

“Children Should be Seen as Well as Heard”

Jeremiah 1:4-10; Luke 4:21-30

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“Children should be seen and not heard” is an old adage. In an American cultural context, it gave way a long time ago to a glorification of youth. Remember that other adage “Don’t trust anyone over 30?”

In today’s message, “Children Should be Seen as Well as Heard,” I hope to explore the complexity of that shift (especially in a church context) and exhort us to see, as well as hear, the children in our midst.

The shift away from silent children toward a more vocal childhood and to a more permissive attitude toward children is part of the “pendulum-swing” of how best to manage the generation gap between old and young and to prepare the next generation for leadership at home, work and in the world. We may rejoice in that shift or lament it, but it is the current reality. Radical changes in the use of communication technology are but one example. If the TV remote, computer, cell phone or Netflix doesn’t work, ask a youth! Other reflections of a more vocal childhood include the responses of business and marketing to youth.

Today’s Bible passages express a preferential option for the young. Certainly there are Bible passages that revere our elders. In addition, the cultures in which the Bible arose as a book of divine wisdom revered the aged, by and large, as a source of wisdom and viewed long-life as a consequence of a righteous life.

That said, God’s call to the prophet Jeremiah, and Jesus’ public ministry, are youth-focused. Jeremiah was young when God’s call came to him as recorded in Jeremiah 1:6. The Hebrew word “na’ar” can describe a person from infancy to adolescence and is variously translated, from “I am (only) a child” in the King James and Common English Bibles to “I am only a boy” in this morning’s reading from the New Revised Standard translation. Suffice it to say that Jeremiah’s response to God was to disavow God’s call and to disavow the gifts and

power God gave Jeremiah because of his youth. Perhaps the Latin Vulgate captures a lament we can all identify with when we don't want to do something: "I am too young," or inexperienced.

God's reply is clear: "Don't say that!" God has plans for Jeremiah not determined by chronological years. And once Jeremiah finds his voice, watch out! As Pastor Hal's students know from their recent exploration of the prophet, Jeremiah verbally lashes the inconsistencies and hypocrisy of religious people with the ferocity of youth; that is, without the shades of gray that attend our moral reasoning (sometimes wisely, but sometimes as self-justification) as we age.

Jesus, too, was relatively young: 30 years old when he began his public ministry. Today's passage is a continuation of last week's, when Jesus read from Isaiah 61 to announce that God's Spirit was on him to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to free the oppressed and to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.

To set us up to understand today's Gospel, we must note the verses that precede it. Verse 16 tells us "(Jesus) went to the synagogue, as his custom was, on the Sabbath day." More on that later. And verse 20: "(Jesus) rolled up the scroll, gave it to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him." More on that now: when Jesus sat down, he was just beginning. Rabbis typically taught sitting down. The home-town folks – Nazareth is where Jesus grew up – were initially polite: "All spoke well of him" but then quickly "were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth." "Is this not Joseph's son?" They say by implication, "We know him and his mother Mary and his brothers and sisters. We remember when he gave them fits because he didn't tell them he stayed behind in Jerusalem and they lost him for three days. We know when he messed up that big job in his father's carpenter's shop. (Okay, conjecture, but still....) We know what he's about."

So, like Jeremiah, Jesus provokes for the sake of the God whose reign he proclaims: "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb,

‘Physician, health yourself; what we have heard you did at Capernaum, do here also in your own country.’” He then provides a litany of those who were open to the transformative power of God. To the offense of the devout in Nazareth, they were not Jews, but Gentiles. In the words of one writer: “Jesus was saying...that often in the history of Israel...God’s goodness...went out to all those who were eager and receptive—and those who were thus eager might not be those of orthodox privilege, but the stranger and the alien. Always there is a tendency to resent that.” (1) If it was only resentment! The notion so offended the local folks that they would, for the sake of the God they professed to follow, have killed one of their own youth for his words! We are only left to guess how Jesus escaped this mob. The writer simply tells us “But passing through the midst of them he went away.”

Later in Jesus’ ministry we recall at least two times he celebrated children. On one occasion, when his own disciples would have turned children away, he told them “Let the children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God.” On another occasion, when the disciples were arguing about which of them was the greatest, he put a child in their midst and told them “Whoever receives this child receives me...the one who is least among you is the greatest.”

What are the implications for our ministry from these stories? First, we need to accept the reality that we are hearing from our youth. We may not always want to hear their messages—and not all messages are worthy just because they are from youth—but we at least need to know what the messages are. When I married Carol I joked with my step-sons, “Guys, your job is to keep me current on pop culture.” We need to be listening to the messages of the young.

Second, let’s mention briefly self-interest. We love the church, right? Guess what? We’re not always going to be here. Sorry to be blunt, but that’s how it is. It is in our self-interest, as those who love the church, to perpetuate the church by cultivating that love in our children. (1) The Interpreter’s Bible, New York, Abingdon Press, 1952, Vol. 8, pg. 95.

Third, we need to SEE our children as well as hear them. This is a double-edged sword. On the one side, today's Gospel reminds us that Jesus went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day as was his custom. This is the item I promised to return to. Is it the custom of our parents and children to attend worship and church school on Sunday? The faces in worship and the statistics of our Sunday School say "maybe." The text doesn't say whether or not Jesus liked everything about the synagogue. But it tells us that it was his custom to be there. I do recognize there is some futility in making this pronouncement to those of you who are here. YOU are here. But if the comedian Woody Allen was right—that 90% of life is just showing up—and if it is true that the Christian faith is "more caught than taught," then just being present has value. Perhaps you have influence, as I do, on those who are less attentive to being present. Do not hesitate to invite people to their own church as well as inviting new people to our church. If we are present with an expectation that we are meeting the holy and living God, imagine the power for good that can be unleashed through us.

I said this was a two-edged sword. Here's the other edge: we who are here need to ask if there is something we can do to raise expectation and desire for our children to be here; and to truly SEE our children when they ARE here. On this first point, one of our leaders has suggested we look at a concept called "Messy Church:" a monthly encounter involving meal, activities and worship specifically aimed at families with younger children. We will look at this and any other options that have promise to connect with our children in ways beyond what we currently do.

On the second point: do we truly SEE our children when they are here? One of the things I like to do is greet as many of our children by name as I can. And I expect to be greeted back, as they and their parents have learned when they don't do it! These interactive social skills are important for life success, and even more so in a digital age when opportunities are fewer for person-to-person encounter. Church, do you SEE and greet the children who are here? When was the last time you spoke to a child here in worship, or anywhere else?

The other day I was in the parking lot at Trader Joe's. I was walking out as she was walking in: a mother a generation younger than me with a compliant girl (perhaps 4 years old) and a boy in his so-called "terrible two's." He wanted no part of his mother's hand to cross the parking lot and was making sure we all knew it. I hesitated, not wanting to be awkward or embarrassing. But in a brief moment my eyes met Mom's and I smiled and said, "Been there. Done that. Got the T-shirt." The mother visibly relaxed and replied, "Everyone who smiles says that."

As we age many of us find that cross-generational contact becomes limited. The children in our lives are our own or our children's children. Church provides a special opportunity for all of us to know and show love to children in a way not offered to us anywhere else. When was the last time you spoke to, and with, a child, youth or young adult here? If a child is noisy, please extend that knowing smile.

Do you know why I sing in the choir? Besides the fact that Rick will take anyone? Because John Wortman (of blessed memory) took an interest in a youth who didn't quite fit in except at church and said "you ought to sing in the choir." I have a hunch that many of you have similar stories where an adult exercised positive influence on you in a way that caused you to try something new or see yourself in a way you hadn't or grow in a way you wouldn't have imagined. If you haven't already, do that for a child, youth or young adult here now.

Children are being heard. They should be seen as well as heard: attending Sunday School and worship as a matter of custom and welcomed by elders who truly see and know them. May it be so, for the sake of Christ.