

Looking to the Future

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Whether you realized it or not when you chose to come to church this morning, you are with us on a special occasion. Today marks the groundbreaking of our ARC recreation center. A project which many folks have spent countless hours planning, working with our local government and with our neighbors in the community to achieve. And this morning, in order for us to truly honor the gift we are receiving, I would like us to think about what it means to be a church that utilizes the resources we have in order to create the kind of faith community that cherishes the fact that we are called to take care of our young people and create opportunities for intergenerational relationships to form.

Our first scripture passage this morning from the gospel of Mark is one that many of us are familiar with. Jesus telling the disciples that the Kingdom of God belongs to the children. A simple lesson...yet one that when appreciated and examined is very rich with meaning and implications for how we live our lives and treat our children.

To give us a little context, children in Jesus' time were in many ways treated as second class citizens. They were not counted in the attendance roles of gatherings and according to some Biblical commentaries were often presented as either examples of unreasonable behavior or objects to be trained.

So when the disciples were keeping the children from approaching Jesus they were probably trying to protect Jesus' time or reputation because of the low status of these young people....or perhaps they were worried that Jesus would be exhausted if he ministered to both the young and the adults---Not an unreasonable assumption on their part....

But, as it goes many times, both back then and even today...the disciples messed up... and in Verse 14 it says “when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and then he said let the little children come to me.”

It is important that we ask ourselves if Jesus would have the same response if he saw the way we sometimes treat children in the church today...

Is it possible some of the ways we treat children could be preventing them from developing a relationship with God?

We have to ask Are we doing everything in our power to let families know that they are welcomed and supported if they come to this church?

And for those of us who are parents: are we making sure to prioritize our lives in a way that will allow our children to grow in a relationship with God?

Are we honoring the importance of prayer before meals and before bedtime? Are we letting some of the extracurricular activities slide from time to time so that church can be worked into the schedule?

In a many communities across our country Churches are up in arms about how Sunday morning is no longer set aside as sacred time for church. And now sports games, marathons, and bike races now command the attention of families.

And while I believe it would be nice for families to make church more of a priority on Sunday morning, I think it is equally important for the church to think about how we can offer other opportunities for families to plug into the life of the church outside of Sunday morning.

For example, did you know there are programs that integrate basketball, volleyball and even cheerleading with the church?

Imagine us utilizing our new gymnasium in a way where there a basketball leagues where there is an uplifting message given at halftime

during the games....and volley ball leagues where the coaches give bible lessons as part of the weekly practice....

Recreation and spiritual enrichment do not need to be mutually exclusive.

But of course, whether it be through new avenues or traditional Children's education and music ministries....these things can't happen without adult volunteers.

And I have to say we at SRVUMC have some the most dedicated volunteers I have ever seen. We have a women in our church who comes and teaches Sunday school for our children every single Sunday....and believe me, she has every right to say "I've already done my part...let someone else who is younger do it" because she has been actively involved in the church for many years....but she knows that she is needed and shares the gifts of her time and talent with our kids.

However, even with all of the wonderful volunteers we have, we need more. We need adults who would be willing to come in and share their years of experience walking in the faith with our confirmation class. We need adults to join us as leaders on our mission trips to San Diego and the central valley this summer. We even have ways you can help support the children's and youth ministry without directly working with kids...but helping prep the materials needed for our lessons...No matter what your experience level or passion I assure we can plug you into something that can help make the programming we have even better.

Please don't hesitate to call or e-mail Stephanie or myself and we would be happy to talk with you about the many possibilities.

And now that I'm done with the sales pitch, let's get back to our gospel lesson.

Jesus says *'Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you,*

whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.'

An important word to lift up in that verse is “receive.”

Jesus is saying that entrance into the kingdom of Heaven isn't something that you achieve...it is something that you receive.

By nature we fall into the trap of thinking we have to earn our way into heaven, but it's just not possible. One of the greatest gifts of young children is that they are not consumed with earning things....they have the confidence that their parents will provide them with what they need.

Unfortunately, that innocence seems to disappear earlier and earlier as we continue to pressure students so that they can get into the right college....or make that competitive traveling sports team.

You may have never thought about this before....but church is one of the only places our students have where they can come and everyone is accepted. It doesn't matter how smart you are...it doesn't matter if you are good enough to make the team....all are welcome.

One of the reasons I am United Methodist is because I learned during my childhood years that this was a place that it was okay to have questions....it was okay to not be on the exact same page as the person in the pew next to you....that we love and embrace all in the same way we see Jesus do time and time again.

Verse 16 of our scripture passage says “And he (Jesus) took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

I wonder what blessing Jesus gave each child. Do you think it was all about things such as health, prosperity and wealth?

Did Jesus say “I bless your child so that they can become pro athlete or go to Stanford or become a billionaire? Or, did he offer a blessing that matters eternally?

I'd like to think that Jesus' blessing for these children was this: that they may know God; love God with all of their hearts and minds, to love their neighbors and keep God's commandments. In faith, I choose to believe that Jesus blessed them so that they could walk humbly with God throughout their lives and hear and do what Jesus taught his disciples to do.

Friends, to good news is that we get to be a part of this blessing. We have the opportunity and responsibility to share the knowledge of God's love with the children of the San Ramon Valley.

Now...I have been talking a lot to the over 18 crowd in the room. Let me just taking a moment to address those underage crowd in the room for a minute.

First of all, just because church is a place that we want you to feel as comfortable as possible in, that doesn't mean you should disrespect your elders. The bible is very clear on that....and by the way...the bible is also clear that you are to honor you parents.

Secondly, Just as it is important for those who are older to take interest in you our younger members, it is also important for you to take an interest in our more experienced members.

The amount of knowledge, skill, kindness, humor and overall wisdom that you have access to in this church is incredible. Youth...take the time to get to know as many people as you can in our church. You never know what incredible thing you might find out about someone.

Finally youth, remember that you are a role model for the younger children in our community. Take the time to notice them and let them know that you care. I bet there are many of you who can think back to a time where a teenager came up to you when you were younger and noticed you. Don't be too cool that you can't share that gift with a younger child....it make more of an impact than you realize.

It's worth noting our passage today was not the first time Jesus talks about children in the Gospel of Mark.

If you back up to chapter 9...just a few verses earlier, Jesus says if any of you puts a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me it would be better if a great millstone was hung around your neck and you were tossed into the sea.

He's making reference to the fact that children in our lives are impacted by the decisions that we make. And Jesus is saying to the adults and older youth that you have incredible power over the faith and life and well-being of these children and you better not take advantage of that in a way that is harmful.

Earlier before that in verse 33 in chapter nine, Jesus comes to Capernaum and there is an argument over who is the greatest and Jesus says "that whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all" and then he takes a little child puts it among them and says "whoever welcomes one such child in my name, welcomes me. Whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me."

Mark in a relatively short gospel gives us a lot of talk about children.

Jesus uses children to challenge adults and change our conception of what faith is about.

I have been beginning to realize more and more how blessed we are as a congregation to have children to both teach as well as learn from.

For there are more and more churches for a whole variety of reasons don't have anyone under the age of 60 involved in the life of the congregation.

There are many Methodist churches in our area that are now having to band together a combine the few youth they have just so they can have 4 or 5 confirmation students...

We have an abundance of opportunity to make a difference.

And I also know that we can still do a lot more to reach out to folks who aren't connected with a church.

We can scoff at how it seems like we don't have as many kids in Sunday school as we did 15 years ago or we can go out and do something about it!

I just love how Stephanie has been thinking of new ways for people of all ages to come together. If you missed last all-ages church campfire, dinner and sing-a-long in the courtyard I really encourage you to catch the next one and invite friends of all ages.

Make no mistake we have challenges before us but I am confident we have everything we need to make an impact that will last well into the future of our church.

One of the most common questions I get from church members as well as other pastors is what I think is the key to having a thriving children's and youth ministry.

My answer for the past few years has been the same and every day I am here I get more confident in this answer: Consistency....

It is all about consistency. We need to make a consistent effort to include people of all ages in our lives and in our ministry.

We need to build long term relationships with one another. We are complex beings....it takes a lifetime to truly get to know someone else.

Our kids need to see familiar faces....families need to be reassured that no matter how much noise is made...no matter what spills may happen along the way that we want them to fully including in every aspect of our church.

We need to stay excited about our church. We need to remember what it was that brought us here and what it is that keeps us coming back...and we need to share that excitement with others.

The key to the growth in our youth program over the years has had everything to do with the students themselves. They are the ones who are excited to tell their friends about the fun things that happen in youth group or on mission trips. They are the ones who invite others on Wednesday and Sunday evenings. What do you want to share about our church to others...and if you are having trouble thinking of something that's fine...let's start something new together for you to get excited about.

I love Paul's prayer for the Ephesians especially the last few lines when he says "Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever."

Paul is saying that God partners with us in our efforts and because of that we can accomplish far more than we could ever imagine....not just for ourselves but for ALL generations! To honor those who came before us and to set the table for those who will come in the future.

I want to close with a quick story. Some of you know in our youth program we give students who are visiting for the first time an opportunity to take free throw basketball shot. Well, we had a visitor join us a few months ago who self-identifies as Atheist so naturally he was a little hesitant to come to church. But the friend who invited him reassured him that anyone can come to youth group.

And as luck would have it he made his free throw I was able to come bring him lunch one day to school, say hi and ask him how his day was going.

Well he has been back to youth group every week since....and recently I found out that he is now encouraging his family to pray before meals together the way we do every Wednesday night.

And when asked by a sibling if he Believes in God now or not he says that he isn't sure...but he knows the things we are discussing on Wednesday nights are shaping him into a better person and that the scripture that we apply to the issues we face in the world seems to make sense to him.

1 invitation from a friend who said it doesn't matter what title you give yourself...everyone is welcome in my church.

1 In-N-Out Hamburger with Fries and a Chocolate Milkshake.

Can make all the difference in someone's world.

And by the way... I learn way more from this student every week than he learns from me.

Take a step...no matter how small in investing in someone older...or someone younger than yourself....and see what God can do.

For as the apostle Paul wrote: "I pray that you may have the power to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly **far more than all we can ask or imagine**, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to **all generations**, forever and ever. Amen."