jesus taught his disciples to pray, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done—on EARTH as in heaven.”

When Jesus begins his ministry in Mark’s gospel, he says, “The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news.” Also in Luke, Jesus says the kingdom of God is among you or even within you. You must change or transform your understanding and your behaviors—that is to say, repent of previous understandings and behaviors—but the kingdom Jesus seeks to usher in is HERE AND NOW.

Secondly, the kingdom that is here and now is small but growing—it is gradual but it is also inevitable and inexorable and world-changing. In the 13th chapter of Matthew, Jesus uses the image of a mustard seed that starts tiny but grows and grows and transforms to a plant of astonishing size, given its humble beginnings. A mere speck becomes a mighty shrub that the birds of the air can nest in.

He also uses the image of yeast in flour—the kingdom rises and rises and surprises and the flour is completely altered by the work of the yeast. So, if you’re looking for SIGNS of the kingdom that is in our midst—look for small realities with great potential, for the little thing that nonetheless utterly changes everything.

Thirdly—the kingdom that is here and now and small and growing is unapologetically and relentlessly biased: not toward the wealthy or the

presently powerful or the insider but toward the poor and the powerless and the outsider. In Luke's version of the beatitudes, Jesus teaches— "blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God...but woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. But woe to you who are full now for you will be hungry."

There is a levelling aspect to the kingdom's work in other words...an equalizing, an UNSORTING. Those of us who are presently advantaged and privileged, those who might be called the haves—are going to have to make space and relinquish some of our privilege to the have nots as the kingdom unfolds.

So that means that wherever we observe charity, compassion, generosity, grace, vulnerability, hospitality, and openness to the needs of others, those things that lead to an equalization of opportunity or of human worth, in other words--we see the work of the kingdom.

And where we see greed, grasping, self-interest, protectionism, guardedness, defensiveness, individualism, or tribalism, a stratification of opportunity or human worth-- we see signs that the kingdom has not yet arrived.

So, returning to our scripture, when Jesus says don't turn the children away, let them come Jesus is NOT merely humoring the children, not merely tolerating their presence or making a magnanimous gesture— rather, he is instructing his disciples and the gathered crowd that the children are fundamental to the present, unfolding, growing, world-changing kingdom of God. They GET IT differently. They see the world in a way that adults have forgotten how to see. They embody the kingdom and its values in a way that adults can't or won't.

Little children for example, are utterly without prejudice—they don't look at each other and see such things as rich and poor; they might see differences in skin tone as a matter of curiosity but certainly not as a matter of importance or of WORTH. They don't know anything of stereotypes, and any other child is a potential playmate. Adults teach children prejudice. Children can teach adults openness.

Little children learn constantly and for the most part adapt easily—they are forming new neural pathways and experiences at practically the speed of light. Children are flexible and malleable and adaptive, not set in their ways. Hand a small child a simple computer, she'll play with it, and make mistakes and find out what it can do, and probably end up with an email pen pal or a Facebook friend in Bangalore. Adults? At least some of us? Oh, I don't use email. I don't use computers. I don't desire change or feel capable of learning a different way.

I'm imagining that fire was actually discovered by a child—look this is great, you can cook with it, it's warm, it gives light—and the adults were probably like, "I don't know how to use that new-fangled stuff. And meat's better raw." Little children have no trouble imagining a different world, even a seemingly impossible one. They are unconstrained by present realities. They are readily able to see as possible what the world says is impossible. Another way of saying that is, children have not yet learned what CAN'T BE. A flying horse—sure! An invisible friend? Why not!

The progression from childhood to adulthood is a sort of learning what is possible and what is not, what is real and what is not. Flying horses are nice to imagine, but simply not possible in the real world.

But this learning of what is possible and not possible can have terrible consequences—like when we learn things such as: Peace is nice to imagine...but simply not possible in the real world. Sensible gun control would be nice...but it just isn't possible.

So, when Jesus says, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child will never enter it, I imagine he is saying something like—whoever is set in the way the world presently is, or convinced that the world can't change, whoever is resigned to the world on its worst terms, whoever can't imagine what seems impossible will never be able to enter a new way of seeing or experiencing or living in the world. But if we can see the world with a child's eyes and a child's heart—then maybe just maybe, we can begin to discover the kingdom in our midst.

That's what I love about the story with which I began. A ten-year-old girl who wants to build a robot—but why? Not for profit or even for utility: The Streets of Paris are sad. I want to build a robot that will make them happy

again. I want to fundamentally alter the mood of the nation and the state of the world. Do you see the hope of a child there?

I believe the streets of Paris can be happy again. I believe it is possible. I want to build it. And here are the qualifications I offer in pursuit of my vision—I have a simple child's toy robot. But I can't make it work yet. I need help.

Compassion...vulnerability...generosity...an openness to the needs of others. The Paris institute is looking for people who can come up with or build the next big thing, and she's trying to build a small thing that can change everything. She's at work on the kingdom of heaven.

And that set me to wondering, and this will wander far beyond the original story, but wander and wonder with me: what do you suppose a robot that could make the streets of Paris happy again would look like? Speculate with me and think with me. Do you suppose it would play music, or spray candy into the crowds, or engage in silly antics that would bring laughter to the people who are sad?

I think even a ten-year-old child would soon recognize that those aren't the things that would make the streets happy once more—that would be a robot that merely amuses or entertains, or distracts...but it wouldn't bring happiness because it wouldn't address the cause of the sadness. It would change nothing.

A robot that could truly bring happiness to the streets of Paris...Paris, France or Paris Arkansas...Paris Idaho, Illinois.... Paris, Indiana.... Paris, Maine, Mississippi, Missouri, Paris, Tennessee, Texas, or Virginia—

A robot designed to bring happiness to the streets of Paris would have to begin where people are sad. Sad because they have no hope. Sad because they are hungry. Sad because they are poor. Sad because they are depressed...or addicted. Sad because they are weary of anger and division and fighting and fear. It would have to begin in those places and genuinely help people to move beyond them.

So, the robot would need to be programmed to be...well, compassionate. It would need to discern people's actual needs without judging them. It would need to be generous, not just seeing people's needs but helping to meet

them. It would have to be understanding, because all people aren't the same, so the robot would need to process a whole host of data about different backgrounds and worldviews, understandings. It would need to be gentle, not forceful or frightening.

It sounds to me like Eva is trying to build a human being. A true, genuine human being, that acts and reacts the way God intended for human beings to act or react before we developed all of these glitches in our programming.

That would be quite a robot for a ten-year-old child to build—there are a lot of bugs in her vision that would need to be worked out. It would take a lot of mentoring—a lot of work...some trial and error, and blood, sweat and tears.

We'd have to reprogram ourselves. I suppose we'd need a great big think tank asking questions like—what is true happiness? What is true humanity? What are the needs? What are the solutions? It would take a huge team, working practically non-stop, all the time, and the development costs? Staggering. But the costs of not developing this "robot?" Catastrophic.

The kingdom will never come if we remain in the realm of the profitable or the cost effective, or the probable or the practical. That's why we need the fearless imagination of children. We always stop at what's realistic.

Let the children come to me and do not hinder 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 child, will never enter it. What would it take, truly, for the streets of Paris to be happy again? Why aren't we building it? Amen.