

Children's Sabbath

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The Community Church of Sebastopol
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Ephesians 4:25-5:1

Listening to Kristen call the children by name as they come forward, as she always does, I am reminded of a Fred Craddock story: "When I was a kid, I went to church with my mother, and after the service the minister would speak to her, 'How are you, Miz Craddock?' The five of us kids would follow after her like little ducks, and he would say, 'How are you, sonny? How are you, honey?'"

"But I remember when another minister came to our church, and about his fifth or sixth Sunday, when I followed by mother out of church, he said, 'Fred, how are you doing?' He was the best minister there ever was at that church. There's a big difference between 'sonny' and 'Fred.'" I am reminded of the theme song from Cheers – "You want to be where everybody knows your name." Not a bad image of church...a place where everybody knows your name – where you are valued as a person and are held generously, tenderly, forgivingly by name – as a person.

I think of how our church Family Camp has evolved over the years. In some respects it has become a family reunion. Young adults who grew up in our church and went to Camp Caz as children, are now bringing their children - and dragging along spouses – to camp. What is always moving to me, is to watch these children of the church, now with their own children, sitting around table and talking with people, well like me, church members who are their parent's age and have known them since they were children, have known their triumphs and struggles, and whose love and affirmation and support of these young people never wavered.

I recently heard two educators speak about the healthy development of children. They insisted that one key to such development is caring support and nurture from at least three non-parent adults. We can do that! That's church! And it is that kind of community, that kind of family, that kind of nurturing support, that I want to affirm on this Children's Sabbath.

But this hope, this dream of community, is not original with me. Paul dreamed it long before I did: "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another as God in Christ has forgiven you. Therefore, be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us..."

Some of you have heard this story before: There was a young minister who was called to serve an urban church in downtown Kansas City. It was not located in what anyone would mistake as the best part of town and church membership and attendance had sharply declined over the years. But the church did maintain a vigorous ministry of outreach to the children of the inner city. Every day after school there was food, games, singing, Bible stories, help with homework...every day – games, food and fun. Fifty to sixty children in the church after school every day of the week.

One day a woman came and said to the minister, "Are you the one running this program?"

"Yes, ma'am, I am.

"My son is in this program."

"And we are glad to have him. We have been having such a good time. I hope he is having a good time."

"Well, he can play games and he can eat the food, but I don't want him listening to any more of those stories."

"But we just get them out of the Bible. They are Bible stories."

"Well I don't want him listening to any more of those stories."

"But why? We not trying to indoctrinate him. We are just telling stories."

"I'll tell you why. He's gotten to where he's coming home now thinking he is as good as anybody in Kansas City. You are setting him up for bitter disappointment. So I don't want him to hear those stories anymore!"

And the young minister said, "I was just trying to do good."

Well, in spite of that worried and fearful mother's objection, I hope we are doing with our children and each other, what that minister and his Kansas City congregation were trying to do. I want our kids to believe that they are special and precious and indeed just as good as anybody in Sebastopol. I want you to believe that about yourselves. And how do we enable that to happen? "Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving...living in love as Christ loved us."

But, of course, we know this is not the way the world always works. I once heard a pastor speak about a mature woman in his church who deeply regretted that she hated to sew because she actually believed she might have a talent for it. She said that when she was a girl, whenever she put in a hem and then took it to her mother for inspection, all her mother ever commented on were the puckers. All she saw were the mistakes. She never seemed to see all the rest of the hem which by precious effort small hands had managed to get to lie flat. Finally those little hands gave up sewing all together.

I think of our grandson, Ben. Over the years he has created little drawings and like most parents and grandparents, we have praised them and put them up on our refrigerator. But, not long after he started school, I asked him about his drawing – we hadn't seen any for a while – and he said, "I'm not any good at art." He was only five, had just started school, and had decided – was it comparisons, had somebody said something? – that he wasn't any good at art. It broke my heart a little to hear that.

The world can be hard, for all ages. There always seems to be someone around to point out the puckers, to comment on how we can't seem to draw a straight line, to remind us of our weaknesses and shortcomings as if we weren't already way too familiar with them.

I recall the classic "Peanuts" strip when Linus comes up to Lucy with something to show her. "Look at this cartoon, Lucy, and tell me if you think it's funny."

She asks, "Who drew it."

He answers, "I did."

"Then I don't think it's funny."

As he walks away with his drawing, Linus mumbles, "Big sisters are the crabgrass in the lawn of life."

And it doesn't take us long to learn that there are plenty of people and situations out there only too eager to sow some crabgrass into the lawn of our lives, only too eager to point out the puckers. But maybe not here...not here. Theologian, John Macquarrie, liked to remind us that in our life together we share in God's creative power. We have the capacity, as we relate to each other, for conferring being, building self-esteem. We do this through careful appreciation, nurturing and supporting each other, again, being generous, tender-hearted and forgiving...which is to say, loving like Christ. In the words of the recently retired Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, "A well-functioning Christian community is going to be one in which everyone is working steadily to release the gifts of others...This is what the church really is." Recognizing and releasing each other's gifts. I like that.

But it doesn't just happen. The profound teaching of Paul in Ephesians really doesn't mean much until it becomes flesh, until it becomes the embodied practice of our community. It just might be that the hardest spiritual work in the world is to love your neighbor as yourself.

Barbara Brown Taylor describes this important spiritual work with these words: "The spiritual practice of loving the other as yourself requires no special setting, no personal trainer, no expensive equipment. The next time you go to the grocery store, try engaging the cashier. You do not have to invite her home for lunch or anything, but take a look at her face while she is trying to find 'arugula' on her laminated list of produce. Here is someone who exists even when she is not ringing up your groceries. She is someone's daughter, maybe someone's mother as well. She has a home she returns to when she hangs up her store apron, a kitchen that smells of last night's supper, a bed where she occasionally lies awake at night wrestling with her own demons and angels. Do not go too far with this or you risk turning her into a character in your own novel...It is enough for you to acknowledge her when she hands you your change.

" 'You saved eleven dollars and six cents by shopping at Safeway today,' she says, looking right at you. All that is required of you is to look back. Just meet her eyes for a moment when you say, 'Thanks.' Sometimes that is all another person needs to know that she has been seen – not the cashier, but the person – but even if she does not seem to notice, the encounter has occurred. You noticed, and because you did, neither of you will ever quite be the same again."

That's what we can do for each other...we can notice, we can confer being and value, we can dare to believe, as you have heard me say before, that we are one another's best bets for becoming fully human, as we keep each other, no matter what our age or circumstance, in focus as persons, as individuals of value and worth for their own sakes, not as problems or functionaries or case studies, but as human beings.

That really is the heart of our faith: "Be kind to one another, tender-hearted...living in love as Christ loved you." The regard for others as persons of worth, with their own treasures to present, arises from the experience of begin so regarded ourselves. We are free to love because we have been loved. "Live in love as Christ loved you."

And we can do that, by God's grace we will do that...lift each other up, hold and support each other and be the community where that "love divine, all loves excelling," takes on flesh and bone, where God's love becomes specific and concrete and immediate, where person meets person and hand reaches out to hand in a network of caring. And when we are such a community, not only do we support each other, but we also become a catalyst for God in the world, reaching out beyond these walls to comfort and support and heal, being generous, tender-hearted, forgiving and loving the world as Christ loved it, helping the whole creation to claim its membership in the one Great Family of God's Own Heart.