

A few weeks ago we had a sermon which mentioned how churches have changed, over time, in terms of equipment we use and how we dress. I thought of another way churches have changed—it's how we deal with children.

For most of us my age and older, going to church meant that the children were supposed to be very, very quiet. My mother would let my sister and me fold handkerchiefs in a certain way, to keep us busy and quiet. Yes, that's how long ago it was, ladies had cloth handkerchiefs for church, not just Kleenex!

Then some time in the 1970's, the children's sermon came into being. The first ones I can remember were at a church in Alaska I attended, and the pastor would play his guitar for the children. It was a great way of making the children feel welcome and involved in worship, and also a way of making the ministers seem more approachable, not just guys in black robes, with big scary voices.

Then, what do you know, but I become a minister myself, and I get to do this. And I just love it. And there are theological reasons for having a children's moment, besides psychological and practical ones (like letting kids wiggle a bit).

For one thing, the United Methodist Church is committed to being a people of “Open hearts, open minds, open doors.” That is one of our slogans. That translates, in part, to welcoming everyone—no matter how old or young.

Our bishop has said, and rightly so, that he runs into a lot of churches that say “Oh, our church welcomes young people—as long as they act like old people.” Hey, a kid who acts like an old person is probably coming down with something!

There is also plenty of justification in the Bible for having children in worship, teaching them our faith as they grow. That idea of “letting them decide” about faith once they are already grown, after having a background without any time in church is nonsense. It is just the other way around! The King James version of the verse in Proverbs goes this way: “Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it.”

The Message version is: “Point your kids in the right direction—when they're older they won't be lost.”

After all you parents here, did not wait until your children were grown up to decide about candy for breakfast? Or eating vegetables? Or taking baths, did you?

And, most important of all is the attitude Jesus held about children. The story which we had is in three Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, so it must be pretty important. In this story, parents brought children and babies to Jesus, to have him bless them.

Now, the disciples were not in favor of this. Maybe they were trying to help Jesus because he was sad about the crucifixion coming, or maybe they thought Jesus was tired. Or maybe they felt that the children were a bother. We can't really tell from the stories.

We can tell what Jesus thought—he was most irate at the idea of the disciples trying to shoo away the children.

In the old version of the Bible, the King James version are the beautiful word: “Forbid them not. For to such belong the kingdom of heaven.” I never thought about that before a few minutes ago—that's great, heaven belongs to the children!

A few weeks ago, on a field trip to a Greek Orthodox Church with some youth, the priest there was explaining to us the church and its architecture and all to us. He mentioned this story, and said that maybe children were closer to God than adults anyway—not having been exposed to the ways of the world as long as adults, not already in bad habits and so on. Perhaps to Jesus, the children he met (in person then, and in spirit now) were actually easier for him to deal with than the adults.

I can relate to that. When I was a nurse, one of the reasons I worked in the children's department, the Pediatrics unit, is that for me, kids make much better patients than adults. They are used to grown-ups telling them what to do, they are open to learning something. They are pretty good at cooperation with people who care about them. And, this is not that nice, but I am usually bigger than they are.

Our church, the United Methodist Church, has done well at keeping in the spirit of Jesus' words.

For instance, this is part of our baptismal service for children.

The pastor says:

Members of the household of faith, I commend to your love and care this child,
whom we this day recognize as a member of the family of God.
Will you endeavor so to live
that this child may grow in the knowledge and love of God,
through our Savior Jesus Christ?

This is the one I like the best to us, when a child is baptized. It is so important that the whole church is committed to being a church—a family—a set of good examples to each within its midst. And, by the way, this is a real promise, not just something we say out of habit, or custom!

The other thing I am proud of with our church is that we have done our best to keep up with the needs and the available information. In terms of children, that comes out in ways we address the needs and abilities they have. We provide a staffed nursery so the little ones don't have to be kept silent in worship. We have Sunday School classes for children and youth, so they can learn about faith in a way appropriate to their age levels. We provide crayons and paper and children's books and worship sheets for them during worship, and of course, the children's time which I've already mentioned.

This is wonderful, I think. We need to raise children to know that faith in Jesus is a positive and good and comforting thing! This is an improvement from when I was a kid. It is a big improvement over the Puritan churches, 400 years ago. One of the positions a gentleman could have then was to walk around with a stick to hit children who were wiggling, like swinging their legs. They couldn't help wiggling during the worship services—those services lasted for hours. Those folks would have been horrified at the 14 minute sermons here!

But we are not going back to those ways, or the men with sticks, either!

Another thing the United Methodist Church has done is start the Safe Sanctuaries program. That is our program designed to protect the children in our church from harm—child abuse in any form or manner—sexual, physical, emotional, verbal, or neglectful.

It has not been a **happy** program of course, because it was the United Methodist Church's pro-active response to the lawsuits being filed against certain abusive Roman Catholic priests in the 1990's. We were determined to take steps to prevent harm and reduce risk in our churches.

It hasn't been easy. Christians tend to be optimistic, hopeful, trusting people. That is good, but that also means folks who can be deceived by criminals, particularly criminals out to harm children.

Over the years that this program has been in effect in the churches, there have been comments and denials to beat the band, comments which have had to be argued against. Like

- “Oh, anyone who comes to a church is good.” —Well, not if they come specifically to prey on children, and that does happen.
- “We've known “so and so” for years, he or she is okay.” —Fine, then a bit more training won't hurt.
- I'm not going to work with kids or teach Sunday School, so I don't need this.”—No, if you are going to be in the same **building** as children, you are going to know how to act, and how others are supposed to act and that it is your Christian duty to report harm done to children.
- “Those things didn't happen when I was a kid.” Or “Those things don't happen around here.”—Wanna bet? I can tell you otherwise and so can other people.

It's been hard. Last summer we went through a lot. Right now, splashed all over the news are articles and complaints about a man who lives in Independence, pastors in St. Joseph, and is in big trouble.

We've had to become more vigilant in our protection of children. As part of Safe Sanctuaries, we do background checks on people who are going to work with children. The computer is also a great source of information on criminal cases, registered sex offenders, and the like.

All of this is because we take Jesus seriously, we take Jesus' words to heart.

We want the children, and the babies and the youth to come to Jesus.

We don't want them to be forbidden or hindered or harmed in any way.

We want to “so order our lives after the example of Christ that they are surrounded by steadfast love, and established in the way that leads to life eternal—or said less poetically: We want to help them all grow up to be Christians and to head toward heaven. Kids are not here to be cute and entertaining. They **are** cute and entertaining, but they are here to learn to become Christians.

May God bless each child who **ever** comes in our doors. Amen.