

Let the children come

A sermon preached by the Rev'd Robert Bruce Edson in St. John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts, on February 8, 2009, the Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany.

Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not be faint. Isaiah 40:31

We are in the midst of the church's season of Epiphany. An epiphany is a sudden realization, a showing forth, an experience of being enlightened. It is in this season of Epiphany that the scriptures reveal to us the extraordinary nature of Christ. Because he is no ordinary person, we are no ordinary people. He is God's son and we are God's people. He invites us to immerse ourselves in his mission fully and willingly. His call to the disciples is our call to full participation and service. This means full commitment and not just lip service.

Jesus tells us that we must enter his realm with child like trust. In first century Palestine, children were among the least of people. They were marginalized with no status at all. They were neither seen nor heard and never had a place in the temple worship. When the disciples tell the children to go away, Jesus rebukes them and asks them to let the children come to him and laid hands on them in blessing.

My own memory as a child is that going to church meant not being in church. I wondered what was going on with the grown ups that we weren't supposed to know or wouldn't understand. On the rare occasion when we were allowed in the church, we were not allowed to receive communion until we were confirmed. It said so in the Prayer Book. We weren't even allowed to go to the altar for a blessing and had to stay behind in the pew while the rest of the family went forward to receive communion. Only when I was confirmed was I then a full member of the church and only then could receive communion.

I'm glad to say that all that has changed. For the past forty years the church has encouraged young children not yet confirmed to receive communion. We now understand that baptism is full membership in the church and that all baptized members are welcome to receive the sacrament. And this means everyone.

It is characteristic of a child friendly intergenerational parish such as this that children are not just tolerated, but welcomed. There are occasions such as concerts and weddings and funerals when it may not be appropriate for small children to attend, but at the Sunday Eucharist it is inappropriate to keep them away. To teach that all baptized children are full members and then bar them from receiving the sacrament sends a very wrong message.

I know that some of you still hold your children back from receiving communion and I'm not sure why. The Episcopal Church does not have a rite of first communion as in the Roman Catholic tradition. You may think that they are not old enough to understand, but the Eucharist is not a matter of the intellect. Children understand as much as we do about the meaning of the Eucharist. Talk with your child about it. He or she probably knows that receiving the bread and wine is how we remember Jesus. It is what he asked us to do in remembrance of him. That's all they need to know and that's all the rest of us really know. It is an act of thanksgiving to God and an offering of our selves in return for God's service. It is important to get beyond the literalness of

the meaning of the bread and wine to remember Christ's whole person, his life, his message of love, his sacrifice and triumph.

From my point of view as a priest on my side of the altar rail, there is nothing more joyful and holy than the expression of delight on the face of young children as they receive communion along with their family. It's all about inclusion and children know when they are excluded.

Here are a few important points to remember regarding children in church. They are, first of all, an essential part of our intergenerational faith community. We all bear the responsibility of bringing them up to know the full nature of Christ. If we welcome them in a nurturing environment they will thrive and grow spiritually.

Children need to be trained not just to sit and draw and be quiet but to take part in the liturgy as a shared experience with the whole family. Help them find their place in both the Prayer Book and Hymnal. Encourage their participation. Answer their questions during church; it's less disruptive than shushing them up. The more they become familiar with church and feel accepted, the better behaved they are. Instead of being concerned that they are disturbing others, encourage their participation. Children quiet down as they become accustomed to being in church and feeling accepted and affirmed. As one mother once told me, I had to listen to their children, now they can listen to mine! In any case, children learn by example—our example.

It is my conviction that we tend to underestimate a child's ability to comprehend spiritual matters. We smile at their innocence when they don't quite get it right, but other times we are humbled to find that they are right on the mark in their understanding.

The tendency is to keep things from children because we think they won't understand or will be confused. I believe it is best for them to have their questions answered and better from their parents than someone else. Children begin at an early age to ask questions of a spiritual nature. They ask where God comes from, how God can hear all the prayers of everyone, if there is room for everyone in heaven and most importantly, if their pet is going to heaven. When questions of a religious nature are asked, it is the finite human mind inquiring about the nature of the infinite. Children want short but honest answers to their questions. It is an honest answer to say that you don't know. Never try to bluff it; they deserve nothing less honesty and sincerity.

Jesus tells us that we must enter his realm as a trusting child. It is with that very trust that children are open and receptive to learn about what is right, good loving and true. They see and hear enough about evil, hatred and violence in the world. We never stop being parents. I am spending time now listening to my adult daughter dealing with the specter of losing her job in this shrinking economy.

Our children are only on loan to us for a few vital years and we must do our best to enable them to grow spiritually. It is our job as parents to see that young people are healthy and that they are prepared emotionally, intellectually and spiritually to be on their own as God's own.