

Learned from childhood

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on September 20, 2015, the Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost.

Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all. Mark 9:35

In reading scripture passages, I like to be able to be “in the moment” by placing myself in the scene. If I had been there when the disciples were arguing about who was the greatest and deserved a place of honor and prominence, I would have reminded them of what Jesus teaches about humility. When Jesus confronts them, they are silent and don’t admit to their claims. He gathers together the twelve disciples and explains to them that honor comes to those who don’t seek it. Those who expect to be first must come last and be servant of all. Jesus then brings a child into their midst and makes the point that whoever welcomes such a child in his name welcomes God.

Welcoming children into our midst is an essential part of our mission as Christians. How we include them in our life together says that we value all baptized members from the youngest to the oldest. For too long children were not included in worship, though no one was very clear about why. As a small child I remember going to church with my family but never being with them in church. In time, children were brought into church for the first ten minutes and then were sent out, leaving them wondering why they couldn’t be there. I am glad now that after Church School children join their families to share in the Eucharist at the offertory. We have come a long way to include children as full members of the church.

Jesus emphasized that we enter his realm with the trust of a child. In first century Palestine, children were among the most marginalized people with no status at all. What we have come to understand is that their spontaneity and innocence serve as examples for us. It is their delight in learning about God’s world that reminds us how we need to appreciate God’s creation. Children remind us to be open and receptive to things of the spirit without skepticism or cynicism. We need to listen and respond when they ask questions of a spiritual nature such as where God is, how God can hear everyone’s prayers, if heaven is big enough for everyone and if their pet will go to heaven.

If we believe that all baptized people are full members of the church, then children need to be fully incorporated in our life together. We can’t help but notice that the atmosphere changes when the children join their families at the Eucharist. Participation in the service and receiving Holy Communion is less a matter of the intellect and more about inclusion. They know that the sharing of bread and wine is how we remember Jesus and know his real presence.

Children are an essential part of the family of God. It is condescending to think of them only as the future of the church because they are very much a part our present life together. They need to be encouraged to participate in the liturgy on their level as a shared experience. They learn by example and their best example is our own. We tend to underestimate a child’s ability to comprehend spiritual things and are humbled at their cogent observations about God’s world.

It is important to listen to what children are concerned about and respond to their questions. They want short but honest answers to their questions including when we don’t have an answer. Attempts at bluffing are transparent. Those are moments when we realize that we can spend our whole adult lives searching for answers to questions that the finite human mind asks about the nature of the infinite. Children live in the moment and want to learn about everything. They have a sense of wonderment about the world around them that we too often take for granted. It is all the more important that we teach them to aspire to what is right and true and just and that they know that life isn’t always fair.

When we kneel together at the altar to receive the sacrament, we are teaching them that we are all equal in the sight of God. It is very human to want to be regarded with respect and recognized for who we are. It is when we are overly concerned about our sense of importance that our assumptions are turned around. Those who think they should be first will be last and those who are last will be first. Jesus identifies with the lowly and the outcast. He teaches us that in God’s realm our greatest privilege is serving others, especially those who can’t do anything for us in return.

In the letter of James we read that where there is envy and selfish ambition, there is disorder and wickedness. (3:16) Greatness is found in those who put aside worldly concerns for power, prestige for the honor and privilege of serving others. Selflessness learned at an early age yields the fruits of thoughtfulness, mercy, serenity, kindness and the secure embrace of God's love.

When we were first born, we were wrapped and swaddled in a blanket. It kept us both warm and secure. Growing up we needed the secure embrace of those who loved and cared for us. There are those who are uncomfortable with an embrace or an expression of affection. Sadly, I have known those who were raised by parents who believed that they should not express affection to their children. It had serious consequences later on in life that left them very needy and anxious.

Our mission as Christians is to find meaning for ourselves by making a difference in the lives of others. God looks for selflessness and humility that makes self-promotion unnecessary. The qualities of humility and selflessness are best learned early in life and it is never too late. We are a work in progress and because God is never finished with us, neither should we allow ourselves to be so set in our ways that we can't change.

We are all capable of reflecting the person of Christ to all we encounter, both those who know and love us as well as those who for reasons we may not understand just don't care for us. While it may be difficult to accept those who don't accept us, it makes no difference in how we treat them. They are as much a part of God's care and concern as we are. That is the great equalizing point that we all learn on our way to maturity.