

“Kids!”

Colossians 3:12-17; Luke 2:41-52

December 29, 2024, Christmas I

Woodbury United Methodist Church, Woodbury, Connecticut

The Rev. Dr. Brian R. Bodt, Pastor

“Kevin?” The plaintive, anxious, hopeful, remorseful voice of Kate McCallister (played by Catherine O’Hara) echoed through the empty house in the closing scene of the 1990 family comedy “Home Alone.” Eight-year-old Kevin, played by Macaulay Culkin, is the youngest of five children sometimes bullied by his older siblings. In the family’s harried rush to the airport for a Christmas trip to Paris, Kevin is forgotten. Home alone, Kevin defends his family’s home against burglars. In case you haven’t seen this nearly 35- year-old movie, I’ll leave it at that.

But whether you’ve seen it or not, Kate’s pathos is a gut-punch to any parent that has, even momentarily, lost track of a child. In these days where we are ever more vigilant about our children and their vulnerability, Kate and Peter McCallister are the poster examples for neglectful parents.

So why, then, would today’s Bible story choose to present Mary and Joseph, the Holy Family, in this way? Did we not just see them a week ago, on this very chancel, looking every bit the dutiful and responsible and adoring parents? And however we answer that question, what does it matter for us, in this church, today?

Let’s start, as it is often good to start, with the Bible story itself. Luke’s narrative is sparse. It goes from the story of the miraculous birth that we heard last Sunday and on Christmas Eve to a quick summary of Jesus’ presentation in the Temple according to Jewish law. (1) From there, we jump to today’s reading, where Jesus is 12 year’s old. It reminds me of an old Dave Barry routine, where the first child has every conceivable picture and activity recorded, but of the second child Barry comments: “Here is a picture of John at his birth. John is now in the fourth grade.”

Nonetheless, there Jesus is, in the Temple, conversing with the elders, amazing them with his understanding and answers yet seemingly oblivious to the fact that he is not with the traveling entourage where his parents might, just might, be worried about him and his whereabouts.

- (1) Jesus was circumcised on his 8th day; the ritual of purification for Mary (Leviticus 12:2-8) was 40 days from his birth.

And how might this have transpired? In ancient times and even in some cultures today, the more modern concept of “nuclear families” would have been strange if not unknown. Families were extended, kinship ties more broadly defined. When Carol and I were first getting to know our families, she spoke often of her “cousins.” It turns out that term is wide-ranging and includes second cousins and first-cousins-once-removed, among others. Carol has 27 first cousins: on her father’s side alone! I have one first cousin on my mother’s side; and the cousins on my father’s side are virtually unknown to me because of family conflict over alcoholism. Quite a different understanding of “family” we both have!

For their part, Mary and Joseph weren’t worried. Jesus was somewhere with the extended family. Except after a day’s journey they realized he wasn’t. So about face, back to the holy city, searching – probably frantically by this time, as the Bible says it was three days – with perhaps both Mary and Joseph echoing Kate McCallister’s plaintive “*Jesus?*” – only to find him in the Temple. And to his mother’s question “*Child, why have you treated us like this?*” his retort smacks of prepubescent sass: “*Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?*” Apparently not, for Luke opines “*But they did not understand what he said to them.*” But Jesus was where he needed to be.

Ah, kids! Whether of divine or human origin they can bedevil and perplex us. We may echo the lyric in the Broadway show “Bye Bye Birdie:”

*Why can't they be like we were,
Perfect in every way?
What's the matter with kids today?*

Yet the stark truth is that our kids are the next generation. None of us lasts forever and none of us gets out of this world alive. So we need to be about welcoming kids, building up kids, nurturing the children just as Jesus did as testified in several other Bible stories. Did you note that last verse in today’s Gospel?

“And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.”

That increase, that growth, that maturation came about because people cared enough to engage, to interact, to respect his personhood and to value both his presence and his contribution to family and community.

How are we doing at Woodbury United Methodist Church in relation to our children? It is no secret that we have few children and youth under age 18; and fewer still preschool age children. It would be easy to throw up our hands – *“Well, pastor, that’s just how it is”*—or to place blame—*“We should have addressed this a decade ago”*—both responses perhaps making us feel better and not doing a whit to address the challenge.

Before I suggest a direction, let me offer three observations:

First, someone said to me after the Christmas Eve worship *“I hope the children did not disturb you.”* The comment was well-intentioned and I understood what they meant, that the more “adult” parts of the service were received without distraction. For my part, I was thrilled that the 7 children present represented 7% of the 89 people present and that they came forward for the message especially for them. Children’s voices in worship are reminders that we are preparing the next generation of Jesus’ disciples. If their voices are not pleasing to our ears, we need to retune our hearing.

The second observation is that we already have resources for children’s ministry. Our physical plant is ready to receive children. Our Safe Sanctuary policy is structurally sound and in the process of being upgraded. Children here have every protection from anyone with mal-intent. We have capable children’s leaders. There is unexplored potential for partnerships with other local churches. There is wisdom beyond the Woodbury community that we can access. We have resources.

The third observation has to do with our mindset. With respect to children, we sometimes think that the children we have, or will have, are our future. So indulge me a show of hands: how many of you grew up as children in this congregation? As I write this message and even before I see what hands are raised, I know that it is a small percentage of our Sunday morning attendance or our membership. The reality is that the children we nurture will likely end up in some other congregation, just as we—who have been nurtured in other congregations—have come here.

So why bother? After all, as we saw in today’s Gospel, children can be a lot of work!

There are at least two compelling reasons for directly addressing the re-development of a children's ministry. The first reason is institutionally selfish; the second is spiritually altruistic. So whether you view yourself as a pragmatist or a dreamer, there is something here for you.

The first reason is simple: children bring their parents. Those parents will have different levels of engagement, but they will engage. That in turn will energize with that other segment of our church that is "thin," adults between 20 and 40 years old. I often speak of our being a "thin bench:" a great first-string team but not much behind them when illness, travel or fatigue sets in. It is in our institutional self-interest to have a children's ministry because they bring their parents.

The second reason to have a children's ministry is also simple: it's what Jesus told us to do. *"Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them; for it is such to these that the kingdom of heaven belongs."* (Matthew 19:14). *"Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the One who sent me."* (Mark 9:37) *"Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones; for, I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven."* (Matthew 18:10) *"And he took the children in his arms, placed his hands on them and blessed them."* (Mark 10:16) *"If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea."* (Matthew 18:6)

As the old saying goes *"The devil is in the details."* Ascertaining what strategies have been tried, and when, is a first step. Circumstances change, and what didn't work at one time may work now. A simple step might be to provide child care on Sunday morning, whether or not children needing it are here. This is an *"If you build it, they will come"* strategy reminiscent of the movie *"Field of Dreams."* What might it say to our friends and neighbors if, on our website and in our advertisements, we could add three little words with respect to Sunday worship: *"Child care provided."*

Another possibility is to design a series of events where we gather adults in the 20-40 age range, with or without children, to help them (and some of us) see that there is a larger cohort of people in that age group than one might surmise looking at us on Sunday morning. I'm sure there are many other ideas in the offing, and we will receive them.

Some of you know the degree to which I wrestled with whether or not to request reappointment to this church next July. That question is now settled. We hope our Bishop and Cabinet will reappoint me, and we will learn of this as soon as they can in the new year.

What you don't know, beyond what I've shared already, is that I knew that a commitment to stay meant a shift in my reason for being here. I came here at God's behest, against my better judgment and self-interest, because I knew you'd been given a bad deal and it wasn't the first time. Please hear me when I say there is no personal virtue in this. The old saying is that "humans plan, and God laughs." My plan was to stay retired. God laughed. God called, and the choice was to answer or say no to the Almighty, which has not generally been my practice. My heart went out to you, and I felt that I could be helpful in doing triage in the crisis.

But what I knew, when you began to ask if I would stay, is that if I stayed, I would no longer be doing triage. The shift in my leadership would have to be from triage to strategic redevelopment.

The good news is that you already understand the importance of strategic redevelopment. The VISION 2024 strategic plan we highlight each week; the development of "testimony" as a worship and spiritual practice; a renewed commitment to stewardship and financial giving; all of these have been advocated, led and supported by you!

An essential part of that strategic redevelopment of our congregation is a revitalized children's ministry. So it is my intent to have this be a focus of our work together for the next 18 months that I am here. This will be both groundwork and growth for the kind of ministry vitality that I believe God intends for this church and that I believe you want to see. We will find ways to engage you in this work. In the meantime, please keep this effort in your prayers in whatever form you offer them.

All ministry is personal: to you, to me. I am acutely aware of the importance of spiritual instruction for children from my own children, now grown. Both were four years old when they shared these insights.

Near Christmas one year, Daniel – whom some of you met at the 200th Anniversary—asked if I knew the carol "*Angels We Have Heard on High*:" "*You know*," he said, "*the one with all the 'Glorias.'*" When I assured him I

did, he asked how I knew. I said that I learned it in church, as he learned songs in church. He was silent for a long time, and then said, *“Daddy, wouldn’t it be great if God borned everybody with a song inside them?”*

Adam, who some of you met Christmas Eve with his wife and soloist Katie, asked if God slept. He asked the question on a particularly busy and fatiguing day and I signed wistfully, *“I don’t know, Adam. Maybe God has an afternoon quiet time.”* *“Oh no, daddy”* Adam quickly responded, *“I know God doesn’t sleep because he’s always watching over us!”* Later that afternoon, reading scripture, I was reminded of Psalm 121: *“He (the Lord) who keeps Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps.”*

The God who never sleeps has indeed “borned” each of us with a song inside us, a song we are called to sing as the disciples he always watches over. *“Out of the mouths of babes...”* as the Psalmist wrote (8:2). It is our duty and delight to nurture the spiritual insights of our children, and to prepare for the children that God will surely bring.

“Jesus?” He’s not “home alone,” he’s here with us. *“Children?”* We have some and they are precious. It’s time that we increase them, and in so doing we all *“increase in wisdom and in stature and divine and human favor.”* Amen.