

## LOOK TO THE CHILDREN

*A sermon preached by the Rev. Terence L. Elsberry, Rector, at St. Matthew's Church, Bedford, New York, on the Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 20, 2009.*

### I

Jesus has been waiting for just the right moment. He's been waiting for the right time to give His disciples the most important message of all He has to teach them. He chooses now as the time to give them the most important fact of what we believe as Christians.

"Before long," He tells His disciples, "I'm going to be killed. But there's going to be a miracle. Three days later, I'm going to rise again."

And how do His disciples react to this cataclysmic news? "No, Lord, not die. Not you. Let it never be. What do you mean die and come back to life? ... I don't understand. When? How? What can this mean? No one can kill you; you're the King."

That's what the disciples said, right?

Wrong. Jesus' 12 chief followers were so self-absorbed they didn't hear a word Jesus said. In fact, they were too busy arguing about what cabinet positions they'd occupy when Jesus became head of the universe.

### II

Good thing I'm not Jesus. I'd probably have turned my back on those unimaginative, insensitive, self-obsessed, self-occupied ingrates and headed down the road looking for a whole new bunch of disciples.

But Jesus being Jesus, He takes an entirely different tack. He doesn't bawl them out. He builds them up. He doesn't chastise them. He affirms them. He takes their embarrassing blunder and turns it into a teaching opportunity.

He says, "Come here, guys."

He sits them down. He says, "You want to be first. But there's a spiritual principle here. In God's kingdom, whoever wants to be first must be last."

Then He takes a little child by the hand. He says, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me... and also welcomes the Father God Himself."

We didn't read it this morning. But we know Jesus also goes on to say that the one way we ensure ourselves of a place in God's kingdom is by being like a child ourselves. By remaining childlike. Not childish but childlike.

I wonder what would happen if in the midst of Congress' wrangling about various issues someone would take a little child, stand the little tyke up front for all to see and ask the question: "What is best for the future of this child?"

That's what we really want, isn't it? We want the best for our children. The love we have for our children is one of the great universal ties that bind us as human beings, regardless of race, creed, nationality or religion.

And when we look at our children – these precious new humans – we see two things today. We see a fresh canvas, clay to be moulded. We see all that we can teach them. But we also see what they can teach us.

It's our obligation, our responsibility and our joy to teach them. We send them to school to learn the accrued knowledge of the ages. We teach them manners (hopefully!) and other life skills so they can grow up and be productive and successful citizens in the unpredictable world they will one day inherit. The wise among us bring them here to Church School. We educate them in the faith that undergirds our Western civilization. We introduce them to the God who created them and died for them and who loves them now and will love them through all eternity. "Jesus loves me this I know."

If that were all they learned here – but learned it in such a way that all their futures are built on that glorious affirmation and anchored securely in it, it would be enough.

And, hopefully, we teach them head knowledge and heart knowledge and life knowledge in such a way that we don't merely turn out little products of our own self-fulfillment fantasies but rather free them to, through the process of all these educations, help them become the life-enjoying, life-affirming joy-filled, singular human treasures God had in mind when He created them.

Yes, we look to our children today, and we consider the best possible ways we can educate them to become the best selves they can become.

I read several books this summer. The one that impressed me most is a book entitled "Mindset." It was written by Carol Dweck, Ph.D. Regarded as one of the world's leading researchers in the fields of personality, social psychology, and developmental psychology, she has taught psychology at Columbia and is now a professor of psychology at Stanford University.

Dr. Dweck's premise in this book, that we all, basically, subscribe to one of two mindsets: We have a fixed mindset or we have what she calls a growth mindset.

There are two kinds of people: those who believe intelligence, personality, talents and abilities are fixed, versus those who believe our intelligence, personality, talents and abilities can change, evolve, develop by our diligence and perseverance.

A belief that our basic qualities are carved in stone leads to a whole host of confirming, repressing, thoughts and actions. Whereas a belief that our qualities can be cultivated leads to a whole host of expanding, and life-enhancing thoughts and actions. We have the choice of walking one of two very different roads of life.

With the growth mindset, Dr. Dweck says we motivate our children. She says we teach them what all great parents, teachers, CEOs and athletes already know. Which is that not a fixed but a growth mindset can create in our children a love of learning and a resilience that forms the basis for accomplishment in every area of life.

Parents, Dr. Dweck says, should watch the messages they give their children. Don't give them messages that say, "Your traits are fixed and permanent, and I'm judging you accordingly. Better to give our kids messages that say: "You're an evolving changing, developing person and I'm here to help you in that process."

And those of us without children at home don't need to think none of this applies to us. These growth mindset approaches to life can work for us too, at any age.

What would happen if you considered yourself – at whatever age – not fixed, not set, not now the person you are and will always be but what if you saw yourself as someone in process, open to change, seeing opportunity in every moment of every day.

My dad was like that. Sometimes when the phone rings, especially at home in the evening, I cringe. Maybe another telemarketer. Not my dad. Every time the phone rang, he would cry: "Golden opportunity." And he'd grab that phone as if it were a direction connection to the Holy Grail.

Considering the growth mindset principles Dr. Dweck sets out in her book reminds me of two things. These principles align with my understanding of how God wants us to be all the years of our lives. And they align with the reasons why He told the disciples that being childlike are the traits that grant us entrance into God's kingdom.

For one thing, Dr. Dweck and our Lord both call us to do these things:

- Stay open to new opportunities.
- Build your life on hope.
- Give your all to becoming the best person you can be.
- Never let someone else make you feel diminished.
- Remember we all fail. But failure doesn't define you; you were created in the image of God.
- Seek challenge.
- Look for the joy in every day.
- And, finally, never, ever wish you were someone else. But be grateful for the person you are, and the person you are becoming.

## III

Nancy and I spent Friday babysitting three of our grandchildren, ages 9, 6 and 3. And all the time we were playing with them and running errands with them and generally hanging out with these three precious gifts of God, this sermon was buzzing in the back of my mind. This sermon and the need to get it written before I left to do a wedding rehearsal. I became, frankly, pretty wired and uptight. Time was running out. How could I find the time to get the sermon down on paper? Saturday was packed full. I was getting more and more tense.

Then I looked at the three of them, caught in the sheer delight of being alive in the world on a spectacularly beautiful, sun-drenched and breezy September day. I saw their fresh, happy spirits, each so distinct, each such a marvelous expression of our Lord's handiwork, seeing my beloved little trio with the eyes of love, I relaxed. Of course, Look to the children.

I rejoiced. Look at what these three are here to teach me about living not with anxiety for the future but joy in the moment.

Look to the children and learn.

Look to the children and be at peace.

Look to the children and see the kingdom of God.