

HEFRE WE GO AGAIN
September 3, 2017
Matthew 16:21-28

So here we are on this Labor Day weekend. School starts this week - - already has for some. Next Sunday is Rally Day. Fall is in the air and I hear via the grapevine that there are worries here that we need to be doing more to bring in more young folks to our programs.

I was astounded! There is always and everywhere room for improvement, but you do so much that is spot on! And I speak with some authority. Before moving here two years ago from Richmond, for close to fifteen years I taught at the Samuel DeWitt Proctor School of Theology on the campus of Virginia Union University. I taught aspiring pastors and aspiring church educators what could be taught in a classroom and, at the same time, directed a small agency that consulted with local churches about their Christian education programs.

If I were consulting now about your concern about numbers I would say, I know of dozens - - maybe hundreds - - of churches that would love to ave your numbers, because for years they haven't had a Sunday School or an MYF. They have no children! None. Zero. Zip. Zilch.

What's right here is that virtually everything you do cries out, children and youth matter here! They're among you whenever you gather for worship, not just as decorations in the pews but as actual worship leaders. Ethan wasn't told he had to pass a written test or be here ten years with perfect attendance before he could be an usher. No, he was likely recruited right out of Confirmation Class. And then the team of adults and children that completes adorning our altar each week.

It looks to me like most of what happens at MT assumes, and provides for, the inclusion of children and youth. And with programs like UMARMY you don't just ship the kids off with a paid youth minister on a mission trip; you go along with them, roll up your sleeves and work right beside them.

I hope you're getting the picture here - - but you may be wondering what has this to do with our scripture, especially the one I want to focus on: Matthew. Jesus

telling those first disciples what's on the calendar next week. We're going to Jerusalem and I'm going to die there. Dear God, didn't we just go through that?

We've barely finished up with Lent, cleared away the debris from all those flowers on the altar, and seen Jesus safely off into the heavens - - and he's back again and it's starting all over. Guess what. There's already Halloween candy in the stores, and before it's cleared from the shelves we'll be hearing Christmas carols and hunting for the Advent wreath.

Here we go again! But here's the deal. That snippet from Matthew is the lead-in to the big story of what God was doing in Jesus and that's our founding, defining story as Christians. God's big story of which our little stories are a part. It's the story we've told generation after generation - - or not. Here's the connection: Christian education is all about telling that story.

Bible scholar Walter Brueggemann reminds us that the church is always one generation away from extinction. Stop telling the story and it's goodbye, church. It takes time, and some argue that the church is already on life support, but others say, no, too many signs of new life out there. The church will look different in another generation but the story will still be told - - or not.

Brueggemann warns us to be mindful of two things: remember who we are and claim that story, and tell it in such a way that today's listeners can hear it - - ways that make sense in the world of today. A world being slammed by constant change, by the findings of science and technology and the impact of globalism.

The elders, of whom there are a good many here this morning, have seen more change in our lifetimes than any generation before us - - so if you experience whiplash every now and then, that could be why. This is the world to which we tell our story - - or not.

What might this suggest to us? Here are some ideas that can help us unpack the issues. Scholars have put a lot of energy, time, money and, yes, prayer, into a couple of decades of research that suggest a way forward, but be clear - - nobody knows. We're in uncharted territory here!

What we're really talking about here is Christian formation or, better yet discipleship formation, because that's what Jesus called us to do. It's what Jesus taught, and consequently what Christianity was meant to be - - not a set of ideas,

but a way of life, a lifestyle, a way of being in the world that is distinctive - - simple non-violent, shared and loving. Over time we made it into an established “religion” with all that meant, and we avoided the lifestyle change Jesus called for. It is in the retelling of the story that the way of life is re-presented for every generation - - or not.

This is why Israel Galindo, one of the best educators I know, writes “the legitimate primary content of Christian teaching is not a text, or a creed, but a person! You can teach a lesson, a book, a concept, an idea or a subject. You can’t teach a person; you can only be in relationship with a person.” Because of that we teach relationally, we teach by the way we relate to one another, by our life together in the congregation. The core of the Gospel, the big story, we model together as a people.

Those first Christians, in their life together, shaped a set of practices that were way more than habits. They shaped their lives. We do many of them today, but few of us truly appreciate or even recognize, their ancient origins and their enormous power to form disciples. We do them here at Mary Taylor - - things like hospitality, testimony, forgiving, building each other up, holding one another accountable, singing our faith. So then, says Galindo, our curriculum becomes “all those relationships and experiences offered to individuals and groups as they participate actively in the life of the congregation.” This means all of us are teachers and all of us are learners. What’s more we’re lifelong learners until we move on to the church triumphant.

It’s the congregation itself that does the formation, and the congregation can undo what the best classroom teachers can do when a child walks out the door of your classroom and overhears a conversation in which one church member speaks cruelly of another.

Isn’t it interesting? The experts directing us toward those first churches? What’s old is new again. We live in a complex and perilous time; so did the first churches. Because of them, we are. To the extent that we can recapture the old practices, we engage in what is coming to be called “innovative traditioning” - - what is old becomes new again.

So where do we go from here? Beats me! Nobody knows, but lots of experimentation is going on and promising trends are emerging. One of those is

that more intergenerational programming is important (HINT: you've got this one underway already). Some churches have abandoned Sunday School in favor of blocks of short-term programs scheduled around school holidays.

My guess is that you can do better when it comes to curriculum for children, and there are some wonderful new lectionary-based lines available that include resources to be used at home. And for youth and adults, it's now widely recognized that to tell is not to teach. All ages learn best, not by being talked at, but through interactive experiences. The key for MT, I suspect, will be to be willing to experiment, risk failure, and learn from it. All of this can feel chaotic and scary. Living our story, God's big story, has never been a walk in the park, folks. We've forgotten that.

Churches in Europe have been closing their doors for twenty years or so, but there is an odd phenomenon springing up that nobody can explain. Young people are flocking to the Anglican church's service of Evensong; light on liturgy but long on ancient chant and song. Add to that the enormous crowds of young people that flock to Taize services in France every summer.

It's counter-intuitive. It flies in the face of all we thought we knew. It's happening. Tell the story in ancient words and song and something speaks to the hungry hearts of the young. Go figure. Praise God, it's happening. Here we go again! Amen.

-Judith FaGalde Bennett

(Walter Brueggemann quote from *The Creative Word: Canon as a Model for Biblical Education*)