

Rally Day Sermon  
September 8, 2019  
The Rev. Emily Richards

*The Gift of Uselessness*

There's a frequently shared story, attributed to writer Parker Palmer about a three-year-old and an early encounter she has with her newborn brother. "She can't wait to meet the newest addition to her family and finally become a big sister. Within a few hours of her parents bringing the baby home from the hospital, she demands to be alone with her brother in his room and with the door shut. Even though their three-year old's request makes her parents a little nervous, they decide to let her do so. With the recently installed intercom system, they are confident if they hear the slightest indication of something going amiss, they can be in there in a split second. So, they lead their daughter into his room, shut the door, and hurry back to listen over the intercom. They hear their daughter's footsteps moving across the baby's room, imagine her standing over the crib, looking down; and then hear her say softly to her four-day-old brother, 'Tell me about God—I've almost forgotten.'"

Jesus says to his disciples and those other adults hanging onto his every word, "Let the little children come to me. Never push them away. For they are the ones who belong to the kingdom of God. And without the simplicity and delightfulness and inquisitiveness and openness of a child you will not be able to enter the kingdom." Children remember what we adults can often forget. The process of growing up is the process of slowly forgetting or of even eliminating that primary understanding of who we are and whose we are. Children know far better than the rest of us that they belong to God, that they are loved beyond measure, and that at their very essence and ours is goodness.

As we get older, and that memory begins to fade, our sense of being an independent self grows stronger. The messages we receive from our culture overtake what we know from those earliest years of our existence on this earth and our disconnection from the source of that Love can feel more real to us than the source itself. It is so easy for us in our busy lives and world to listen to other voices instead of the voice of Jesus, ones which declare loudly that what you do, who you know, how much money you make, where you live,

matters more than what your heart has to teach you. Maybe this is why Jesus is so insistent in telling his disciples and us that we must stop and pay attention to our children. Within their uncluttered hearts remains a deep, visceral connection with the place they had come from and the Presence that loved them and all of creation into being.

Amy Julia Becker, whom I'm spoken of on several occasions has written books, articles and a blog recounting her experience as a mother with a special needs child. Amy grew up in an affluent, white, well-educated community which valued intellectual abilities above many other things. She is honest in sharing how her daughter Penny reoriented her priorities in life. "Our culture," she reflects, "is constructed around an idea that people need to be useful in order to be considered valuable. They need to be able to solve problems. They need to work in a productive—which is to say, economically viable—way. They need to not impose a financial, emotional, or legal burden on others. Our culture prizes usefulness. . . I have often succumbed to this line of thinking, assuming that my value as a human being comes from my usefulness, from my good grades and my awards and high job performance reviews. But after Penny was born, all this changed.

I wrote an essay for *The New York Times* when I was pregnant with our third child about how I had decided not to pursue prenatal testing because I would welcome another child with Down syndrome. Although many people expressed support of my perspective, others commented on how it was unethical of me to even consider bringing another child with Down syndrome into the world because of the burden that child would place upon his or her family and society. The logic went something like this: If they are too vulnerable, too needy, then we have no place for them. But what if usefulness is not the measure of our humanity? And what if one of the most important things Penny and other people like her have to offer is the affirmation that our value as human beings arises from our belovedness, not our usefulness? What if to be human means to be loved, and what if this is the most important truth for any of us to ever learn?"

In Jesus' day there was absolutely nothing useful about a child. You were helpless, burdensome, a financial strain on your family until you grew older and became a productive member of society. But it was a child. A small, helpless child that Jesus placed in the center of these societal assumptions and declared that God's kingdom belonged to

him. This child affirms for all of us that to really be human is to be loved. Nothing else matters.

After returning from my three-month sabbatical there is a great temptation to stand up here today in front of all of you, and somehow prove my productiveness while I was away. To list of all the books I read, the podcasts I listened to, to tell you about the places I discovered and rediscovered, the meaningful conversations I had and the insights I gained from them. I trust that there will be opportunities in other sermons and other settings where I will share more of what I learned and received. But in this moment, I want to offer that one of the greatest gifts I received on my sabbatical was the gift of claiming what you can learn from uselessness. It was as if I whispered to God, "Tell me about you. I've almost forgotten." I remembered where I had come from, and who I will always be. Embracing a kind of uselessness allowed me to re-claim that love for God and for all who belong to God. Being useless helped me regain my memory.

Now, I know I will go back to being very productive, working very hard with all of you for the sake of the church and the world. I will return to my lists and schedules, paying greater attention to the pinging of my phone that is reminding me I need to be somewhere or do something. And that's OK. It is a part of being human. Just not the most important part. My hope for us in this new program year is that we can listen to Jesus over all the other noisy voices and follow the lead of our children. That in the midst of our busy lives, important work and our need to be productive, we can help one another find time for uselessness. To stop for brief moments and delight in the beauty and goodness of the world God created and the people God created. And finally, to generate hearts filled with gratitude for the encounters we have where we know again of that deeper truth – that to be human is to be born from love, held in love and meant for love. Amen.