

THE JOURNEY OF LIFE – THE YOUNGEST AMONG US
Mark 10:13-16
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The saintly Christian mystic Julian of Norwich, who never had a child, once said, "To me was shown no higher stature than childhood," a statement that recalls the words of Jesus as recalled by Mark. Phillips Brooks, perhaps the best-known preacher of his generation, never married and never had children. And yet, with all the attention and acclaim he received, Brooks had a peculiar habit before stepping into the pulpit on a Sunday morning. He would round up some children and play horse and bear for the few minutes that preceded morning worship and prayers.

The prophet Isaiah is echoed in all these sentiments when he says, "A little child shall lead them." Christianity is, of course, a religion that is philosophically a paradox: on the one hand, it is a book religion requiring mature thinking, but on the other hand, its message has to do with the centrality of children. A distillation of this premise is that book by a ministerial colleague that he called, quite simply, *All I Really Needed to Know I Learned in Kindergarten* - that is, to be nice, to share, to clean up after myself, to pick up my room, and that milk and cookies are good for you.

To be blessed with children or to be around children puts us in a realm of inexpressible fascination - about them, their world, their perceptions, but also about ourselves, our feelings and attitudes, and our values.

One of my favorite writers, Philip Gulley, is a Quaker Minister from Danville, Indiana. In a world that is often harsh and demanding, his stories are gentle and forgiving. He writes of his children and the great joy they bring him. In one of his books he talks about bedtime stories. Gulley writes:

"Three months before our second son, Sam, was born, we moved Spencer out of the crib and across the hall to a big-boy bed. We'd read that a psychologist told parents not to move one child out of a crib the very day a new baby was put in it. It might cause the older child to resent the younger one. It was all for naught. When we brought baby Sam home, Spencer took one look at him pointed at my wife's stomach, and said, 'Put him back.'

When we moved him to his twin-size bed, I got in the habit of lying beside Spencer to tell him a bedtime story. I always tell him about Zipper. Zipper was my dog growing up... I tell Spencer how Zipper went fishing with me, how she jumped in the lake to catch a fish that was getting away because she knew times were hard. I told him about the time Zipper and I went camping and how, when we woke up, a deer was sleeping right beside us. None of these things really happened, but they were bedtime stories my father had told me about his dog Zipper, so I'm honor-bound to pass them down the family line.

In the years I've been telling Spencer bedtime stories, I've added a few stories of my own. I tell him how Zipper pulled me from a raging river. Or about the time Zipper bit a charging bull on the nose and saved my life. After I tell him a story he is full of questions. 'How deep was the river? How hard did Zipper bite the bull?' At the age of four, he accepts as gospel truth all I tell

him. When he no longer believes me, something precious will be lost. Though I welcome his growth, I do not look forward to that day.

We keep our stereo in his bedroom, high on a shelf, away from little Sam fingers. It is a complicated stereo and far too perplexing for my wife, Joan, and me to figure out. Four-year-old Spencer has it down pat.

When I'm finished telling him about Zipper, Spencer climbs out of bed, runs to the stereo, and plays the Nat King Cole Christmas CD. Spencer is a serious Nat King Cole fan. He especially likes "Deck the Halls," "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing," and "Joy to the World!" He programs the CD player to perform them in that order. When Spencer is tired, he'll be asleep before Mr. Cole starts tolling the ancient yuletide carol.

My son has little regard for the seasons of music. To his ear, the herald angels sound every bit as good in July as in December. My wife and I sit in our front room on a warm June evening, the windows open, nursing a glass of lemonade, while Nat King Cole sings of peace on earth and mercy mild. It is a fine message, one that bears repeating regardless of season.

The thing I love most about my children is their high regard for the wondrous. Theirs is a world where deer and daddies slumber in peaceful coexistence, where angel bands crowd a meager manger, and life's gravest dangers are bested by a twenty-pound dog with ringworm. There is no incongruity in their world, no jarring clash between fact and fable. All is truth, for now.

But the day will come when things will cease to be true just because Daddy said so. "Is that really true?" will creep into their language. How will we answer our children? Will we tell them that herald angels still sing their advent song? Or that peace on earth and mercy mild are infinitely harder to program than a CD player?

I pity the child whose parents so thoroughly rob him of wonder, just as I pity the adult whose cynicism kills the steady beat of an angel's wing. As for me, I believe in what Nat King Cole sings – from herald angels to peace on earth. For truth, like any object of beauty, has many facets. While some things are Zipper-true, others are gospel-true. And each truth has its beauty." (*Home Town Tales*, p. 66)

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For any of you who saw or held your children minutes after they were born, that fascination begins with a lump in the throat. It is impossible to tell what makes one's emotion at that time stand out as the premier experience of life, an overwhelming moment fused in joy, thanksgiving, awe, and mystery. No one who has seen a baby born can ever escape the sense of divine miracle. This experience, of course, is not limited to parents who wait anxiously in labor and delivery rooms of hospitals; there are thousands of mothers and fathers who have known this feeling at an airport gate or at the door of an orphanage when a little one whom they shall adopt first arrives. .

As our children progress they become less angelic and more human, requiring of us large measures of soulcraft in exchange for the first, fine careless rapture of divine joy they brought us in the beginning. God's gift is a joy and a burden, and of the many functions a church must serve, framing a context for the nurture of children is possibly its most constant role. The church is not a substitute for other essential influences, such as parents, but it can be the flying buttresses against the outside walls of the home to strengthen and support that home with the weight of its history and thinking. Let me put the issue, and subsequently, the task, in the form of an inquiry to us who have children or have been touched by children: How shall we impart religious precepts and moral values to them?

Across the cover of *Newsweek* magazine was once emblazoned the question, "Can the children be saved?" A little boy's worried look had been photographed as he sat in a weed patch upon a city sidewalk while this question hung over him and over us as a society. And then you read on - guns in the hands of nine-year-old boys; violence, abuse, drugs, poverty and despair.

And it is not only these children of the "underclass" who are creatures of violence, but also children of privilege who are on the edge of shadows every day. No home is exempt from the tension between light and darkness. That is why our ministries with children and youth are so critically important. Whether it is our Sunday School or Preschool, or 3rd Church tutoring, or youth fellowships or volunteering at Withrow - these ministries require and demand our dedicated support.

We owe our children at least three things if we are to succeed in religious education and moral instruction. First, our children deserve consistency. More than occasionally I have come across a person who says, "I am not going to choose a religion for my child. I want him to be entirely free to make his own decisions when he grows up."

Up to a point I agree with this position. A secondhand, hand-me-down religion is not the real thing, even if we get it at home. It is not enough, however, just to cut loose from convention for the sake of democratic principles in child rearing. There is a fallacy in such a departure, because, bad as churches may be, staying away from them does not enhance a child's opportunity to learn about religion. In every other way parents try to shape and influence their children, teaching them what is permissible and what is off-limits. We monitor the television-to-homework ratio; we survey their amusements and friends - so there is little use pretending that we do not try to influence their children. Being passive about religion is inconsistent with everything else most parents do.

Second, learning to be moral is much like learning to speak a language. You do not teach someone a language (at least nowhere except in language courses at a university!) by first teaching that person rules of grammar. The way most of us learn to speak a language is by listening to others speak and then imitating them. Most of the time we act as if morality is a matter of rules to be learned. We seem to believe that, after we have learned all the right rules we can go act morally. No. We learn to speak by being initiated into a community of language, by observing our elders, by imitating them. The rules of grammar come later, if at all, as a way of enabling us to nourish and sustain the art of speaking well. So the church can do nothing more "ethical" than to expose us to significant examples of Christian living. In fact, our ethical

reflection, at its best, is usually nothing more than reflection on significant examples.

Finally, we have a task that requires not only consistency and teaching by example, but also investment for "rainy days" of illness, crisis and death. Many years ago there were said to be some foreign cultures where, before the arrival of Western medicine, it was native custom to pay the family doctor once a year. The size of the annual fee was determined by the number of days he had **not** called. It is a theory that commends notice (imagine paying the doctor to keep us healthy rather than to make us well when we are sick!), because it is based on the assumption that when we are healthy we are not conscious of the body. If we are aware of the body, something is wrong. We call this medicine that intends to prevent disease happening in the first place rather than to cure it afterward preventive medicine.

The religious situation is equivalent in some ways. People who are too conscious of their souls and of their religion are not healthy. What I am speaking about are the people who as children were given wrong, facile information and misinformation about religion. No minister or teacher can entirely undo the "complications" that develop in adults who grew up thinking of religion as magic based on false data - that prayer, for instance, is oriented to concrete results.

If there is one flat rule about what we owe our children, let it be this: never teach a child as being religiously true any proposition that you know he or she will have to unlearn in later life. Perhaps this rule should be subject to interpretation, because it is too simple. But when asked, Did God write the Bible? Is it all true? Where do we go when we die? we need great sensitivity to age appropriateness. For if later our answers have to be dislodged they are not removed without taking with them a good deal of that mental soil that is our human capacity to trust and to believe. Our safest ground is to stand upon our own intellectual integrity in explaining religion to children.

When we discuss religion with children, we are trying not so much to outfit them in advance with complete answers and solutions as to lay a foundation of a trusting relationship that is in itself an intimation of religion. Ours is the first trust they have, and if they are let down, their whole capacity for believing has been impaired. What we owe them in life, for which we have tried to organize and prepare them, is that inspired reverence that protects and cherishes all children as God's children, for of such is the Kingdom. Thanks be to God. Amen.