



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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For Our Children

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People were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them; and when the disciples saw it, they sternly ordered them not to do it. But Jesus called for them and said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs" (Luke 18:15-16).

Somebody sent me a little story the other day, about a boy in Sunday school who was puzzled about something, so he asked his teacher. The boy said, "According to the Bible, the children of Israel crossed the Red Sea, right?"

"Right."

"And the children of Israel beat up the Philistines, right?"

"Right."

"And the children of Israel built the Temple, right?"

"Right again."

"And the children of Israel fought the Egyptians, and the children of Israel fought the Romans, and the children of Israel were always doing something important, right?"

"All that is right," the teacher said. "So what's your question?"

"What I want to know is, when the children were doing all these things, what were the grownups doing?"

Well that's a cute story, but like lots of stories about children, it points to something important for grownups. Our young children and grandchildren look up to us, literally, because we are the big people in their lives. We're taller than they are in the beginning, so they have to look up to see us. And of course, that's where the metaphor comes from later on. Children look up to us personally and morally and spiritually, too, because adults are still their role models, even when they grow up to be taller than we are.

This raises an obvious set of questions that we grownups need to ask ourselves all the time – not just for the children in our immediate families, but for all the children who are constantly learning from the big people around them. Questions like: What do children see when they watch us now, because they're watching us all the time? What kinds of behaviors are we modeling for them, individually and collectively? What will they learn, not only from what we *say*, but from what we *do*, and from how our words line up, or fail to line up, with our actions? What *are* the grownups doing, after all?

When I was a kid, the biggest of the big people was George Washington, the father of our country. The first story we heard about Washington was that, when he was a child like us, he chopped down a cherry tree – which he should not have done, but when he got caught, he didn't deny it. "I cannot tell a lie," he said. He told the truth and faced the consequences of his actions. It was that kind of integrity that made him fit to be our first president, and we boys and girls were supposed to grow up to be like George Washington.

The story may or may not have been literally true, but the point was that having the courage to tell the truth, even about our mistakes, is a mark of integrity, and we should all grow into that kind of courage. What lessons do you suppose our children are learning today from what the grownups are doing in the city that bears our first president's name? And what lessons do they learn from us, in the ways we respond as citizens of this great experiment in democracy that Washington's generation began?

A couple of weeks ago, a teenager looked into a television camera in front of his school in Florida and said, essentially, "We're children. You're the grownups. What are you going to do?" What *are* we going to do, about so many things?

My doctoral degree is in history and policy from Carnegie Mellon, where I teach a little now, and I can tell you that our grandchildren's generation will study in college the social and economic and environmental challenges of our time, and what we did or failed to do to meet them.

They will know what information was available to us, because it will be well documented in the archives of history. They'll see what we did with the information we had, and they will discuss in class why we chose to act or not to act on what we knew, and why some of us chose not to know at all. They'll see where we were brave and did the right thing, even when it was hard, and they'll see where we were not so brave. Our grandchildren will see where our vision was wide enough to look out for the whole society, and even for the planet itself; and they will see where our vision was much narrower than that. It won't be just an academic

exercise for them, because they will be living with the consequences.

I saw a church sign the other day that had a more meaningful message than often appears on those signs. It said, “Always do the easiest thing.” I thought that was strange, but underneath the sign continued, “#ThingsJesusNeverSaid.”

The Jesus who said, “Take up your cross and follow me” did not model the easiest way. Jesus did hard things, and encouraged his followers to do them too – not because they were hard, but because they were *right*, and in this fallen world of ours, the right thing to do is often not the easy thing.

John the elder, who some traditions say was the source of the Gospel according to John, and the New Testament letters of John, and maybe even the book of Revelation, talked a lot about two great themes: love and truth. They went together in his mind, because God is love, as he said, and Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. People who love should be committed to the truth; and if we love other people, we should want them to know the truth and live according to it. That’s why John says, in the last of his letters, “I have no greater joy than this, to hear that my children are walking in the truth.”

If you’re old enough, it’s easy to think of almost everyone as your child – at least your child in faith. I’m already starting to see how that works, even at this stage of my life. John the old man, who may have been a teenager when he first followed Jesus, wants his spiritual children to

live in the integrity of the truth.

Part of that truth, as he says again and again, is that God wants us to love one another. Not just the people closest to us, but everyone. That's why he says, "Beloved, you do faithfully whatever you do for the friends, even though they are strangers to you." Do we hear that? Some of our friends in the community of faith are still strangers to us, in the sense that we haven't met them yet. But we are friends anyway, because we follow Jesus, and so we are all brothers and sisters in Christ.

Jesus tells his disciples to let the children come to him, because the kingdom of heaven belongs to the likes of them. So we need to think about what we teach our children, through what we say and what we do, and what we encourage them to say and do.

This year again, during Lent, we're teaching our children to share through the Pocket Change Project, which is just the sort of thing John talked about. We're teaching them that they have friends they don't even know, and to be faithful to Jesus is to care for people who may be strangers to us now – even as far away as Haiti – but who will turn out to be our extended family, children of the heavenly Father, just like us.

Of all the things our children learn, what they learn in and through the church is among the most important. What we do here matters enormously – not just what happens within these walls, but the way we live outside as well, because what happens in church does not stay in church. It reaches out to the world around us, to the whole world,

because as that song we teach our children says, “He’s got the whole world in his hands.”.



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