

Rally Day
The Rev. Emily Richards
September 10, 2017

Don't Push These Children Away

On Tuesday at Middle School Orientation I approached a fellow parent I hadn't seen since the end of school wanting to hear about his family's summer adventures. He greeted me with, "Happy New Year, Emily!" I smiled and laughed. "I feel like this time of year is a celebration of new beginnings," he said to me. He's right, I thought. This time of year does feel like a fresh start for us all. And it's not just with school; but here in this place. We gather to begin again as a community of faith. Today we celebrate Rally Day when we are invited to reignite our commitment to our ministry among our children and youth. We are reminded that our children's natural joy and laughter, spontaneity and inquisitiveness are blessings to us and our world and that God's kingdom as Mark says belongs to them. On this day we ask ourselves, "How is that we as individuals and as a community are recognizing each child in our midst as a blessing from God?" "And what work do we still have to do to remove the obstacles which hinder them from flourishing and thus hinder us all from flourishing?"

I want to share a story with you that I've shared before. But it's worth repeating, especially on this morning. An Episcopal priest reflected on his family's visit to another church: "On a rare Sunday away from my own parish, my family and I ventured out of town to visit another Episcopal church, a much larger one than our own. Unable to arrive early enough for a service intentionally styled for families, we came to a later service and immediately worried that we had entered a no-children zone. Being churchy people, we figured we could cope. We were thankful that as we moved from the Gloria to the Collect to the readings, our nearly four-year-old son remained a perfect angel, dipping into the enormous bag my wife had carefully prepared to keep him quietly occupied in this foreign environment. Our two-year-old daughter began to fuss during the sermon, and I took her out to the narthex. The ushers were slightly awkward with me about her, but I kept her busy. I was not fazed. But then the shock came. As the service finished, a neatly composed woman approached my wife and said, 'It was very inconsiderate for you to bring your children in here. They don't get anything out of it, and you've ruined worship for 200 adults.' 'Are you kidding?' my wife replied. 'No, you are incredibly rude,'" the woman said.

The priest goes on to say, "My children's noise cannot *ruin* worship of Almighty God, because it is not about them or anyone else in the first place. It's about God. The

people's sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving happened that Sunday morning regardless of distractions. Jesus was present. God was glorified. The intersection of heaven and earth had been revealed. It is not enough for clergy simply to reassure people that children are welcome in church...It is not a question of being nicer, more welcoming, or more evangelistic. We all need to ask ourselves a more fundamental question: Do we come to church *primarily* to participate in the work of God among and through his people, or to soothe and excite our individual souls? In the best-case scenario, we experience both, but we must never lose sight of our primary objective. It's not about how we feel. In fact, the second goal always flows from the first. We will be fulfilled in our worship experience — if we walk through the doors desiring to jump into the cosmic, unending stream of praise and thanksgiving that is distilled each Sunday. We need the screaming babies, squirmy toddlers and easily distracted ten year olds to lift the full voice of all creation to the throne of grace."

Too often I think the church has put conditions on how we embrace children into our midst. As long as they sit quietly and do not disturb us or our worship, as long as they are downstairs with their teachers, we are okay with them. Or when it is convenient for us adults, we parade them out among us and celebrate their preciousness. Our children at St. Peter's are not distractions or disruptions or adornments. They are not even the future of the church; they are the church right now, right along with us, just as they are. They are good for us. They are good for all of us. And I dare say, they are necessary for us to live out our mission and ministry. If we believe that we come to church primarily to participate in the work of God among and through God's people, then we see our children and youth as an integral part of that sacred work. And if we take to heart Mark's words, we can't in fact participate in God's realm without them or (here's the rub) without being like them. We need the screaming babies, and the squirmy toddlers and the easily distracted ten year olds and the questioning teenagers to remind us how to be the church.

Our intentionality in embracing the gifts of children must extend beyond what we do on Sunday mornings in these pews. How serious are we in forming them in the faith or inviting them to serve alongside their adult counterparts in ministry within and beyond these walls? How are we supporting them and their parents in their lives beyond this community? How are we supporting and caring for the children in our neighborhood, children who may never worship with us or even enter these doors?

This year we engaged in holy conversations around these questions as we were discerning a way forward in this ministry. Before you in the pews are the fruits of our discernment: our Mission Statement, Core Values and Goals. This document informed

our work as we hired Kim Leach to serve as our new Director of Children's and Youth Ministries. In our budget process the Vestry took a leap of faith and increased the education portion, the largest it's been in over a decade enabling us to create this strong Education Team. Shannon and Kim's devotion to children and youth coupled with their devotion to the church will ensure that our young people are given every opportunity to deepen their relationship with God, inspiring them to live their lives for the benefit of others.

We also formed a new partnership with On Gracie's Wings, an organization created to honor the memory of Grace Packer. Through this partnership we will give them a permanent home, ensuring that foster children and their foster families in our community are provided the care and support they need. But this is just the beginning. At the end of this month, the Rev. Kirk Berlenbach, the new Diocesan Canon for Innovation and Community Development will be meeting with me and members of our staff to begin conversations on how we can expand the kind of work we're developing with On Gracie's Wings. As you see from our list of goals, one of them is to explore the possibility of creating an after-school program. What other opportunities are out there in our neighborhood among God's people? How are we being called to seek and serve Christ among the children and youth in our wider community?

This is an exciting time for our parish and an exciting new direction we are taking. But it is not something Kim, Shannon and I and our Vestry can do our own. Parents, we need you to partner with us as together we raise your children in this community of faith. We need you to bring your children to church, to participate in the programs and activities we offer, to help Kim and Shannon shape the ministry you are seeking for your kids and for yourselves. We invite you to reach out to us with your questions, sharing your struggles, seeking our help and guidance as you parent your children in an ever-changing and confusing world. To the other members of the parish, we also need your partnership in this ministry. Yes, we need your financial support. In order to have such capable leaders as Kim and Shannon, we must have the resources in our budget to support their work, and to give our young people the opportunities to encounter Christ in the world outside these walls. One of our ambitious goals is the formation of an Education Fund, just like the Property and Music Funds we have. This Fund will help to support our staff and their ministries as well as our initiatives to become more active and engaged within our neighborhood.

We also invite you to be teachers and mentors and friends to our children and youth. Our parents need you to walk alongside of them, to share your wisdom and to help nurture their children in the faith. Just spend a few minutes with Laurel Mosteller or

Dave Kipphut or Calvin Haas and you'll quickly realize what a gift it is to journey with our young people. We do this work with all of you because it is the commitment we all make to the children of our parish and the future children of our parish and to the children who never enter these doors, but need to know their innate goodness and belovedness in the sight of God. It takes an entire church community to raise a child.

"Don't push these children away," Jesus says to us. "Don't ever get between them and me." Today, may each and every one of us recommit ourselves to shaping our community in such a way that every child we encounter is treated not as an inconvenience or a distraction but through whom we meet Jesus himself and come to experience the very heart of God's kingdom. May this be our collective New Year's resolution. Amen.