

On Children

-by *Kahlil Gibran*

Your children are not your children.
They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself.
They come through you but not from you,
And though they are with you yet they belong not to you.
You may give them your love but not your thoughts,
For they have their own thoughts.

You may house their bodies but not their souls,
For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow,
which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams.
You may strive to be like them,
but seek not to make them like you.

For life goes not backward nor tarries with yesterday.

You are the bows from which your children
as living arrows are sent forth.
The archer sees the mark upon the path of the infinite,
and He bends you with His might
that His arrows may go swift and far.
Let your bending in the archer's hand be for gladness;
For even as He loves the arrow that flies,
so He loves also the bow that is stable.

In this beautiful poem, written and published by Kahlil Gibran in 1923, we are reminded of the precious, fragile, perplexing and at times highly complicated nature of what it means to have children. In this issue of *The Journey* we are focusing on “our” children.

Whether or not you are literally a parent, we as a community have been entrusted with loving, celebrating and supporting the children and youth that travel with us. We are committed to them and need reminders from time to time, of how to be more inclusive and relevant so as they grow up they know we see, respect and adore them as vibrant and valuable members of our community.

The Church for this generation of youth is a very different place than for previous generations. I have seen two very big differences over the past decade or so. First, there are significantly fewer students in our Sunday morning classes- often are the Sundays when we have as many teachers in our classrooms as we do youth. Second, Sunday itself is no longer a day of univocal focus for families. Today we are competing with Sunday schedules that often include: organized sports, social events, blended and complicated family arrangements, and work schedules of parents that don't always allow for regular Sunday participation. In and of itself this is not necessarily bad news. These realities are a part of our lives- lives still precious and holy, wrapped in the love of a God who never leaves us-whether we are in church or not. At the same time, these realities present us with opportunities to think through how and when and why we gather, and the ways we facilitate or hinder full participation in our common life.

I believe the time has come for us to have a season of discernment about “Sunday School.” The Sunday school movement began in Britain in the 1780s. The Industrial Revolution had resulted in many children spending Monday through Saturday working in factories. Christian philanthropists wanted to find a way to educate these otherwise illiterate children and Sunday was the one day that presented itself as a time for actual education. From this desire to fill an educational void Sunday School was born.

Up until the mid 1950s this model served the church well as it adapted itself away from the work of needing to be the primary educational source for children into a crucible for actual catechetical (religious teaching) and formational purposes. It also evolved as an important venue for enculturation into the liturgical and spiritual life of the church. Sunday school was the hub, the place for children and families to connect, find support, learn about the faith community, engage in social events and build up the next generation of church members and leaders. It was a good model and it served not only a clear and necessary purpose, it worked and worked well for many years.

Today, in 2014, we find ourselves navigating a different landscape and looking out at a very different horizon. In a recent Gallup poll, 95% of Americans polled claimed that they still believe in God, but have simply stopped going to church. Of those born since 1980, 25% describe themselves as having “no religious affiliation.” Polls indicate that less than half of American Christians can name the four gospels, only a third know the Sermon on the Mount is found in Matthew and two-thirds of those surveyed believe the saying “God helps those who help themselves” comes from the Bible (it does not). The point here is not to bemoan this lack of knowledge, but rather to elucidate the need to re-examine our current context. We can no longer make assumptions about the centrality or even relevancy of church in the lives of those around us. And in terms of families with children, it seems imperative that we take time to listen and discern how best to create an atmosphere and a culture that is engaging, accessible and meaningful against the backdrop of the rest of their lives.

What does all this mean for St. John’s going forward? While the answer is not yet in sight, I believe we have reached the launching pad for a time of conversation. We are only limited by our own imaginations and our ability to trust God and each other through a process seeking out next steps together. We are ready to ask some big questions including:

Questions about current format:

- Should we continue to offer Sunday School classes by age groups?
- If we do, is 10:10-10:50 the best time for families?
- Should we offer something for parents during this time?

New program/format ideas & questions:

- Should we think about a more family-oriented, all-inclusive, multi-generational program instead of traditional Sunday School from 10:10-10:50?
- Would families participate in a family-based program offered in the Parish Hall each week?
- What is most important to families on Sundays?
- How can we better serve, include and engage multiple generations?

Between now and next September we will be praying, talking, thinking, dreaming and planning a path forward. We may be ready to introduce a new structure by September, or we may need more time to plan next steps; it all depends on our collective input and willingness to discover what lies ahead. This is a conversation that will be richer and more vibrant if we can find ways to include many voices. To begin, we have planned two ways for the community to be involved in this process:

- 1.) **Sunday School Forum, Sunday May 4, 10:10-10:50am:** Come join us in the Parish Hall for a facilitated conversation where ideas will be shared and questions can be asked.
- 2.) **Sunday School on-line survey to be sent in April** with questions and opportunities to share ideas.

I hope that we are bold in this conversation and risk moving out of our comfort zones in order to find new ways to celebrate and support the youngest in our midst and those that have not yet discovered our corner of heaven on earth. May we together, with God's help be beautiful *bows from which our children as living arrows are sent forth* in the name of the One who loved us first.

You are loved.

Priest Lisa