



SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE
in the City of New York
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, October 15, 2019
The Nineteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Choral Mattins and Choral Eucharist
at 11:00 a.m.

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Alison J. Turner,
Director of Children and Family Ministry
on
Genesis 32:22-31 and Luke 18:1-8
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Annual Appeal Sermon Series: Children and Families

*Tell me the stories of Jesus I love to hear,
Things I would ask him to tell me if he were here.
Scenes by the wayside,
tales of the sea,
Stories of Jesus,
tell them to me.*

- W. H. Parker, 1845-1929

I remember the musty smell of an old book shop, the creaking wooden floors, the faded paint and crumbling walls that housed memories of decades, the piano in need of tuning, and the crackle of the tarpaulin as it was unraveled as a carpet to catch our crumbs on picnic days. The memory I treasure most about Sunday School, however, was Mrs. Blois and Deaconess Lawrence, our otherwise quiet leaders joyfully leading us in songs about the people Jesus called, met, healed and the stories he told. Stories of Jesus welcoming the outcast; parables of ordinary things - of light and joy, of houses on rock and sand - and what I would soon learn to be extraordinary parables of the kingdom, those familiar earthly stories with heavenly meanings. Perhaps you, too, have someone who introduced you to Jesus by telling his story when you were young.

During our recent "Open House" as part of the Ministry Fair, many of you shared your own reminiscences of Sunday School, and of the places, the people, the prayers, and the songs that you sang. Many experiences of Sunday School have changed over the years and yet telling the stories of Jesus remains at the heart of our Sunday gatherings. The weekly telling of stories reconnects us to the past, affirms the present, and leads us forward that we may live or become part of that story.

"*The Enduring Power of Storytelling*" was recently expanded upon in the *Living Church Magazine* by the Reverend Dr. Daniel McClain.¹ He reflected on Aristotle's anthropological insights which refer to us as 'narrative and story-telling creatures.' He said this: "*Stories help shape the way we narrative-animals see the world. Stories, both sacred and secular, give us a shared language, a means to relate to one another, to collaborate.*"

McClain goes on to quote the founder of Godly Play, the theologian and researcher Dr. Jerome Berryman, encourages all of us to see the importance of telling the story. She says, "*Storytelling and story-bearing as a way of making mutual meaning is a matter of existential importance for me as well as for all of us.*"² Godly Play is one model of catechesis that we have recently begun at Saint Thomas; it seeks to explore the mystery of God's presence in our lives through story, religious language and spiritual experience. Gathering, welcoming, feasting, praying and responding to story are some of the key components of Godly play, at the heart of which is the theme of **wondering**, as children and adults engage **together** in exploring the scriptures.

Mark's Gospel says, "He began to teach them many things in parables." (Mark 4:2) Approximately a third of Jesus' teaching is filled with storytelling. In our Gospel reading this Sunday from Luke we, once again, encounter Jesus sharing stories in the form of parables as he speaks to the crowd. A crowd filled with people of all ages. And he tells a story that is as much for you and me as it was for the crowd then. Our own children are hearing the same passage in Sunday School today as I speak.

We have just heard afresh the Parable of the Unjust Judge and the Widow, persistent in prayer. I wonder: Do we mirror passion in our faith and prayer? Do we persevere in our search for justice with the same persistence of a child tugging at your hand for attention or simply not being prepared to let go of a question? It is readily observed that children are not concerned with the historical or literacy context, but the people at the center of the story. You only have to spend a short time with a toddler who has learnt the question 'why?' to discover this. Why is he hurting? Why is she crying? Why is he sad? Those were some of the questions of my three-year-old grandson that came utterly unprompted as a response to a crucifix in the Rectory and an image of Mary at the Cross last summer.

Jesus' radical insistence on the centrality of children within the Kingdom of Heaven is seen time and again. He places them central and makes them visible. For him, they model the key to the kingdom. In an article on children and the kingdom of God, Keith White says this, "*Children are in a real sense God's language in and through which he lives his true nature and therefore the nature of his kingdom.*"³

What might that mean for us at Saint Thomas?

For Jesus, children are not hidden treasure, like the hidden carving in the stone of the Narthex adjacent to the Children's area of the Chantry Chapel, bearing the words that continue on from today's Gospel reading, "*Suffer the children to come unto me, for such is the Kingdom of God.*"
(Luke 18:16)

In our growing number of baptisms in the Chantry Chapel, the Gospel is proclaimed each time, "*Let the children come to me, do not try to stop them.*" (Matthew 19:14)

In our own church I see signs of children's faithfulness and formation in the faith in the way that they respond to this Church and to this community of faith: In the toddler who stops to kneels at the altar on her way through the ambulatory to meet her mom, because she naturally recognizes that Jesus is there, or in a child whose beaming smile brightens the sanctuary as he extends his hands to make a throne for Jesus as he receives Holy Communion, or a baby holding out her hands to receive the host, seeking in a very natural way to belong with all God's children.

Children and family ministry in this place aims to support families at church and at home in the demands, challenges, and joys of modern day living, and in making children and their families visible in worship as we grow in faith together. Our ministry asserts that we are all are part of the body of Christ in this place here and now, and that children are not simply a church of the future or when they have grown up but, rather, are the Church now. It belongs in partnership with all our other ministries - pastoral, liturgical, musical, and educational. Why? Because Jesus placed them at the heart of his ministry and in the midst of his disciples:

"At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" He called a child, whom he put among them, and said, "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me." (Matthew 18:1-5)

We all have a part to play in this expanding ministry, perhaps in giving our time, talent, or treasure and also in prayer but, far more importantly, we all have a part to play because children need to know that they belong in this place. Or, as one parishioner regularly reminds me, "*Children are important – I was once one myself!*"

1 2.

The Living Church: *Serving the One Body of Christ* December 20, 2018

Godly Play and the Enduring Power of Storytelling by the Reverend Dr. Daniel McClain (Chaplain to the College of William and Mary and Associate Rector of Bruton Parish Episcopal Church).

3. "He placed a Little child in the Midst": Jesus, the Kingdom and children by Keith White in *The Child in the Bible*. Ed. M.J. Bunge.