

sermon-7/8/07 Newport Presbyterian Church
“Teaching Our Children”
Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

I have to admit, I love baptisms. What can be better than seeing proud and happy parents present a child for baptism in the company of extended family and friends and their church family? Receiving babies and children into the arms of the church is a great sign of hope. The next generation will carry on the faith. There will be those who come after us to be the body of Christ for the world. Great stuff!

But baptisms are also sobering. Parents promise they will raise their child to hold their allegiance to God above all other allegiances. God forbid, but some day they may have to act on that commitment. Christians, down through history have paid a steep price for putting their allegiance to God and God’s kingdom first, even over allegiance to their own beloved country.

And we, the church, make promises when someone is baptized. We promise to help raise this child to accept God’s love and eventually become a confirmed member of a church, hopefully this church. We promise to teach children what it means to be a Christian in an increasingly secular world, what it means to live by a different set of values than they will see on television or in popular culture.

Of course, the big question is: what is it we should teach the children in our midst? What are the important lessons to be learned that will help our children live in this world with integrity and courage, holding Christian values of service, compassion, and gentleness in the midst of a culture that tries to seduce us to cherish other values such as success, power, and wealth?

We turn to the Bible for that curriculum. Our scripture passage for today in Luke providentially has some great advice for us. When you are committed to preach the lectionary, like I am, sometimes I fear the passages given won’t relate to a particular focus, like this baptism. Invariably I have found that not to be the case. There seems to be something in the passages given that are extremely relevant to what is happening in the present. Jesus’ advice to the 70 disciples he is sending out on a missionary journey is quite relevant to what we want to teach our baptized children.

For instance, Luke says Jesus sent the 70 ahead of him to towns Jesus planned to visit later. The disciples’ task, among other things, was to act in such a way that people would want to receive Jesus with open hearts when he came into their town.

Isn’t that what we all hope to do in our living? We are sent into the world each week when we leave this sanctuary to live in such a way that others might experience God at the very center of our being. We can soften peoples’ hearts to be open to God by the way we carry ourselves as Christians, or we can turn people off. We want our children to be ambassadors for God in Christ in how they live and treat others. It is a great calling.

One of the best ways to allow God to shine through us is to travel light. That is exactly what Jesus asks the disciples to do as they head out into their world. They were not to take any purse, bag, or even sandals on their journey. They were to travel light. What would that mean for our children and us, for that matter?

One commentator said Jesus was urging his disciples to identify with the poor by not taking much with them on the journey. They would need to receive hospitality from others in order to be fed and housed. They would have to see that we don't get through life without help from others.

Part of traveling light means the openness to receive gifts from others with gratitude. Life is not about being totally self-sufficient. We need each other. While we want our children to grow up and be able to take care of themselves, find a good job, and make a living, we also want them to see that we all are recipients of gifts. Our children did not earn being born to parents who were economically comfortable. They could just have easily been born into a poor family. Traveling light requires a kind of humility that recognizes we are all, rich or poor, receivers of gifts we did not earn.

Traveling light also concerns focusing on the really important things in life and not getting bogged down in the minor stuff. For the disciples that meant they were to be gracious guests and eat what was put in front of them, even if it was not kosher. Scholars tell us that when these disciples went into Gentile territory, they would most likely be offered food that was not kosher. It was probably very hard for them not to be put off by such food. Jesus says, eat and drink whatever they provide. Don't let your religion get in the way of your graciousness.

So many of us get so bogged down in the little stuff we carry around in our heads and hearts, we don't have time or energy for the really important stuff. Traveling light is partly a matter of letting go of that little stuff.

Of course, the little stuff may not seem little at first. Some of us get lost in financial worries, or trying to make a name for ourselves at work, that we neglect our most important relationships. Some of us hold on to petty grievances, wanting to be justified or proved right to the detriment of our marriages or friendships. Churches, of course, are full of little stuff that can bog us down and make us lose sight of the more important issues: the color of a new carpet, a little change in the style of worship, you name it.

When we teach our children to travel light, we teach them to let go and focus on what is really important. We teach them the priority of people over things, compassion over dogma, of generosity over wealth.

Traveling light also means literally not carrying so much stuff around with us. I read an article about a woman who died in a concentration camp during World War II. This woman was named Etty Hillesum and she was a Jew. She knew because she was a Jew that she would be deported one day. She would only be able to take a little knapsack with

her. This is what Etty packed: some chocolate, a bottle of aspirin, an extra sweater, a favorite volume of poetry.

Stories like that make me wonder what I would pack in a similar situation. They also make me think about my life now. What do I have that is really necessary for me to be content? How might I live more simply? How might I travel lighter? It is a real gift to our children and the world, especially in our wealthy country, to teach them to travel light in all senses of that word.

Jesus offers other good advice we might easily try to teach our children. Be content with what you have been given. Stop traveling around looking for greener pastures. Travel in pairs for companionship and accountability. But I want to end on something Jesus tells the 70 once they return from their missionary trip.

They come back excited about the deeds of power they were able to do in Jesus' name. "Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!" Pretty heady stuff. It is very easy to be seduced by success, whether that be at work, in some kind of competition, or even in doing good works of charity. We love it when we are successful, when others look up to us for being such good people.

Jesus warns them not to get caught up in success. He says don't rejoice that you are so powerful spiritually, "but rejoice that your names are written in heaven." Jesus is telling them whom we belong to is far more important than what we do.

When we teach our children that they are children of God, and that is their primary identity, the primary way they have worth, and that nobody can take that away from them, we are giving them such a firm foundation on which to build a life. They are not loved because they do great things. They are not loved because they happen to be physically attractive, or good at sports, or get good grades.

All of those things are fine as far as that goes. But we are loved because our names are written in God's book of life. We are loved because we belong to God, in other words. Even when we get old and can't do much, even should we fall into dementia, become housebound, we are still people of worth in God's sight. Such a lesson will see us through our entire lifespan.

When our children grow up learning those lessons in the church, they will make a huge difference in this world. It is the best gift we can give to our community. May we commit ourselves to teach this to Brody and all the other children in our church family. May we live into such advice ourselves. Amen