

Reclaiming Our Birthright ~ Growing into the Full Stature of Christ

Brenda and Ian Nestegaard Paul write their church...

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Where are the children? How often is this question asked on a Sunday morn? Where are the energy, the giggles, the high-pitched voices, the questions, the shushing? Where are the children? Often they are found in the Sunday School, at least those who are little to around grade six. And then, often they are not found at all.

Where are the children? How easy it is to blame, to point fingers. But who is there to blame but ourselves, the ones who make the decisions of when to teach and when to worship? By our actions, we have taught our children they do not belong in worship! This is what we imply when Sunday School is scheduled at the same time as the rest of the community—the adult community—gathers for worship!

A conversation was overheard between two youngsters. They heard the sounds of singing and preaching upstairs, in the nave, and one said to the other, “What do they do up there?” Her companion responded, “I don’t know. But there are no kids, so I want no part of it.”

Where are the children? Why have we fallen into this pattern of taking our children out of our worship services and sending them off to Sunday school? Many reasons are given, (time, the most common), none of which have much to do with the faith development of the child. However, being an active participant in, and learning about, worship is at least as important as what is taught in Sunday school. Consider what worship is and does.

Each time we gather we are shaped, both as individuals and as a community, by our worship. In worship we are drawn into communion with Christ and with each other. We encounter God’s Word for our lives and hear that our sins are forgiven. We are strengthened for this life by the bread and wine and reminded that we never walk this path alone. We are rejuvenated for life in God’s service beyond the church walls. How can we, as responsible and caring members of the body of Christ, deny this to our children? Is this not a pattern for living that children need to experience just as regularly as adults do? If our worship experience is important for us as adults, why would it not be just as important for our children? They need to participate in worship during their formative years so they too may be shaped by it! This is part of what we promise when our children are baptized.

“You should therefore, faithfully bring them to the services of God’s house, and teach them the Lord’s Prayer, the Creed and the Ten Commandments. As they grow in years, you should place in their hands the Holy Scriptures and provide for their instruction in the Christian faith, that, living in the covenant of their Baptism and in communion with the Church, they may lead godly lives until the day of Jesus Christ.” (*Holy Baptism, Lutheran Book of Worship, p. 121*)

What are we doing, as faith communities, when we make it difficult for our parents, godparents, mentors and others to fulfill their promises on behalf of their children, and in particular, the promise to “faithfully bring them to the services of God’s house?” What are we inculcating in its stead? Too often, by ensuring their absence, we are saying to our children that attending “the services of God’s house” is not really all *that* important. And if they do not feel they have a place in worship as *children*, the likelihood is that they will not feel they have a place as *adults*.

However, when we make room for our children to become integral participants in the worship experience; when we encourage them to serve as acolytes, readers, greeters, gift bearers, musicians, cantors and worshipers; when we insist there is nothing more important than their presence in worship; then our children come to feel they truly belong.

We claim that gathering together to worship is the central act of the Christian faith community. If we want our children to believe that this community is of primary importance to their well-being, then they need to be there to experience it, to grow in it, and to come to need it.

This is not to say that Sunday School and Christian education programs are unimportant. Just the opposite! Where else do we find the opportunity, at any age, to hear and grapple with the stories of our faith, to ask questions, to grow in our understanding of the Scriptures and God? But we need to be honest: If Sunday School and Christian education are so important, why do so few adults make ongoing learning a priority in their own lives?

“Then Jesus took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, ‘Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.’” (*Mark 9:36-37*)

When we read the gospels we often find children among Jesus and the disciples. It is important to note that Jesus *taught* the adults; he *enjoyed*—and encouraged!—the presence of the children. Learning about the faith *is* important and we, as mature members of the family of God, need to model its importance in our lives for the sake of our children. “Practice What You Preach!” “Actions Speak Louder than Words.” “Monkey see. Monkey do.” They may be tired clichés yet they still pack a punch. The children of today look for authenticity and integrity as never before. They look to us for guidance. Do we practice what we say we believe?

When children regularly attend worship they are learning by way of one of the most effective teaching methods in existence. They are learning by example and experience. There is no better teacher. When children see their parents and elders engaged in Bible and faith studies, they are learning by example and experience. Again, there is no better teacher.

God help us to be the models of faithful living we are called to be. God help us to walk this road of faith, adults and children *together*.

The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you all.

Brenda and Ian.



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Supplemental Resources

1. The ELCIC has published a terrific collection of materials related to welcoming children in the worshipping community. The material is contained on a dedicated page at Lift Up Your Hearts, the ELCIC’s worship and spirituality website. The full address is <<http://www.worship.ca/children.html>>. Look for helpful essays and a number of links to useful and encouraging ecumenical web sites.

2. *Seasons of the Spirit* <<http://www.spiritseasons.com/>> is a newly created, lectionary-based, ecumenical and international church school curriculum, successor to the acclaimed *Whole People of God*. *Seasons* takes careful account of the relationship between worship, learning and service, in the matter of Christian discipleship.