

Children's Ministry

1 Samuel 2:18-21 Luke 2: 41-52

We find God using children in various ways throughout scripture. The young, precocious Joseph who shapes the destiny of the Hebrews, the baby Moses who is saved from the river by Pharaoh's daughter, and the overlooked boy David who's named king, to cite a few examples, besides the characters in today's scriptures.

I've noted before that children tend not to matter as anything of value in biblical society. Actually, the valuing of children is a fairly recent development in human societies. Until a child was able to contribute meaningfully to the daily grind of hard work distributed among more mature family members, children had no standing, no importance, and little value, except as a hedge against the risks of the future.

Yet God uses children to teach lessons. They can be rather sneaky vehicles to awaken the slumbering to new awareness of faithfulness. One pastor recalls the development of a new faithful response in a longtime churchgoer, Gladys.

Gladys, a widow, attended church faithfully every Sunday. She would get to church about 20 minutes early to sit and pray. This was her ritual. Just her and Jesus. She had been doing this for many years.

Then one Sunday a new family sat behind her. This was disturbing. Then she thought, "Oh, well, they're just visitors. They may not even be back next week." She thought that for one Sunday at least she could put up with the small feet kicking at her back, and the toy cars being driven behind her head on the top of her pew, and the loud whispers for lifesavers, and the several trips to the bathroom.

Much to Gladys's dismay, one week turned into two weeks, and two weeks stretched into a month, and then she realized that they were going to stay. She weighed her options. She could change pews, but "no, that was where she and her husband had always worshiped." She wasn't willing to give up her pew. She could turn around and glare at them. She could pray at home for 20 minutes instead of coming early to church.

One Sunday before worship was really bad. "Church is for quiet meditation and reflection," she thought. She looked at the parents and the squirming children. She realized that the parents looked tired. "Maybe I should just let them be," she thought.

Instead of glaring at them, she managed a small smile. The next Sunday she took lifesavers and offered them. The next Sunday she asked their names. She found out the oldest liked horses, the youngest liked cars, and the middle one liked books. The next Sunday Gladys was disappointed that they weren't there. It didn't seem like church without the tap of little feet at her back. By now it was clear; the children had changed her, altered her routine, and actually transformed her expectations about church.

In the first reading, we hear how Hannah fulfilled her pledge to God by having her son Samuel dedicated to sacred service in the Temple at Shiloh run by Eli. You may know the story, following a familiar biblical theme of barrenness. Hannah wasn't bearing any children and pledged her first born to God in order to be blessed with producing babies. She played 'let's make a deal' with God, and it worked. Good to her word, Samuel is dedicated as a Nazir and grows up in the Temple of Shiloh under the tutelage of its priest Eli.

It isn't the greatest environment, however. In the passage before our selection, there's an expose about the two sons of Eli who are cheating, greedy, and generally wicked. Since they were actively running amok in the temple, apparently Eli didn't make ethical discipline one of his emphases. If Samuel was looking for role models, there were slim pickings at the temple where Eli was priest.

Yet Samuel was ministering, learning more and growing more, possibly getting more examples of what **not** to do than anything else. Perhaps it may be from seeing the disconnect between the lessons of righteousness that Samuel found in the Torah-Law versus the conduct of the sons of Eli that caused Samuel to keep asking questions of himself and his God. Lacking the role models but having at hand the resources which would make him a servant of God's promise, Samuel grows into his calling.

As an adult, taking the role of judge, he is a leader of God's people. Samuel negotiates the difficult times in initiating the monarchy, seeing the first king – Saul – fall from favor, and then promoting the leadership of David amid a divided nation. After the events of Moses and the Exodus, Samuel is the most prominent figure in history of God's people, besides David and perhaps Joshua. Samuel's path is a peculiar one, but it shows that this young man was asking faith questions and not settling for just any answers. His enduring value as a servant of God's will through a host of tumultuous events is his willingness to be like a child, taught by God at different turns to recognize new ways of faithfulness.

One final point is concerns the rather bankrupt character of Temple priest Eli. Despite his characterization as a weak, useless priest, unable or unwilling to constrain his wicked sons, old Eli had journeyed a long way with the Lord. He may not have had much worthy reputation by the time Samuel was maturing and learning, but Eli probably still had plenty of wisdom and insight to impart. Samuel probably learned early that lessons of faith can emerge from unlikely sources, even corrupt and useless old Eli.

God is ready to grow the one who seeks the way of his promise regardless of conditions or circumstances. God invites the faithful to look with fresh, childlike eyes, ask big questions with Samuel and grow ourselves "in the presence of the Lord." And we are encouraged to do this visioning at every age.

The gospel of Luke has the only biblical reference to Jesus between his birth and his appearance to John the Baptist. Again, children don't usually count for much, so the absence of details about Jesus' childhood is nothing surprising.

This curious account tells about Jesus at age 12, just prior to the age of manhood. Departing Jerusalem following Passover, his parents travel homeward *for a full day* before suddenly realizing that their son is missing. I suppose we parents make some assumptions, that the kid is with so-and-so and they're watching him, or the kid is around here somewhere, I thought I saw him a little while ago. So, it turned out the kid wasn't anywhere that the parents assumed he was. In fact, he's nowhere to be found. Panicked, the parents make a day's trip back to Jerusalem. I know what my temperament would be if I had hiked for day, and then had to hike back the next day, only to have to hike back out for another day. I'm getting steamed just thinking about it.

Eventually, they find their 12 year old in the great Temple. He's hanging out with the Temple scribes and teachers, listening and asking questions, and apparently impressing these teachers with his keen knowledge and insights.

As his parents find him, they're rather upset. Actually, I know that I wouldn't be so patient and generous. Of course, the parents may have been unsure how to handle this situation in front of the Temple's scribes and teachers who seemed to have enjoyed their exchanges with the kid. It wouldn't look too good to cuff him upside the head right away, but they didn't want to look like derelict parents indifferent to their child's whereabouts, particularly since they had been derelict parents indifferent to their child's whereabouts. Awkward.

However, the boy Jesus doesn't understand his parents' anxiety. "Why were you searching for me?" he says. I can feel my teeth clenching already, and I'm holding back. Then he says: "Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?" Twelve years old or not, I'd pop that weenie's little fanny! The text says 'they didn't understand what he was saying,' which I can also understand. They were in parental mode, and his remark sure sounds like a wisecrack, deserving the appropriate administration of discipline, particularly after a full day's hike *back* to Jerusalem.

But if we back off the parental thing, we can also hear a young man who is growing into his destiny, who even now is gaining clarity about his identity and his pathway in life. He is a year or so shy of becoming a "man," of professing his faith and taking his place among the men of his faith tradition. He was asking faith questions, impressing the elder teachers. It isn't that he was brilliant. He was a kid, and was asking kid questions, the kinds of simple, basic questions that the adults had long since taken for granted, having answered them in their own minds and never returning to check their worth and validity. In effect, the kid Jesus was already departing from his birth parents, and accepting a more mature faithfulness in a relationship that now was forming – as he said – to recognize God as Father and himself as Son.

In the closing paragraph, we're assured that Jesus remained obedient to his parents – no juvenile delinquency – and his mother cherished these occasions in his life, like the others. Finally, it says, "Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men." This is quite close to the ending of the other reading about Samuel. It's a noteworthy remark. Both sought the presence of God in their lives, Samuel in his

ministering at the Temple of Shiloh under Eli's tutelage, and Jesus in the Temple of Jerusalem with the wise teachers and elders. They were both asking questions about their lives, their faith, their spirituality, and their God. They were both growing in the love of God, seeking new directions amid new insights, already training and preparing their inner spirit for greater roles in later life. They were asking important questions, knowing that their lives would be impacted and transformed.

As we look ahead to a new year, we ought to be challenged to ask questions once again, just like those of youthful age. God, what do you want from me? God, what path would you have me take? God, how can I best use my gifts to serve you? God, how can I fulfill your promise in me? God, how can I grow in my faithfulness and commitment to the way of my Lord? How can I be the blessing you desire? How can I reflect and give witness to Jesus, his love, and his grace?

In our maturity, we may stop asking questions like these. It's when we stop asking questions, and start spouting our pat answers that we become something along the scale between boring and boorish. The cranky wanker who has a cynical comment for everything is the perfect example of someone who stopped asking questions. It's no mistake that the child-like reverence for discovery and exploration was smothered years ago. Left with their fixed beliefs, their spirit has gone dark and their outlook on most everything is dismal. For them, faith has become a static creed, and the notion that God holds out the promise for more has gone invisible.

One of the many blessings of this congregation is that so few are so plagued. This congregation remains cheerful, good humored, both welcoming of the childlike spirit and witnessing to that spirit.

May we always seek to discover and explore what new things God would do with us, and be ready to receive new insights and learning that grow us, even in our maturity, making a children's ministry our blessed gift to cherish, share, and grow in every season.