

9/20/09 John A. Baldwin

D. L. Moody, one of the most well-known evangelists of the 1800's arrived home one evening exhausted. As he climbed into bed, his wife rolled over and asked, "How did it go?" "Pretty well" he said, "Two and a half converts." "That's sweet" she said, "How old was the child?" "No, no, no" Moody replied, "It was two children and one adult. The children have their whole lives ahead of them. The adult's life is already half gone."

This morning my sermon is going to focus on children – our blessing in having them in our midst as active members of our parish family; our responsibility in being participants in their Christian formation; and the paradigm shifts we all need to go through to see them as D.L. Moody did: in their fullness and not as half an adult.

I am focusing on children for several reasons. Our Christian Formation program begins this morning with Godly Play for 3 year olds through Kindergarten; our Workshop Rotation for grades 1-5; and our Journey to Adulthood for grades 6-12. We are also embarking today on a revised Children's Liturgy of the Word for ages 3 through 2<sup>nd</sup> grade during the first part of our 8:30 and 11 a.m. services. We are baptizing Spencer Kane at our 11 a.m. service and welcoming him into Christ's family, the Church. And finally, in our Gospel reading this morning, Jesus says something very important about children. He takes a little child in his arms and says "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me." (Mark 9:37)

This is a very powerful statement from our Lord about the vital importance of hospitality to children. This isn't the only thing he has to say about children. In Matthew 18:6-7, Jesus' blood boils hot as he utters these stunning words, "Whoever causes one of these little ones to stumble, it is better for him that a heavy millstone be hung around his neck, and that he be drowned in the depth of the sea." In perhaps his most well remembered utterance (recorded in all 3 Synoptic Gospels - Matthew, Mark & Luke) Jesus doesn't just quietly coo, "Oh let the little children come over to me for a moment." Instead this powerful man thunders with great passion. "Let the little children come to me! Don't you dare hinder them!!! My kingdom belongs to such as these." (Mt. 19:14) What Jesus did and said that day was extraordinary. Children are as fully important to Jesus as anyone else. I imagine Jesus would have been severely distressed with whoever came up with that horrendous statement, "Children should be seen and not heard."

I had the great blessing 2 weeks ago of spending quality time with my 14-month-old grandson Landon, and our one week old granddaughter, Evelyn. My wife, Ann, went down to Warner Robins, Georgia on August 10<sup>th</sup> to be with our oldest daughter during the birth of Sarah's first child. Our youngest daughter, Ashley, I felt might welcome a respite from parenting, and Sarah was eager to see her nephew, so I volunteered to fly down to Georgia with Landon. Some thought I was courageous to do so, others I was losing my mind. The flight to Atlanta went remarkably smoothly. Landon fell asleep 3 minutes after takeoff and slept until passengers were disembarking. The trip home was a very different matter. Blessedly, the seat next to us was empty. Landon was active the whole hour and a half flight, jumping up and down on his seat, grabbing the seat in front of him in which someone was trying to sleep, dropping his bottle of apple juice repeatedly, scattering his snacks, and playing with every single toy in the travel bag briefly before throwing them in the aisle. Shortly before landing, the stewardess informed me that he needed to be in my lap for landing. Landon didn't like that one bit, putting up a mighty fuss, and then falling asleep for only about 10 minutes before I had to pick him up to disembark. At this point he began crying loudly. This lasted all the way down the concourse to the baggage claim. Here I could see he had wet himself, and his stroller, with all of the apple juice I had plied him with on the flight. I had to do an emergency diaper change by the carousel before calm resumed. Whew!!!!

But you know what? I bonded with this little guy in a powerful way. I am deeply thankful for the blessings I received from Landon during our 4-day trip. Because Sarah was experiencing post-birth complications, my wife's attention was focused primarily on Sarah & the baby, leaving Landon and me to experience a lot of quality one-on-one time together. I spent much time on the floor playing with him, watching Dora the Explorer on TV, feeding, diapering, and thrilling to every effort he made to learn how to walk, as well as making goofy noises with him and warming instantly to his smiles and laughs. What Landon was doing and involved in was surely no more unusual than what the parents and grandparents here this morning go

through with their children and grandchildren. What made the experience exceptional for me was that I was paying deep attention.

So much of what is truly miraculous and extraordinary in life passes us by unnoticed because we aren't paying full attention. It is truly incredible when any child takes that first step, begins to smile, starts saying words in sentences, learns a new skill, becomes aware of their gifts and talents, rides a bicycle, falls in love. When it's our child or grandchild we are often blessed to observe and give thanks for the miracles. When it's someone else's, we often don't notice or get excited about it. Understandable, yet sad.

As members of Emmanuel Episcopal Church we are blessed to have many children of all ages here with us on Sunday mornings. God has truly gifted us and we should be mighty thankful. It's a gift we should never take for granted. All of us need to be paying attention and rejoicing in the steps our children are taking towards growing in faith, love and compassion for others.

The most moving and powerful book I read this summer was titled *Too Small to Ignore* by Wes Stafford, President and CEO of Compassion International. In it (p. 248) he quotes Dr. Howard Hendricks as saying, "It is my deep conviction that no effort in Christian ministry is more enduring or stabilizing in our Christian faith than outreach to children." Francis Xavier, an early Jesuit of the 1500's is well remembered for his bold claim, "Give me a child until he is seven, and I will give you the man." The rationale here is the same as in the battle against poverty around the world. Children will ultimately change the churches in which they worship. Changed churches will produce changed communities. In time changed communities will change nations and ultimately the world. It all begins with the young. Stafford asserts that two-third's of the people who give their lives to Christ do so before the age of 18. This is a time of ultimate importance for the life and vitality of the Christian community.

Stafford is a man who is passionate about championing and promoting the health, safety and well being of children all around the world. He observes in his book (p. 2) that "no matter what the setting, children seem to be a second-rate mandate. No matter what the ills of society, it tends to spiral downward and eventually land with its cruelest most smothering impact on our littlest citizens. Small, weak, helpless, innocent, vulnerable and trusting, they are the waiting victims for our simple neglect and most evil abuse. When hunger and famine strike a nation, adults become weak and hungry, but it's the children who most often starve to death. When disease arrives with all of its fury, adults can become sick, but the first to die are usually the children. The wars of the last decade killed more children than soldiers. The ritual sacrifice of children has been taboo for thousands of years, but it is tragically practiced every day across our world. When the sickness of pornography has run to its most evil and destructive end, it takes the form of child pornography. When prostitution reaches its sickest, most depraved form, it becomes child prostitution. Perhaps a little closer to home is the reality that children are the sacrificial lambs when our homes break up through neglect, anger, hostility and eventually divorce. Kids frequently blame themselves for the destruction, carrying deep scars on their innocent spirits for a lifetime."

Stafford goes on to testify (p. 10): "Every child who crosses my path in the grocery line, at church, or at the ballpark I consider a divine appointment, an opportunity to lift that child up – if only for a brief moment. It may just be the moment that will launch a life, or restore one that needs kindness today." (p. 9) "A life can be launched with as little as a single phrase, an uplifting word, or an act of kindness. The spirit of a little child is a lot like wet cement. When a child is young, it takes little effort to make an impression that can last a lifetime."

It is essential if we are to be faithful to Jesus' command: "Let the little children come to me! Don't you dare hinder them!!! My kingdom belongs to such as these" that we make valiant efforts for this parish family to be a child friendly, safe and affirming place; that adults of every age be attentive to our children and youth, encouraging them, learning their names, stretching ourselves to serve them by teaching, mentoring, leading Children's Liturgy, passing the peace, paying attention; that they learn from our example the importance of patience, kindness, fairness, honesty, acceptance and approval. Amen.