

Children will Listen

Dean Peter Elliott

September 9, 2018, Pentecost 16

We're focusing sermons over the month of September to the topic of children and faith. So, let me tell you a story about one of my grandnephews, Cody. This happened a couple of years ago when Cody was about 3 years old. His mom and dad are both university graduates with degrees in history and politics. So, they talk politics quite a bit. They're also music lovers and his mom likes to teach Cody about pop classics, like the Beatles and the Stones etc. One day they were listening to the Mamas and Papas and the song California Dreamin' came along. So, they talked about southern California, and how it was always summer there and sang along. The song finished and his mom said, "Cody, would you ever like to visit California?" And Cody replied, "Not as long as Donald Trump is President."

As Stephen Sondheim puts it, "Children will listen." Every parent or uncle or aunt knows that moment when there is a child new in the household and the adults suddenly have to become a little more careful in their, shall we say, expressive language, because otherwise, you'll hear a child use words that would make a sailor blush! Children will listen, they pick things up quickly, they learn so fast — it's astonishing. So, for generations the church in her wisdom has sought to teach our children well, by providing opportunities for kids to learn. And learning of course is not just about conveying information, it's a process where we can already assume that children have a natural sense of the divine, and it needs more to be called out of them rather than drilled into them.

So, what is it that we seek to teach? Drawing from today's scripture readings I think we can identify three things: wisdom, the necessary connection between belief and behavior, and openness to seeing in the other as friend not foe.

Now by the word wisdom I'm referring to a reservoir of knowledge that Fr. Richard Rohr refers to as the "perennial tradition."^[1] This is the notion that there is a common thread of wisdom with recurring themes and truths within all of the world's religions. Fr. Rohr puts it this way, "The work of religion is to re-ligio — re-ligament or reunite what our egos and survival instincts have put asunder, namely a fundamental wholeness at the heart of everything."

A fundamental wholeness at the heart of everything: this is why the writer of Proverbs, a book of wisdom says this, "The rich and the poor have this in common: The Lord is the maker of them all."^[2] We are all made of the same stuff. Our little egos, our little minds are always seeking differences amongst us, dividing people up into categories: good and bad, rich and poor, right

and wrong... the perennial tradition affirms that we are all more alike than different, we share the same stuff, we are of the same earth, the same blood runs through our veins, the same oxygen keeps us breathing.

That great icon of our time, the photo of the earth taken from outer space: whenever I see it I'm reminded that you see no national borders, there's only the earth — itself a living thing. We are all part of the earth, God's sacred creation.

A few years ago, when a parishioner with kidney disease needed a transplant, a donor from within the congregation came forward. They were a match, and we prayed for them at the Eucharist before their surgery. I visited them after the surgery and both of them said that what they had learned was the practical meaning of the sense of being united in the body of Christ. "We learned that we are quite literally one body," one of them said to me. We are one.

The ethics that grow out of this always leads to a greater egalitarianism, a deeper understanding of how we are connected. Another grandnephew, Tom, has a park across from his house where he plays every day. We were there one day and I said, "I like your park Tom," and his mother quickly said, "This is everybody's park," and Tom murmured "Everybody's park." Then his mom explained, "He was beginning to think of it as HIS park and we had to remind him that it's a public place." Tom did what all humans instinctively do, identify things as ours: every child needs to learn about sharing — and, um, so do most adults. We forget that we are fundamentally connected to each other and so much of the pain and suffering that humans inflict on one another comes from this tragic amnesia. The function of faith is to wake us up to what is really real, to remind us of the deep wisdom within our tradition, of the teaching that we are all one.

The letter to James — which almost didn't make it into the Bible (that's another story for another time) — puts this idea pretty starkly when it says, "So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead."^[3] It's getting at this idea that religion is not just about thinking pious thoughts and engaging in arcane rituals: rather it's about changing your behavior. It's been put this way, "What you do says more about what you believe than what you think you think." At its best, religion or faith or spirituality is about helping us think differently about ourselves and the world so that we act more authentically, are kinder and more considerate of others and not just mouth a commitment to justice for all but actively work at it within our families and workplaces and in our politics and ethics. Children are more likely to imitate what we do rather than just parrot what we say and so in this sense, spiritual education of children is not just the work of parents and families but the whole community.

Inculcating a sense of the unity of the human family is not just a nice thing to do; it's pretty crucial for the future of the planet. In the gospel reading from Mark today^[4], we have two

stories. The first one is about a young mother who has a sick child. It takes place in what we know as Lebanon and Jesus is away from his home country and his people. He would have regarded this mom as a heathen, and he was trying to get away from people because he was in demand. But like all mothers everywhere, when her child is sick she will do everything to help her child. When faced with the life or death situation of a child, walls make no sense. And so, she engages in a dialogue with Jesus where she pushes back at his prejudice — she stands up to him and he learns something.

Listen again to how the dialogue goes:

“She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, ‘Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.’”

NOTE: He basically calls her a dog — a huge insult. She doesn’t back down.

“But she answered him, ‘Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.’ Then he said to her, ‘For saying that, you may go the demon has left your daughter.’ So, she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.”

Jesus learns — as we must time and again — that the healing power of God does not belong to any one group, any one religion, any one culture but is available to all. And so, he does what he does, and her child is healed.

Jesus, in Mark’s gospel is shown to be on a learning curve himself especially in this story. In Mark’s gospel Jesus is kind of weird as the second story of the healing of the deaf man tells. John Dominic Crossan writes, “...we catch a glimpse of a strange and somewhat frightening Galilean holy man. Is this the human face of God for us? Do we prefer a face that is more like our own?”[5] All our attempts to domesticate Jesus, to make him just like us, miss the essential weirdness of this one who is for us the human face of God. The one who learned from a woman culturally and religiously different from him, the one used spit and spirit and called brought healing to one who was excluded from society said, “Be opened,” and healing came.

That same one, that Galilean holy man, says the same thing to us. Be opened. Be opened to the perennial wisdom of God that reminds us again and again of the fundamental unity of things. Be opened to the importance of integrating what you believe and how you live. Be opened to those who are different from you by virtue of race or gender identity or colour or creed — because each person is a bearer of divine grace. Even the little children know of the divine, sometimes they know it better than adults.

In a time like this where we are flooded with information through media, where headlines pop up on our phones like puddles after the rain, in a time when politics matters, and issues are

complex, the wisdom of the ages is here to assist us. It gently says to us, we are one. We are one. The Eucharist acts this out as bread is broken and wine is blessed, and gifts are shared with all who seek. Come this day, and once again meet the one who has created us all and who feeds us with wisdom, with faith — expressed through behaviour, and who breaks down the barriers, inviting us to see the face of God in one another and in all people — no matter how old or how young. Be opened, this day to the unity that is our deepest identity

[1] See more here <https://cac.org/the-perennial-tradition-2015-12-20/>

[2] Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23

[3] James 2:17

[4] Mark 7:24-37

[5] John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*. New York: Harper Collins, 1993. Chapter 13, page 305.