

Turning Our Hearts to Each Other

November 18, 2007

(Pentecost 25 - Year C)

Malachi 3:13-4:2a,5-6

St. Alban's Episcopal Church, Waco, Texas

I grew up at Holy Spirit Episcopal Church in west Houston.

When I was a kid, we had two different youth groups: one was for the senior high kids, called EYC.

The other was for the junior high kids, called JEYC.

When I was in junior high, I went to JEYC Sunday school almost every Sunday, which was led by volunteer adult sponsors.

Nowadays, experts in youth ministry tell us that adults who work with youth need to be cool and hip and know how to speak the language of teenagers.

However, when I was in JEYC, our Sunday school class was taught by Mrs. Farrell and Dr. Greer.

Dr. Greer was probably in his late 50s.

However, at the time, I thought that he was a really old man.

Dr. Greer was completely bald and I was never quite sure what he was a doctor of.

But he was a wise man who liked to laugh a lot and who had a house in New Braunfels that we would go to on retreats.

My other Sunday school teacher in JEYC was Mrs. Farrell.

Mrs. Farrell was probably in her late 40s.

She always sat in a wheelchair - I never did see her stand up.

Over and over, we would ask her to tell us the story of how she ended up in a wheelchair.

And she would tell us about how when she was a younger woman, she was playing volleyball at a picnic, and suddenly collapsed.

She was diagnosed, as an adult, with muscular dystrophy and she never did walk again.

Soon after she was confined to a wheelchair, her husband divorced her, leaving her to raise their two children by herself.

Yet, Mrs. Farrell never said a bad word about anyone. She was probably the first person I can remember who taught me that the Christian life embraces suffering.

As awkward junior high kids, I can remember sitting cross-legged on the cold floor, sitting at the feet of Mrs. Farrell, listening to her tell us the old stories of our faith from her wheelchair.

I can remember Dr. Greer adding his words of wisdom into the conversation and laughing, with a deep-bellied laugh that made us want to laugh, too.

Can't you tell from my detailed descriptions of Dr. Greer and Mrs. Farrell, even 30 years later, that they made a huge impact on my life?

If someone were to look into that Sunday school classroom, there is no way that they would suspect that a woman in a wheelchair and bald old doctor could relate to teenaged kids.

They were not cool or hip or relevant to the youth culture of those youthful 1970s.

Yet, in that Sunday school classroom,
God turned the hearts of the adults to the children,
And God turned the hearts of the children to the adults.

In today's reading from Malachi, we hear the very last words of the Hebrew Scriptures, the scriptures that we call the Old Testament.

In these last words to us, years before the advent of John the Baptist and his cousin, Jesus, we hear the visionary word of the Lord proclaim: "Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes.

He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the hearts of the children to their parents."

These Old Testament prophecies give us a vision, a sneak-preview, of what the kingdom of God looks like.

And looking at this passage through a New Testament lens, we can see that the prophet Elijah is actually John the Baptist, who preaches a message of turning around, of repentance, of preparing the way for

Jesus.

John the Baptist's voice cries out in the wilderness, ushering in the kingdom of God.

John the Baptist's voice turns the hearts of the parents to the children and the hearts of the children to the parents.

The kingdom of God that John the Baptist announces and that Jesus brings in by his death and resurrection is a kingdom where children and parents and grandparents and young adults and singles and senior citizens and babies are not separated out into youth groups and to nurseries and to guilds and to age appropriate sub-groups.

The kingdom of God is a multi-generational reality, where God turns the hearts of the adults to the children,

And God turns the hearts of the children to the adults.

Today, 3 boys are entering into this multi-generational reality of the kingdom of God, as we baptize Jack Bumgardner, Sean Bumgardner and Spencer Williams.

We will promise, all of us, whether we are 45 years old or 95 or 25, we will all promise to support these 3 boys in their life in Christ.

We will promise, all of us, that we will turn our hearts to these children as God is turning the hearts of these children to us.

We will promise, once again, to be a community that welcomes all ages, a family of God welcoming everyone home.

For the Church is one of the very few places left where we can experience a multi-generational family.

Decades ago, it was not unusual to have 3 or more generations living together under one roof.

But now that adult children live far away from their childhood home, families of all ages do not live together like they used to.

The Church has now become one of the last places left where toddlers and teenagers and people who use canes and walkers can be one family and live together in community.

We promise to be this kind of multi-generational family at every

Baptism, as we baptize new members into our family of faith.
And we must live into these promises, by turning our hearts to the children.

In the early part of this next year, I will ask all of the adults in this church to turn our hearts, in a new way, to our young people.
I will ask us to prayerfully consider a new way of doing youth ministry here at St. Alban's, using a program called Journey to Adulthood.

Journey to Adulthood started in 1984 at St. Philip's Episcopal Church in Durham, North Carolina, and is now used in over 1,500 churches.

Journey to Adulthood is a complete youth ministry program of spiritual formation for 6th through 12th grades.

It uses Bible study, prayer, rites of passage, outreach ministries, pilgrimages to distant places and both serious and playful activities to underscore its 2 core principles:

First, that manhood and womanhood are free gifts from God.

Second, that adulthood must be earned.

Journey to Adulthood will transform and re-vitalize this entire church, because it does not rely on one charismatic, cool, hip, youth minister.

Journey to Adulthood relies on the commitment of adults like us, adults who are like Dr. Greer and Mrs. Farrell were to me.

Journey to Adulthood will require us to turn our hearts to our young people, and we will be blessed to experience the miracle of having young hearts turned to us.

This a dream, a vision, a sneak-preview, of the future.

However, for today, I have some challenges for us:

If you are younger, then turn your heart to those who are older than you.
Call them on the phone, go visit them, ask them about the greatest challenges they have faced in their life and how they have overcome them.

If you are older, then turn your heart to those who are younger than you.

Send them an email, encourage them to be the person God has created them to be, ask them about their fears of growing up in today's world.

For God's kingdom is filled with the young and the old,
Transformed by the turning of our hearts to each other,
Turning us... into God's family.

AMEN.

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