

*Window to the World* (Matt. 18.1-5)  
A Meditation for Children and Youth Sunday  
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Opening a book is like opening a window. One minute you're in the same old stuffy room of your life, and the next you've thrown open the pages of a story, which lets in a rush of cool air, bright sunlight, and a fresh perspective. When we open a book, we look through its window at the story that the author is telling us. If it's a good book, we can get caught up in the story and sort of forget about our own stories for a while. It's almost as if instead of just opening a window onto another world, a good book invites us to climb through the window altogether and walk around in the places it has imagined. And there's hardly anything as fun as getting lost in a good book. But if the book is more than a good book, if it's a *really* good book, then it will go one step further than simply allowing us to escape into a make believe story. A really good book will follow us back into our own stories. It will climb through the window the other way, moving from the world we've imagined to the real one we happen to live in, raising questions about the differences between the two.

Earlier this year I read a really good book. Actually, I read three really good books in a trilogy. The books were recommended to me by a young person at Covenant some years ago, who assured me that they were really good. And I have it on good authority that many of the older children and youth here today (and many of their parents) have read these books as well. The books I mean were written by an Englishman named Philip Pullman, and they are called, in order, *The Golden Compass*, *The Subtle Knife*, and *The Amber Spyglass*. The three books together offer 1,243 adventuresome pages that include every sort of character from rustic gyptian sailors to ageless flying witches to noble

talking bears, and they cover all sorts of terrain from the canals of Oxfordshire to fields of arctic snow to forests of giant trees in other worlds. Many of you grown-ups who are listening can glean from this brief description of the books just how much fun they are to read. Many of you children and youth already know. My point here is not to do anything that will ruin the stories for those of you who might still like to read them. And we haven't time to tell much more about them because this is just a meditation and there's another story we need to remember before it's through. But there is a moment from one of Philip Pullman's books that I'd like us to think about.

At the beginning of the second book, we are introduced to a boy named Will Parry. Will is one of the two heroes of the series, along with a girl named Lyra Belacqua. In the first few pages of *The Subtle Knife*, we learn that Will is on the run. Again, I can't tell you why he is on the run because it would sort of spoil the book, but I can tell you that he was moving quickly through Oxford, wondering how to keep from getting caught by the grown-ups who were sure to come looking for him. The scene is a little scary, and, as readers, our hearts race a bit as Will steals along the side of the road trying desperately not to get noticed. But then all of a sudden the strangest thing happens. Will notices a tabby cat and he begins to watch her. He observes that the cat is behaving curiously, holding out a paw, then jumping back. After a time, the cat, who has settled into a single spot, pawing and jumping around nothing in particular, simply steps forward and vanishes into thin air. Will cannot believe his eyes, and he rushes quickly to the spot where the cat had been. Here's how Philip Pullman describe it in the book: "...when [Will] came to the place and cast about to look closely, he saw it. At least, he saw it from some angles. It looked as if someone had cut a patch out of the air, about two yards from

the edge of the road, a patch roughly square in shape and less than a yard across. If you were level with the patch so that it was edge-on, it was nearly invisible, and it was completely invisible from behind. You could see it only from the side nearest the road, and you couldn't see it easily even from there, because all you could see through it was exactly the same kind of thing that lay in front of it on this side: a patch of grass lit by a streetlight. But Will knew without the slightest doubt that that patch of grass on the other side was in a different world.”<sup>1</sup>

In the pages that follow, Will steps through the window in the air and into a very different world from his own. Afterwards, his story will be changed, as will everyone else's, by this single choice. Will will meet many new characters along the way and he will have many great adventures, but mostly what he'll do is engage in the very painful work of growing up. And this is one thing that is most important about Philip Pullman's books. The kids at the center of his stories, Will and Lyra, are not simply soft and sweet one-dimensional characters. They are not overly romanticized and their childhoods are not portrayed as the lovely idyllic days when they had no worries or grown-up concerns. No, Philip Pullman remembers better than most what it is actually like to be a kid. So his stories are full of frightening choices, unintended consequences, disappointing and confusing grown-ups, the risk of trying to make friends, the struggle to figure out who you are, and the idea that life moves quickly, we tumble through its adventures, ready or not, our actions defining who we are and, in turn, making our world what it is. What Philip Pullman does is remind us that being a kid is actually quite complex. And the daily process of learning and growth in which children and youth are so immersed

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Pullman, *The Subtle Knife* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), 14-15.

requires a regular climb through the window from the world that is known and familiar to the one mysterious and new. I think Philip Pullman is on to something here. But he's not the only one.

The old writer of the Book of Matthew knew something about windows between worlds. He knew something about storytelling, too, and the ways we climb into stories and then climb back out again, followed by their questions. I think he might have even known something about being a kid, or at least his Jesus did. Consider the story of Matthew's Jesus. As he tells it, Jesus' friends come to him and ask who will be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Jesus responds by calling a child to himself and saying, "Unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." Now it's important to know that in Jesus' time, children weren't considered to be equal to grown-ups. So when Jesus says that his friends should become like children, he is turning the tables and saying, as he so often does, something like the last shall be first or the humble shall be exalted. This is basic Jesus stuff. The rabbi dispenses with his culture's boundaries and enlarges his circle, expands the kingdom, as it were, to include everyone, especially those who have been left out before. This is Jesus doing what he does best, opening a window for us to look through and catch a glimpse of a world very different from our own. But I can't help but wonder if there isn't something else going on here. Jesus is taking children seriously.

In his culture, a culture that doesn't see children as equal to grown-ups, Jesus teaches that it is children who are the greatest in his kingdom. And here I'd like us all to step through the window into Jesus' story in order to look back at our own stories differently. In our own culture, it seems to me that we don't always take children and youth seriously,

either. We slip rather easily into idealizing and romanticizing our children and youth, stressing their cuteness or the things they do that strike us funny or the way they see the world differently. And there's nothing wrong with a bit of romanticism when it comes to childhood. There are sublime delights that come not only from being a child or youth but from spending time with young people. What we may need to be reminded of, however, is what Philip Pullman's characters remind us of, namely, that growing up is full of complexity. Being a kid isn't any more simple, easy, or fun than being a grown-up is. Because being a kid is just a person. A person facing frightening choices, unintended consequences, disappointing and confusing grown-ups, the risk of trying to make friends, the struggle to figure out who you are, and the idea that life moves quickly, we tumble through its adventures, ready or not, our actions defining who we are and, in turn, making our world what it is. I think this might actually be closer to what Jesus meant when he said that children would be the greatest in his kingdom.

I know that it's a strange thing to compare Philip Pullman's imaginary characters and stories with Jesus and his story. Because Jesus, unlike Will and Lyra, is not someone we have imagined. He walked through the real world as we do, telling stories to open windows in our minds through which we might look and see things differently. His story, to me, is more exciting even than Will and Lyra's because, though it contains no Egyptian sailors, flying witches, or talking bears, it tells of things even more wonderful if equally difficult to imagine. Climbing through the window into the world Jesus sees, we are asked to walk through a world where people will put away their swords and learn to live together in peace. We are asked to walk through a world where those who have been last get to be first. We are asked to walk through a world where poor people are

remembered and everyone shares what they have and finds that there is enough. We are asked to walk through a world where the way we love heaven is the way we love earth and the way we love God is the way we love our neighbor. We are asked to walk through a world very different than the one we have now, a world that Jesus taught we can begin to make with our lives if only we can become like children. Which is to say, take the painful risk of moving from the world that is known and familiar to the one mysterious and new.

May it be so.