

Sermon Title: God Made You to Make a Difference
Matthew 5:13-16

November 20, 2011

A few weeks ago, our stewardship campaign committee asked if, as part of the stewardship campaign, I would share about children's ministry and why we do what we do. Of course, I thought. I'd love to tell you about our kids! Our children's ministry, however, is about more than our kids – it's about our whole church family walking together on a journey of faith, so that's what I'd like to talk about this morning.

Over the past few years, churches have begun talking less about Christian education and more about faith formation. At first you think, it's just a change in terminology, but the shift, if done correctly, is much more than that. I think of this new model like a potter shaping a piece of clay into a bowl or a vase – it's a fluid movement that ebbs and flows and changes as effort is applied. In the same way, faith is much more than lists of dos and don'ts, more than a library of Bible stories and scripture verses. Faith isn't just about believing in God. Faith is about centering ourselves in God and living a life of meaning. Again, think of the clay on the potter's wheel. A potter will tell you that centering the clay is the first step – if not centered, the wheel will push the clay awkwardly and fight against its development. Once it is centered, however, the clay can be molded and shaped into a work of unique beauty. Faith formation is about maturing along the journey, acquiring skills in thinking, decision-making, valuing, reflecting, and acting in Christian service. Throughout our lives, we are shaped by our experiences of living in God. That's not a task that is limited to children's ministry. Our faith community should

be all about faith formation – living lives of purpose and action together that illustrate what we know about God.

Our children's ministry is designed to give our kids experiences that center them in God, shape their growing understanding of themselves in God, and empower them to act and serve in love. We begin by welcoming our children. Our nursery provides a loving and nurturing place for our littlest ones to experience God's love and care. More importantly, however, we welcome our children into worship. As an active part of the worshipping community, our children learn that they are an important member of the family of God. They learn to praise God, to pray for one another, to talk with God and to listen and learn God's word. A few weeks ago, one of our kids put me on the spot as we talked about All-Saints Day. "Is God a saint," she asked? Her inquiry received a chuckle from me and the congregation, but not because she was being silly. Instead, her question demonstrates her formation process. By wondering about the ideas and stories she hears/learns(?), this young lady is mulling over the information she is learning and integrating it into her understanding of God. The way that we each understand God's story gives us a context for understanding our own lives. It is for this reason that we invite our younger children to hear and actively wonder about the stories of the Bible during our Children's Chapel time using the Montessori Godly Play stories. This gives them one more opportunity to engage with the scripture and begin to internalize its meaning for their lives. (and you thought they were just playing over there).

What I have just described happens in just one hour – twice each Sunday. We offer two worship services that invite our children into this experience of the family of God, and a lot of their growth happens there. We also offer a traditional

Sunday School time for our children and youth. While I say it is a traditional Sunday School hour, our Sunday School is anything but traditional in its teaching style and activities. We continue to teach Bible stories and skills, of course, but our curriculum really focuses on the kids asking and answering their faith questions together so they can apply the lessons of our faith to their lives.

As Robert Keeley, the author of Helping Our Children Grow in Faith writes, “Faith development is about helping children come to know and trust God as the Lord of their lives.” To do this, we try to let the stories speak for themselves and give children a chance to wonder about what people in the Bible did and why. God chose to tell us about himself through story. Our children come to know God more closely as they relate the experiences of Bible characters to the events of their own lives. Looking beyond the actions of the characters to their motivation or their feelings helps sink the stories into our children’s forming hearts. Pondering Bible stories leads them into a mature morality. Once again, from Robert Keeley, “As children focus on God’s Word, it becomes more a part of their lives and encourages a faith that has depth.”

While we are helping our children go deeper in their faith, I like to think of our children’s ministry program as a ladder. As the children grow and deepen their faith, they are ready to take the next step. Our upper-elementary students begin to participate in CrossWalk – a sort of youth group for the elementary set. Here they take the next step in living a life of faith and continue to strengthen faithful friendships. They are negotiating social situations and discovering how they can make a difference in the world around them. Some at this age also choose to serve their church in worship by acolyting or reading scripture. As they become

more and more centered in God, their lives increasingly illustrate the depth of their faith.

Walking with our children as they grow is an honor. I feel as if I have front row seats to witness their journey as they discover their purpose. Our theme in CrossWalk this year is “You Were Made to Make a Difference,” and this scripture is guiding our time together. Jesus highlights our purpose, instructs us to stay centered in God so we don’t lose our saltiness, and challenges us to live our faith and bring out the God-colors of the world. We are expected to live in deep relationship with God and to shine with God’s love in our hearts so all may know the God who lives there. Like I said earlier, this journey of centering in God and living our faith is not just for children. Jesus is speaking to all disciples when he says, “Let me tell you why you are here.” Salt and light, my friends. We are all here to be salt and light. We were all made to make a difference. And the first step is being centered in God.

Back to the question originally posed to me by the stewardship committee... why do we do what we do in children’s ministry? I have given you the theory and practice, outlining our programs and their purpose, but have I answered the “why?” Let me give it a try...

There’s a song I’ve been hearing on the radio for the past few weeks. The song, “Helplessness Blues,” by the Fleet Foxes caught my attention this fall as it seemed to be one of those songs that the radio kept playing as I drove from here to there on my daily travels...

I was raised up believing I was somehow unique
Like a snowflake distinct among snowflakes,

unique in each way you can see
And now after some thinking, I'd say I'd rather be
A functioning cog in some great machinery serving
something beyond me

But I don't, I don't know what that will be
I'll get back to you someday soon you will see

I think what struck me most about this song was the sense of wandering and lostness that the musician described as he struggled to find meaning in more than just himself. The musician explains that his song is a reflection on how the self-centered individualism of his youth has influenced him as a white American adult. He explained to the UK newspaper *The Independent* that he was born in the Eighties, a time of relative plenty in the United States, so he felt like the 'individual' thing was really emphasized when he was a kid, and he just doesn't know where that has left him. If everyone's just like this autonomous individual, he wonders what that means for our culture. The musician says, "Sometimes I find myself wanting something to stand under. I have everything that people all over the earth are fighting for, and sometimes I just feel like I'm not really doing enough with that. That song is basically about that, the desire to cultivate something more than oneself."

And what struck me next as I listened to this song was a sense of hope for the children in our church family... Our children are growing up finding their center in God – they have something to stand under. If given opportunities to serve together, they will know themselves as part of something bigger than themselves. They will mature as functioning parts of God's great machinery, and hopefully will not need to struggle too much with the sense of wandering or lostness that the song describes. As the song says, "I would rather be a functioning cog in some great

machinery serving something beyond me but I don't know what that would be."

Well, our children know what that would be, and that, my friends, is why we do what we do at all ages. The church is here to help us center our lives in God. Each of us is special, created by God, loved by God, and knowing that, we give thanks to God and live for God. Our children's ministry and our church's ministry is loving each child or person individually and helping them be the best they can be, giving them the guidance that they need to make good decisions AND we are including them in the machinery of the church serving in faithful witness to the world. Hopefully, our children will never wonder how or where they might serve. They have been raised in a community that includes them in ministry to the world. They have been empowered to serve faithfully. They have been told that they can change the world, and they have been doing it since they were young. Our children will grow up knowing that they are part something bigger than themselves – and knowing how to share their own unique gifts and graces to serve God's kingdom.

Helplessness Blues suggests a waiting period – I'll get back to you someday soon when I figure out how I can make a difference. When we asked our CrossWalk kids what they wanted to do in CrossWalk this year, the majority of their ideas involved ways that they could raise money to help others. They talk about having a carwash, a bake sale, a flea market – each fundraising idea designed to raise money for the animal shelter, the homeless shelter, people in need after natural disasters, poor children around the world. Our kids recognize the need in the world and are looking for ways that they can help. By actively living their faith all along, we hope that our children will skip most of the wandering and helplessness, and instead

confidently enter the reality of the world ready to make their mark, stand up to injustices and live with compassion.

Saint Augustine wrote that “Our hearts are restless until they find their home in God.” Willow Glen United Methodist Church is here to help children of all ages find their home in God, to soothe restless hearts and to drive away the helplessness. We are here to live our faith together as we each become more fully formed in the image of God. I give thanks for the role that each of you play in this ministry, and for your commitment to continue to center and grow in God.

I'd like to close in prayer with the words of a Jesuit leader...

"Nothing is more practical than finding God, that is, than falling in love in a quite absolute, final way. What you are in love with, what seizes your imagination, will affect everything. It will decide what will get you out of bed in the morning, what you will do with your evenings, how you will spend your weekends, what you read, who you know, what breaks your heart, and what amazes you with joy and gratitude. Fall in love, stay in love and it will decide everything." Amen.

faith is a gift of God – an act of divine grace – rather than a set of beliefs or a well-developed cognitive understanding of spiritual things.

Bowling with turkeys, flinging pumpkins from catapults, acting out the parables, participating in prayer stations, washing cars to raise money for UMCOR, singing our hearts out, making tin can luminarias or resurrection biscuits – all of it sounds like a lot of fun, right? Like we saw in Lisa's video this morning, sometimes it's hard to see the centering that is happening in the midst of the energy and goofiness. But if you watch closely, you will see kids who love one another and love their church because it is a safe place for them to learn and struggle and grow in a community that is learning and growing and struggling right along with them.