

On Children, Water and Aquarium Maintenance

Bishop Paul Marshall preached this sermon at the November clergy day, where the focus was baptism and confirmation.

[Mark 10:13-16] People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, "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." And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.



Bishop Paul sits and talks with the children of the Church of the Mediator in Allentown.

“Whenever I can, I sit on the floor of the church for a few minutes and visit with little children. I have no illusion that I can teach them much or that they share my sense of humor. All that I want to happen is for them to experience that the person who is the identified leader of the community notices and cares about them. If they ‘learn’ something else, that’s a bonus, but the basic message is that they are accepted, that they are a valued part of who we are.”

We are indebted to Father Andrew Gerns for alerting us to Topverses.com, which lists all the verses of the Bible in order of their popularity. I surfed over to take a look, and noted that none of the top verses of the Bible come from stories in the four gospels, and that the only passage from the gospels to

even make it into the highest rated verses was John 3:16.

People prefer the verses that give short, solid propositions. The four gospels tell stories. There is something about stories, isn’t there? They always evoke something

new – you are never quite done with them, and they are never quite done with you.

Now the passage we have just heard is often used as a proof-text for infant baptism, and perhaps it is. But before it is a proof-text, it is a story.

We live in a time that is sentimental about children – this seems to have begun in the Romantic era. It is hard to remember that the peasant children in this story were not neatly dressed in velvet with ribbons in their hair and Sunday school smiles on their faces, and the disciples were most definitely not glad to see them. (You can hear St. Peter doing a W.C.Fields impression: “go away, kid, you’re bothering me.”) These children were probably naked or nearly so and quite dirty. They had no status and under Jewish or Roman law their very lives were in the hands of their parents, for whom they were burden as well as blessing.

Jesus is doing something very important in the story. He is indignant with the disciples who don’t want these dirty non-persons troubling the Big Guy. He startles them when he says the Kingdom is for them.

So far, so good. Then he says something astounding: you have to receive the Kingdom the way a child does or you don’t receive it at all. Shades of Nicodemus! (John 3)

Then the Messiah shows exactly what he means by embracing the kids, sticky with peanut butter and other grime, and touching them in blessing.

That is the level where Christ wants to reach us. At the place in us which is earlier than and more profound than our memory for facts, propositions, and slogans. Children don’t have the capacity for data-type memory until they are quite well along. They do from early on have the ability to form “procedural memory,” which is about how things are done and how relationships work.

Today, from before they can “understand” in an adult sense, children learn what is sacred by holding out hands and saying Amen at communion. By being loved in church and being with their parents who act like they are encountering the sacred, they form associative networks that stay with them throughout their lives.

Our most powerful memories are those that cannot be expressed in words or even particularly recalled as narrative. This is why we respond emotionally to touch, certain sounds, tone of voice and tastes and aromas, especially from childhood. Long before we could operate with narrative or declarative memory, we were learning the gospel from how we experienced religion, particularly in our parents’ attitude and how we were treated in church and Sunday school.

So, again, at a point before these little children could construct a memory in the ordinary sense, they are experiencing Jesus holding, touching, and blessing. This is the church’s primary ministry to the very young, receiving them as we would receive Christ, and thereby embracing, touching and blessing them.

This is why, whenever I can, I sit on the floor of the church for a few minutes and visit with little children. I have no illusion that I can teach them much or that they share my sense of humor. All that I want to happen is for them to experience that the person who is the identified leader of the community notices and cares about them. If they “learn” something else, that’s a bonus, but the basic message is that they are accepted, that are a valued part of who we are.

Being a “cradle” Christian is very important for forming those connections. No matter how old we are, we must, as children do, let God hold us on a level that is entirely previous to what we think. Those of us who come to faith later in life, have a catch-up game to play, perhaps. For all of us, the

Kingdom is received in its most basic way as we practice the faith that is trust, the faith that rests in Jesus' embrace.

In the technical language of our trade, spirituality is largely a matter of training one's affective side to be in prayerful and constant relationship with God. That developing ability to rest in God's embrace is where the healing and power come from.

Pastoring, and I dare say, bishopping, seems less and less to me a matter of what we say to people when they are hurting than how we are with them. This is not to say that we are always cuddly (Jesus certainly wasn't), because one of the things children also must learn early is where the limits are. It is to say that we are always genuinely present and recognizing of their value.

And that brings me to another thought about Holy Baptism. What happens if we take the "baptismal ecclesiology" of which we hear so much at its face value? What if the Church is a huge baptismal font?

Huge medieval baptism fonts were not equipped with tiny bowls that were emptied after each baptism by devoted Altar Guild members. Fonts were big, full of water, and only consecrated on a few feasts.

Plunging naked babies into the same water would, over time, produce—well, let's just say, some silt.

Of course, that's not so odd. Until quite recently in history, most bath water was shared. Yucch.

That information about fonts and bathtubs is useful to me, again for reasons of child development and our own spiritual development. One of the things a child does very early on its the road to growth is to realize that the "bad" mother who doesn't meet all of its desires immediately, and the "good" mother who feeds, holds, and caresses, are the *same person*. The child learns not to "split" reality into black/white,

good/bad, but discovers that existence is complex, and that others may have reasons for doing things differently than the child expects.

Children who don't form this ability to "see grey," can form rigid orthodoxies (left, right or center – it's the rigidity, not the orthodoxy, that kills). They can be destructive of community. They fear curiosity in themselves and dampen it in others.

Babies have to learn that mom is one person who is more than their experience of her. Our life-long task is to remember that the pond in which we live is a font with very old water in it. Even with all its silt, the font is where Christ bathes and forms us and we are one in him

So *little and big* children who have adequately held, touched, and blessed on a level much deeper than ideas, a level where faith is a child's trust, learn to live with considerable ambiguity and are amazingly tolerant of themselves and others—of such is the kingdom of heaven.

So far, so good. But we can, we must, make this a bit edgy. How many of you have an aquarium? Somewhere near the bottom of our aquarium there was always a fish called a plecostomus. If you don't know what one is, google it, but there is a vocational hint in it for us when it comes to maintaining the quality of the water. I'll leave it to you to investigate.