

“A Blessing for Our Children”

Mark 9:33-37 May 17, 2009

Rev. Joyce Kirk-Moore San Dimas Community Church, United Church of Christ

I told the church council last Wednesday night that I was bored with myself and my sermons; the well is dry. So I decided to ditch the lectionary and preach on something I feel very passionate about, and that is, children and the special people who teach and nurture them.

When our girls were young, they came to me and said “Mom, there’s mother’s day, father’s day, why isn’t there kids’ day.” So, in a weak moment I told them we’d celebrate kids’ day the Sunday after mother’s day. We usually went out for pizza and miniature golf. Perhaps it was indulgent of me, but the lesson I wanted them to learn was that I heard them. Their needs were important to me; they had a voice that I would pay attention to.

The one-time Commissioner of Education, Ernest Boyer, gave a speech where he tells the story of a conversation he had with a group of high school students. He asked them this question: “How many of you have had a teacher who changed your life?” Almost all of them raised their hands. Then Boyer asked them, “How many of you thanked that teacher?” Hardly any raised their hands. Well, today I’m not going to ask the second question, but I would like to see a show of hands if you’ve ever had a teacher, mentor, or adult friend who really changed your life. This sermon is dedicated to those people. It is dedicated to tired parents, grandparents, teachers (now near the end of the school year), to all who have loved children, and in particular, I dedicate it to Christina for all her gifts and grace she gives to our children every week.

The education of children happens all the time, whether we realize it or not. It happens when we talk with them on the way to school, games, or lessons. It happens when they watch us and we say nothing. But there are also some ways that Christian Education doesn’t happen, and I call these myths that sometimes stand in the way of our enjoying our roles as those who teach children.

The first myth is that education is quick, easy, and happens in an orderly and enjoyable context. It would be nice if it were that easy. The truth is education often happens within difficult situations. In other words, God works in and through the muck of our lives which shouldn’t be so surprising to us since the cross is the central symbol of Christianity. The best lessons I’ve learned as a teacher have been those many times when my lesson plan didn’t work or when the students posed difficulties that drew all my emotional and spiritual reserves. Teaching children is a sacrificial ministry. It requires you as a teacher to be willing to put yourself out on a limb, to be vulnerable, to be in relationship with students, and to negotiate those relationships in helpful life-affirming ways.

The second myth is that education always happens when children listen attentively, internalize what we say, and are able to articulately say it back to us. This rarely happens and sometimes it is a source of discouragement to the ones teaching when it doesn’t, but this does not mean that our children are not learning. As a child, I was a good student, but I rarely said a word in class.

The third myth is that as parents/teachers you are sure to be overwhelmed with expressions of gratitude. I’ve come to the conclusion that gratitude is a very adult trait that rarely is seen in anyone younger than 21. Children do not come forth from the womb with gratitude for all we do for them. Please do not judge your success as a parent or teacher or grandparent or mentor on expressions of gratitude; gratitude is what we adults offer each other as we support our work in blessing our children.

The fourth myth (and this is particularly for those teaching children the Bible) is that teaching requires a lot of biblical knowledge and expertise and that a teacher should have her/his

faith fully formulated. We all grapple with the questions, and we might as well grapple together. One reason I love to teach children is that by the time I've invested myself in a lesson so that I can present it coherently to young ones, I have learned so much myself.

We work to bless our children the best we can while at the same time holding tight to a radical confidence in God's spirit to work in and through us so that the result is a holiness that is more than what we could ever accomplish alone.

Hebrew tradition recounts this story:

When Israel stood to receive the Torah,  
The Holy One, blessed be He said to them:  
I am giving you my Torah.  
Bring me good guarantors that you will guard it, and I shall give it to you.  
They said: Our fathers are our guarantors.  
The Holy One, blessed be He, said to them:  
Your fathers are unacceptable to me.  
Yet bring me good guarantors, and I shall give it to you.

They said to him: Master of the Universe,  
Our prophets are our guarantors.  
He said to them: Your prophets are unacceptable to me.  
Yet bring me good guarantors, and I shall give it to you.  
They said: Behold, our children are our guarantors.  
The Holy One, blessed be He, said:  
They are certainly good guarantors.  
For their sake, I give you the Torah.

Today's scripture makes it clear that glory and greatest is directly tied to those who honor and give a blessing to our children.

I want to offer just one lesson from process theology. Process theology is one framework for thinking and talking about God, and that framework I find particularly helpful. Process theology has an expanded notion of time. Now this isn't too hard for those of us who are Star Trek fans. We're accustomed to the collapse of the space-time continuum. Process theology believes that every moment in time is taken up, prehended, into the mystery of the divine, into God. And there within God resides all the moments of the past as well as this very moment we're now experiencing. And if this is true, then, in God, dwelling in ways we cannot completely understand but which we believe, are all those adults, teachers, and mentors that you named in your heart earlier when I asked you if you'd ever had someone who had changed your life. Within God is a transcendence in time that makes the past and those we love from the past, present to us in this very moment.

So it is possible today in this time and space to honor all those you have named in voice or heart today, those who have loved you and made you who you are, the ones who were a blessing to you as a child. Today in this moment we add our grateful praise for all those in present time who bless our children with their hard work and an investment of time and their willingness to be in relationships with children, relationships though meaningful, are also the most demanding. We thank God for the blessing offered to our children by those who grapple with the text, the hard questions, the tradition, and life experiences and try their best to teach our children the life of faith. To be a blessing to our children is hard work; it takes every bit of our energy; it asks of

us more than we think we can ever be. But it is worth it. You see, one day maybe 20 or 30 years from now, the question will be asked “Have you ever had a teacher, an adult, a church friend, a mentor who’s changed your life?” and someone will name you, and wherever you are, when that happens, you’ll know... you’ll know.