

Children's Sermon

I'm going to do something this morning I haven't done in 32 years. I'm going to preach a children's sermon. So, to begin with, I'd like to call up all the children in the congregation. Let's keep this organized. We are Presbyterians, after all. Let me give the instructions first. After I have given the instructions, the children can follow them.

First, I'd like to call up to the front of the church all the people in the congregation whom the Bible calls God's children. (Don't move yet! Wait for the instructions).

Next, I'd like to call up to the front to hear this sermon all the people who are learning more about God's love in Jesus Christ – all the children who are still learning. (Don't move! I'm not finished).

Next, I'd like to call up to the front to hear this sermon all the people who pray the Lord's Prayer, the prayer that begins "Our Father, who art in heaven . . ." If you pray a prayer like that, you must be one of God's children, so this sermon is for you. You'll need to come up to the front, too.

Let's see, let me make sure I've got everyone. Anyone called God's child in the Bible. Anyone who is learning about God's love in Christ. Anyone who calls God "Abba," Father. If any of these descriptions fits you, I need to preach this sermon to you.

So, I'm going to count to three. On *one*, I want anyone who fits this description to lean forward in your pew. On *two*, I want you to stand. And on *three*, I want you to come forward and sit on the floor for my children's sermon. Ready? *One . . . two . . .*

Ooops. I don't think this will work. You'd better all sit down again. It turns out that we're all God's children, aren't we? A "children's sermon" is just another way of saying a "sermon," isn't it? We haven't got enough room on the floor for all of you children, and some of you have bad knees, and might not be able to get up again. So I'll just let you stay where you are.

It's curious of God to have so many children, isn't it? But that's the way God works. God's son Jesus loves us all and calls us all to follow him. The Apostle Peter put it this way on the Day of Pentecost:

The promise is you and to your children and to all who far away,

everyone whom the Lord our God calls (Acts 2:39).

The fact is, God calls us all because God loves us all. It's the call of God that makes us God's own. If we didn't believe that, we'd do a lot fewer baptisms, around here, wouldn't we? Instead of baptizing babies as well as youth and adults, we'd just baptize the folks who passed the entrance exam: the graduates, people who did well on the spiritual FCAT. But if God's *call* makes us God's children, and baptism is the sign that we belong to God, then this font is the place to welcome children of all ages.

"Come on in," we say. "The water's just fine."

Today we welcome to worship children who have just entered kindergarten. Their names are Thatcher, Paul Brooks, and William. We're giving them hymnbooks because the hymnal is one of the best resources for learning how to worship. We're also presenting Raleigh with her own Bible. Now that she's a first-grader, she'll need a Bible so that she can read it on her own.

You might have seen these brothers and sister in worship before. We want them here, with us, as we worship God together.

We older children of God, the ones who suffer from presbyopia and the occasional bout of forgetfulness, need to remember a few things about these younger children among us.

Here's the first thing to remember: Young children can do several things at once. They can color, they can wiggle, and they can listen all at the same time. It's really quite amazing. We might think that they're not worshipping with us, just because they're doing more than one thing at the same time. But they are. My parents used to call this "misbehaving in worship." A better name is "multi-tasking." Worship is all about multi-tasking.

I remember once, long ago, our first scripture reading was the story of the call of Samuel. One of our younger members was under a pew at the time, coloring, while the lesson was being read. As you can imagine, this did not well please this young man's father, who was trying to figure out how he could extricate his son from under the pew without causing a distraction to those around them or committing a reportable offense under the Child Protection Act.

The reader read from the Bible, "**Then the LORD called, "Samuel! Samuel!" and he said, "Here I am!"**" (Isaiah 3:4)

A small voice came from under the pew: “Listen to this part, Dad. Samuel thinks it’s Eli, but it isn’t. It’s God.”

Multitasking.

The second thing we older children need to remember about our younger siblings is this: They learn to worship just the way we learned – by worshipping. There just isn’t any better way to do it. Learning to worship is a lot like learning to ride a bike, to drive a car, or to love another person. You learn by doing.

A lot of people, some of them Christians, don’t understand this. They think you have to know all about what you’re doing before you can do it. That’s certainly true for nuclear fission. It’s not true of worship. In worship, participation precedes cognition. You do it, and as you do it, you learn more about it.

You sing “God is here! As we, your people, meet to offer praise and prayer,” and, over time, you learn what it means to be God’s people and to feel God’s presence, because you’re right here, amongst them, worshiping with them.

Here are symbols to remind us
Of our lifelong need of grace;
Here are table, font, and pulpit;
Here the cross has central place.
Here in honesty of preaching,
Here in silence, as in speech,
Here, in newness and renewal,
God the Spirit comes to each.

(Fred Pratt Green, Hymn No. 409)

You learn to worship by taking part in worship. That’s not rocket science, but it is the wisdom of the ages. Samuel learned the same way. So did Jesus. So did Lydia and Phoebe. So have all the saints of God.

The church has known this from the beginning, even before the Day of Pentecost. Remember how Jesus and his disciples sang a hymn before they left the upper room and went out to the Mount of Olives? They didn’t need a hymnbook that night because everyone there had learned how to worship by worshipping.

The last thing we older children need to remember is this: We need these younger brothers and sisters. O yes, they can be challenging. They can be distracting. They can ask awkward questions at inopportune moments, but without them the praise we offer God is incomplete. It's like an orchestra with no flutes or an eight-cylinder car firing on six.

Worshipping without these young Christians is like washing your feet with you socks on. It's not nearly as effective and hardly any fun at all. God likes nothing better than the worship offered by all God's children. That's why the psalmist sings:

Young men and women alike, old and young together!

Let them praise the name of the LORD . . . (Psalm 148)

I received a brochure in the mail not long ago from a group organizing a new church. It had a drawing of a coffee cup on it. No pulpit, font, or table. Certainly no cross. A coffee cup. "Come join us for an experience," it said. "Casual. Non-threatening. Inviting. We'll take care of your children for you, so you can worship in comfort."

No doubt helpful and enjoyable activities take place in that coffee klatch, that fellowship of the sacred bean, but my friends in Christ, it's not the worship of the Triune God. God's very essence is relational, communal, interactive. To worship God in the fullness of the gospel requires the presence and participation of God's children within and amongst the generations.

That kind of worship is not always decent and in order, but it's very often interesting. And it's the kind of worship God likes best.

He's a grown man now, working as an aide in a retirement home, but when he was five, his mother asked him, "Son, what do you like best about worship?" He smiled his unique smile – which, I am happy to say, he hasn't grown out of.

"What I like best," he said, "Is when we share a piece (peace?) of the Lord."

Me, too! So say all the children of God.