

Mark 10:13-16 (Contemporary English Version)

¹³Some people brought their children to Jesus so that he could bless them by placing his hands on them. But his disciples told the people to stop bothering him.

¹⁴When Jesus saw this, he became angry and said, "Let the children come to me! Don't try to stop them. People who are like these little children belong to the kingdom of God. ¹⁵I promise you that you cannot get into God's kingdom, unless you accept it the way a child does." ¹⁶Then Jesus took the children in his arms and blessed them by placing his hands on them. **Through The Eyes of Children**

For you, little one, the Spirit of God moved over the waters at creation, and the Lord God made covenants with God's people.

It was for you that the Word of God became flesh and lived among us, full of grace and truth.

For you, [name], Jesus Christ suffered death crying out at the end, "It is finished!"

For you Christ triumphed over death, rose in newness of life, and ascended to rule over all.

All of this was done for you, little one, though you do not know any of this yet.

But we will continue to tell you this good news until it becomes your own.

And so the promise of the gospel is fulfilled: "We love because God first loved us."

These words come from what may be my favorite liturgy – a This is a variation of the French Reformed Church Baptismal Liturgy. Words said to a child as he is baptized – words that promise that we, as the family of Christ adopting her will teach her the Good news of the Gospel until an age when he stands and claims it for himself. These are the words of our salvation - - *for you* – small one, for you, the one that makes your parents crazy when you cry and cry because you do not have language yet to say "I'm tired, put me to bed." These words are for the children who stand in children's choirs and sing, who come on Wednesday nights, and then come to Youth group. These words are for those who may never be brought to churchdarken a church's doorstep again. - For you – God became human and lived among us: , for you, Christ triumphed over the grave and ascended into heaven. When you are small, the enormitiesenormity of these words do not have much meaning. They do not make much sense - -Jesus did what for me? Adult theologians still struggle over it. And yet, when we baptize our childena child, we tell themhim or her that we claim themher in the faith of one who has done all of that for us, and we promise that we will tell them, over and over again until they can claim it for themselves.

"Read it again, please?" How many times do we want to experience our favorite stories over and over again? It may be a book we have read so many times the pages fall out, a movie we have seen so many times we have it memorized, or a story we can tell by heart. "Tell it again, please?" Those were the words that I least expected to hear from a group of girls gathered around the table in Fellowship Hall on a Wednesday night as we ate tacos and talked about Samuel and Eli. In preparation for today's service and sermon, I spoke with some of the children of our congregation about how they saw God in today's Old Testament reading. We had already read the story once and

talked about it, and they wanted to hear it again. “But we will continue to tell you this news until you can claim it for your own...” And so, I told it to them again –almost as you saw it acted out this morning, even though my taco was getting cold and my brownie looked so good.... And the girls, well, they wanted to be the voice of God. Several small voices called out “Samuel, Samuel” at just the right time. We finished the story, and they asked for And then it a third was time – I think because they wanted to try out different voices for God. What would God sound like calling Samuel in the voice of a lion or a chimpanzee? We never found out; it was time for Jam for Kids Jam and BibleMax and so off they ran were running to see what the next thing.

A week later I was with a group of boys - -this time they were in middle and high school and the meal was fried chicken and fried okra. They were humoring me, offering saying the right answers to my questions about Samuel and Eli and what they saw and heard in the text things – until I called them on it. “Are you saying that because I’m the Pastor and you think you that is the answer you have to give or because it’s really what you think?” And with that question there was a whole different kind of conversation about Samuel and Eli and God. This was a conversation that went deeper than the telling and retelling of a story. It was about what the world looks like, just a little bit, through the eyes of middle school boys. In this conversation, the story was told and retold – but in their own words. They are in the process of claiming their faith as their own. Some have made their public confession, some soon will. They are putting language around the incomprehensible love of Jesus Christ, beginning to understand what that means for them. “All this was done for you, little one, though you do not know any of this yet. But we will continue to tell you the good news until it becomes your own.”

What these two seemingly different meals had in common, besides the location, was that the children were being listened to, intently, about what they had to say about God. It was being written down and taken very, very seriously. I made each table 2 promises when I sat down with them. First I promised them that there were no wrong answers to the questions I was asking, and second that I was not going to stand up in the pulpit and identify what anyone said by name. I told the children we were writing a sermon about Samuel and Eli, and indeed we did. Yes, someone was telling and retelling them their story, but then, and now, they got to say what they really thought about it. For you see, once you are adopted into the family of God, you are invited to be one of the story-tellers too. Just as our children have chores and jobs and ways they contribute to our lives at home, they are also a part of our church family. The focus for today’s Children’s Sabbath is to see God through their eyes. To see what they hear God telling us as a church about the story of Samuel and Eli.

Every child who encountered this text identified with Samuel. If the listener was 4, then so was Samuel. If the listener was 6, then so was Samuel. If the listener was in middle school then so was Samuel. Their hair color and eye color all matched - -our children saw themselves as in the child in this story. They identified most closely with Samuel. Samuel who had been sent away to boarding school at the church. Samuel, who slept in the sanctuary of the church, which was probably pretty lonely. For you see, Samuel may have been the only child there. And the church was HUGE – like a cathedral. In their minds eyes, it was like sleeping inside of a giant lighthouse or the inside of the Empire State Building at night after all the lights are turned off. It echoed. It was lonely. Samuel was scared. He wanted his mom and dad. And one night, he heard a voice call out to him. He did not know who it was, but he knew that his Pastor, Eli, would tell him. God kept calling Samuel and Samuel kept running to Eli. The voice sounded familiar to Samuel, but he had not heard it that many

times – he did not know who it was for sure. But he knew, without a doubt that Eli would help him. And Eli eventually believed Samuel, and told him to listen for the voice of God, and answer it.

“Samuel, Samuel...” God called out in the night to Samuel, and Samuel kept running another direction. Samuel was not sure of what he heard, and how true is that for us sometimes? God tries to speak to us, but we are not sure it is God. Sometimes when God speaks to us, we don’t know what God is telling us, or where the voice comes from. With Samuel, when God calls, he thought it was Eli – he was not listening closely enough, not paying enough attention to what he was hearing. And yet God kept calling Samuel. God called and called and called. “Samuel, Samuel.” “Samuel, Samuel.” Over and over again. Samuel kept trying to answer, moving in the wrong direction until someone pointed him in the right direction and helped him hear the voice for what it was. God called until someone answered. For God does not give up calling us until we answer.

“Read it again, please?” How many times have we heard the story? I know it by heart, and yet, through the eyes of our children saw something new. Your children told me that when our lives get hectic we sometimes cannot always listen to God because we are too busy listening to everything else. Around the table that night, middle-schoolers spoke of distracted and chaotic lives, of being caught up in the day to day and wanting to hear God. They spoke of rushing from place to place, and being too distracted to have the time to listen. How busy are our children are that these terms are parts of their vocabularies and they can talk about it with a true sense of meaning? What is God trying to show us through the eyes of our little, and not so little, ones? Perhaps they do need a Sabbath?

Jesus told his disciples that the little children were to be allowed to come close to him, to experience him, to be blessed by him, and to learn from him. ¹³*Some people brought their children to Jesus so that he could bless them by placing his hands on them. But his disciples told the people to stop bothering him.*

¹⁴*When Jesus saw this, he became angry and said, "Let the children come to me! Don't try to stop them. People who are like these little children belong to the kingdom of God. ¹⁵I promise you that you cannot get into God's kingdom, unless you accept it the way a child does." ¹⁶Then Jesus took the children in his arms and blessed them by placing his hands on them.*

To be honest with you, I’m not sure any of us really knew what to expect when we started planning worship for today. Ted saw Children’s Sabbath Sunday on the Presbyterian Planning Calendar, and was intrigued by the idea of a Sunday to celebrate Children. With the help of Ellen and Rick and all of our other staff and volunteers, the worship for today began to come together. Today’s worship service is led by our children, but is the work of our whole church, and I thank all of you who helped us make it happen. Today, in our church, we gather to celebrate the gifts our children share with us. We come to see them participate as our worship leaders for this special day. By the time today is finished, we will have added two brothers and a sister to the family of Christ through the sacrament of Baptism. We worship seeing God through the eyes of our children today.

We didn't know what to expect, but we knew what we were striving for - -a day to say to the children of our congregation that you are important and you have important things to say to us about God. When we baptize, we make someone a part of God's family. When our children participate in worship, they are not performing for applause or adoration. They are helping us experience the Word of God using their particular gifts and talents - -just as the Choir does when they sing, or Ted and I do when we preach, or Rick does when he sings and Terry does when he plays the organ. Our children are just as much a part of the body of Christ as we are, and we are called to listen to them. Jesus told his disciples to let the children come to him, to let the children come and experience him. He wanted children to experience his work and to see who he was and what he was about. And Jesus tells his disciples that they cannot get into the Kingdom of heaven unless they experience it the way the children do.

Our celebration today is one for and about our children. It is one of thanksgiving - -we give thanks to God for the activity of our children. So often we hear that the children are the *future* of the church. After being part of our service today, we make the claim that our children are just as much a part of the present of the church as any adult who is here. Our children have just as many things to tell us about God and Jesus as we have to say to them. They have things to say to us, good news to tell us until it becomes our own too. A sampling of what the children of our congregation have remindedtaught me this in the last month or so:

First, theyThey really do hear what we are teaching - -they hear the stories we teach and re-teach. They are indeed listening to us proclaim the good news over and over again, and are making it their own.

SecondYet, they live in a world of uncertainty, a world where in Middle School asking questions or being wrong or uncertain can lead you to being labeled as "dorky" or "uncool" - and while we, as adults tell them that is does may not think these things matter, when you are in Middle School, it as adults, they still really does, and we needmatter to pay attention to that and not brush it aside. them.

But third, our Our church is a place where they know that they can come and ask questions - - where it is OK to ask the big questions about faith and life, for just as Samuel knew Eli would be there when he needed him, our children know that we, as a church, will be here for them. We will patiently re-tell them the stories. We will help them to discern which voices are God's and which are not. We will wait with them throughout their entire lives as they in turn wait for those who follow.

For even as we age, we tell and retell each other our stories, we continue to tell each other the good news to those who may not be able to claim it - until it once again becomes their own. And sometimes, it is indeed through the eyes of our children that we see God at God's clearest, and through the voices of our children that we hear God at God's loudest, speaking to and loving us all. Thanks be to God. Amen.....