

Exodus 2:1-10

¹Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. ²The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was a fine baby, she hid him for three months. ³When she could hide him no longer she got a papyrus basket for him, and plastered it with bitumen and pitch; she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river. ⁴His sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him.

⁵The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river, while her attendants walked beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maid to bring it. ⁶When she opened it, she saw the child. He was crying, and she took pity on him. 'This must be one of the Hebrews' children,' she said. ⁷Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, 'Shall I go and get you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?' ⁸Pharaoh's daughter said to her, 'Yes.' So the girl went and called the child's mother. ⁹Pharaoh's daughter said to her, 'Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will give you your wages.' So the woman took the child and nursed it. ¹⁰When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and she took him as her son. She named him Moses, * 'because', she said, 'I drew him out* of the water.'

1 John 2:28-29

²⁸ And now, little children, let Jesus live in your heart, so that when he comes back into the world we won't feel ashamed about the things we do. If you know that Jesus always does the right thing, you may be sure that everyone who does the right thing has Jesus living in their heart.

Matthew 18:1-5

¹At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, 'Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?' ²He asked a child to come over to him and stand in front of the disciples, ³and said, 'I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. ⁴Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. ⁵Whoever welcomes a child in my name welcomes me.'

Being Good Stewards toward Children

A good rule for teaching children is *never ask a child a question that you yourself can't answer*. Most parents and probably all teachers are familiar with Claude Piaget's theory on the stages of cognitive development. The gist of the theory is that children think differently as children than they do as adults. Children like definitive answers; they have a hard time with speculation or hypothetical notions. This may explain why so many children stray from the Church when they reach adolescence and young adulthood. You teach them all about Noah and the Ark, about the parting of the Red Sea, about Jesus' resurrection and ascension, and they are okay with it until adolescence when they start thinking more critically and more abstractly. That's when they can explore faith at a deeper level. But as children, faith is a simple thing.

So this last week we had our Sunday School children answer the question, “*What does Sunday School mean to you?*” This was going to be a surprise; I saw no one’s answer before today, but if they had said they *learned* a lot of history about Jesus and Abraham and Moses and Noah that was fine. The things I *learned* from Sunday School were just those sorts of things: Jesus died on the cross because we were bad, and he rose from the grave on Easter, and though I wasn’t clear why I thought it meant that people who died wouldn’t be dead forever. I learned about heaven. That was the concrete learning, and with the onset of adolescence I began to question all the history, all those stories. I think I was told that it was bad to NOT believe those stories, and that just gave me a headache that lasted for years. I was told that heaven was for people who did good things, and that made my headache worse. I got some comfort from seeing people who were very “churchy” misbehave, because I figured if they had a chance of going to heaven so did I. But so much of what I *learned* I came to question, and though I wasn’t angry with my Sunday School teachers I felt deprived in a way. I was told to believe in things that were just hard for me to believe.

I realize now that it was really my own fault – that’s also something we learn much better after childhood; how to take responsibility for our own actions. I had *chosen* to leave the church, and so I had few people around me who could satisfactorily answer my questions about the Bible, about faith, about God, and it would be a long time before faith took root in me. And once it did, I could go back to all those stories that I learned in Sunday School about Noah and Abraham and Moses and Jesus, and I could read them with new eyes, and understand them in new ways.

This is where it’s appropriate that I urge your stewardship with regards to our youth; we need to have people in place in this church who can help adolescents navigate the doubt that comes naturally as they develop. We have a great team of Sunday School teachers now who are doing just that, but we need to be vigilant, especially when it’s so easy for teens to go out and get their hands on cheap, toxic drugs that have killed over 70 youth on this island this year. Let’s talk visioning for minute: we strive to be a radically welcoming congregation, open to everyone, *but that’s really not enough; we need to be an outwardly focused congregation that intervenes and injects a drug called LOVE into the veins of our youth.* Opening our doors is not enough; we need to step out of those doors and onto the mean streets. We need to *go* to where the need is so obvious.

Which brings me back to our question about Sunday School. It’s not “What did you learn in Sunday School?” but rather “What does Sunday School *mean* to you?” That’s a lot different, isn’t it? *What does Sunday School mean to you?* Or in the case of us grownups, *what did Sunday School mean to you?* To me it meant nothing bad, and that was good. My family moved around a lot, so I didn’t stay in the same church for more than a few years at a time, and I don’t remember many of my Sunday School classmates and I remember even fewer of my Sunday School teachers, but I remember nothing bad. No fighting, no mean looks, no teasing, no bullying. I don’t imagine that I ever threw a tantrum or had anxiety attacks about going to Sunday School. So what it meant to me was something good. And even though that is all that I can really remember, **THAT’S IMPORTANT** because the positive experience I had may have actually saved my life. When I was a lost soul, wandering in the wilderness, vulnerable to all the deadly addictions and temptations of this world, I felt comfortable enough with the church to come back to it. Jesus says, “Whoever welcomes a child in my name welcomes me.” Every Sunday School

teacher in every church I ever attended welcomed me in Jesus' name. And after I had grown up, the church still welcomed me in Jesus' name.

In Jesus' name. What does it mean when someone says, "I welcome you in Jesus' name"? It means *"I am a representative of Jesus Christ, and I'm letting you know that you are welcome here."* The church is only as strong as the Spirit of Christ that dwells in her people, and everyone who has Jesus living in their heart can say "I welcome you in Jesus' name" in all sincerity. And you don't just say it; you *live* it! Love is measured in actions more than it is in words. Love is measured in all the work that teachers do to prepare for their Sunday School class, in the time and energy they spend teaching their children songs and stories and skits, in the work they do preparing crafts, in the tears they wipe away, in the time they spend deciding on which books and materials are best for their students, in the time they spend learning what they never learned before so that they are better prepared to answer questions posed by their students.

And of course Sunday School is about more than the teachers; it's about the whole church, because you serve to support the teachers through your prayers, through your encouragement, through your offerings, through all the things you do in love, in Jesus' name.