

Wm. Blake Spencer

Parable of the Seed and Yeast

Matthew 13: 31-33

Little Joseph. He used to come to church wearing his little red, scuffed on the toes cowboy boots. His eyes were as big as saucers, and he seemed to always be so excited to be at church.

He's not so little anymore. It's been a number of years when he joyfully stomped into the sanctuary in those little boots. I choose to believe he's still curious and bold and joyful....and wearing a pair of boots.

Back when his boot size was as big as the palm of my hand there had been a policy change at the church. The decision was made for all entering 1st graders to remain in the sanctuary for the duration of the worship service. This was to replace a long time trend of allowing children up to 5th grade to leave after the time with children.

In that place and at that time parents of children as well as many other members of the church wanted children to be present and active in worship, believing the only way a child can learn how to worship is "to" worship with people of all ages.

Of course....because it was a church, because we were a group of people....not everyone agreed the change in policy was a good idea....but we "forged on forward" as they say....promising to diligently work with families and their children to provide opportunities for full participation in worship on a weekly basis.

We made a commitment to not rely on the children's sermon as the only space and time for little ones to actively engage. So, we explored each part of worship and considered how hospitable the liturgy and the physical space were for a child. It made us think in a ways we had not been thinking....and when we honestly dug down deep enough we remembered our own stories....what it had been like to be the smallest one in the room.

Garrison Keillor writes that "Childhood is the small town everyone came from."

This is the one common denominator for all humans....for every human in every corner of the earth....in every place in culture and society....everyone of us was once a child.

I'm thinking this is the root to Jesus' parable. He uses images of the tiniest seed that grows into an enormous bush....and bits of yeasts that work to grow into a large loaf of tender, crusty, tasty bread. The littleness of life behind all that grows and gives life.

I'm pretty sure this was the purpose of Jesus' life and ministry....revealing God's power through littleness, vulnerability, gentleness, kindness, and trust.

I'm pretty sure this is the root to our calling to be children of God....to have child like faith.....to not only remember what it was once like to be a child....but to continue to approach life with child likeness which in the end softens all the rough corners of our so called grown up lives.

These are the thoughts we were exploring when Joseph was walking among us in his little red boots and enormous smile. We changed a church policy hoping to open the way for children to explore and participate in more meaning ways.

What we didn't expect was the journey to change our hearts and minds.

We didn't anticipate how the children would minister to us "grown ups", how the children would end up speaking deep truths about faith and life.

Before we got to witness this new life...we had to listen to those few voices who spoke in opposition to the new plan.

"Children make too much noise.

They can't (not they won't) but they cannot pay attention for one full hour.

They don't understand what's going on.

I don't want worship to be dumb downed."

We also got a message from the Executive Presbyter as we sought new ways to welcome and involve children. She told us she had visited a church down in the valley....the South Texas valley near the border of Mexico. A tiny church without children had recently hired a pastor who had toddler triplets. They said they wanted children to fill up their church again.

What is that old saying...."Be careful what you pray for." Their prayer was answered. But after five months of their hallways and classrooms and sanctuary being filled up by the normal noises of three toddlers.... the congregation had had it. They were worn out and wanted their new pastor to go. And she did.....she left....not even completing her first year.

The Executive Presbyter went down to meet with them. She arrived early for the meeting and walked around their building. She noticed a collection of pictures hanging on the wall outside the sanctuary and looked at them for quite some time.

After a two hour meeting hearing all the grievances the members had of their new pastor and her family....the Executive Presbyter said, "You don't want children in the church....you just want pictures of children."

The first Sunday of the policy change arrived. Our rising 1st graders filed into the sanctuary for their first full experience of worship. The nay say-ers perched in their pews to prove the policy wrong.

The rest of us worked to live up to our new promise. I had asked for a moratorium....allow us to work with the children for three months.....and if after the three months our youngest worshippers were not "worshipping" in Presbyterian decency and order we could re-evaluate our plan.

Can I tell you what happened?

In a matter of 3 short weeks, our youngest worshippers were focused, involved, pleasant, and infusing joy into our service of worship and Joseph was one of them. We won't forget the day he figured out the "passing of the peace". This tiny boy in his red boots standing below the tallest man in the church....6 foot 8 Bruce.

And there Joseph was looking straight up in the air with is tiny hand extended as high as it would go. Bruce didn't see him at first, but when he did....his expression was.....well it was what passing the peace of Christ is all about. Bruce looked down and Joseph said in his lispy voice,

"May the peas of Cris-t be with you."

And Bruce greeted him the way he greeted everyone else. All I can say is.....it was a sacred and holy moment....one we would not have encountered if our youngest children had not been in the sanctuary.

My son Wayde was in Junior High at the time. He was older than Joseph but it was just as important that children his age feel the same welcome and have the same opportunity to participate in worship each week.

Wayde was forever the explorer and the learner and had just recently learned the basic skills of baking bread from scratch....and he happened to be really, really good at baking.

One afternoon he was making multiple loaves of bread he had been contracted by various church members to bake. When he was pulling out his first loaves I realized the next day would be communion Sunday and asked him if he would make one large loaf that I could use to break. He replied, "Sure, no problem."

As he baked I went about various Saturday afternoon chores. After some time working in the back yard I came in and peeked in the oven to see the communion loaf. "Oh my gosh, y'all." That's what I said. "Oh my gosh!" And Wayde said, "I know. You said you wanted a big loaf."

Some of you may remember that I Love Lucy episode.....she's cooking bread. She opens the oven door and the loaf of bread comes busting out....it's so big it shoves her up against the wall. Well....Wayde's loaf of bread was oven wall to oven wall big. It was gigantic. It was so big....all you could say was O my gosh!

Thankfully the church we were serving at the time had a very large communion table....7 foot by 7 foot sitting in the middle of the pews. It was made for large loaves of bread. That Sunday the largest loaf of bread ever served in that church was sitting on the communion table and as each person entered a wave of, "O my gosh!" could be heard followed by joyful laughter.

That loaf of bread just made you happy. And when the congregation found out it was Wayde who baked it for them....they were even happier. I explained the bread's largeness so as to get all the giggles out before communion.

During the first hymn Wayde came up to me and asked why the people were laughing at his bread. I told him, "Oh honey they aren't laughing at your bread....you have made them so happy they are laughing with joy. You've done a really good thing and they are happy!"

Worship moved on and we made our way to the table. As I lifted up the bread and said the words Scripture says Jesus said.....muffled and some not so muffled laughter began again. We just couldn't help it. That bread was big. And it made us happy.

Have you ever tried to break a ginormous loaf of bread? Jesus would have had to struggle with it too. I couldn't break it...not like I normally do....so I put it on my hip and broke that bread apart.....flour went flying everywhere and the laughter turned into a deeper joy.

It was truly the most joyful communion I've ever experienced. The joyful feast of God was joyful to the bone that day.....joyful to the roof. God's Spirit didn't just hover....but danced and jumped, hop-scotched and somersaulted!

After worship my son continued to break the barn sized loaf into smaller pieces handing it out so that people could take a piece of that joy back home with them.

This is what happened when we put on the eyes and ears and hearts of children. Joseph shared peace, Wayde baked bread. Ashley sang songs, Maddie colored pictures, and Jameson shared stories.

The children taught the grown-ups how to sing with gusto and move and laugh.....and in it all we became the parable Jesus was speaking and teaching.

The little ones grew us!

Mister Rogers said it this way: The child is in me still, and sometimes not so still.

As children of God it is our calling as it is our gift to approach this thing called worship with eagerness and joy trusting God's Spirit to meet us and to bring alive the words we say we believe.

So bring in the children.....the ones inside you.....and the ones who are already here. Bring in the children and have them stay.....and discover again and again and again and again and again....just how many ways God can come alive.

In the name of God who was born in a stable, who claimed us in baptism, and who continues to move and jump and holler and laugh. Amen.