

Your Children are not your Children

Matthew's Gospel this morning tells us the unusual story of Joseph, though I guess it, in a sense, becomes less unusual by the day. It tells us that Joseph's task, given to him by God, was to raise a child who's not his own. More and more of us today are called to do that, in the strictest sense, as families mix and remix. Joseph's case is a little bit distinctive—his adoptive child is not his wife's by her first husband, but from her extra-marital dalliance with God—yet it's the same principle—raising a child that's not your own. But again, through adoption, blended families, we do it more and more.

I used to flinch when I heard Roman Catholics describing Joseph as Jesus' step-father—he was always just his father, to my mind, though I also am comfortable with the story of Mary's extraordinary conception. I've realized that there's a deep pastoral message to this—that in Joseph we have the patron saint of the adoptive parents that we all have become---that's what we did last week. We adopted Christopher and Brendan—we committed ourselves to raise them as our own. We followed the example of Joseph—we made Joseph our patron saint—and we took responsibility for these small, but marvelous gifts from God—with all that entails.

The Joseph metaphor really holds for what we do at Baptism, if you think about it. What does the angel tell Joseph---that Mary's child is a child of the Holy Spirit. That's the whole point of Baptism—to declare the truth of these children, of all of our children, as children of the Holy Spirit---and to take seriously that blessing and potential in each of them as we take responsibility for them. We haven't been given just any children—we've been given God's children, and they are all ours to raise.

Only we have to be careful---because they aren't really ours, are they---They are the Holy Spirit's children. We have responsibility for them, but we don't have possession of them. They belong to God---they've just been entrusted to us to raise and care for until God demands back their lives to do with them as they and God choose. And this is true not just of each other's children---those children that we adopt in baptism. It's true of our

own children, if you're a parent, as well. Cyndi and I have to remember---or better, Cyndi has to remind me—Christopher and Andrew, they aren't ours, they belong to God---they're children of the Spirit. They have just been entrusted to us. We need to honor that trust.

I didn't come to this realization by myself---That our children are not our children---- Sweet Honey on the Rock, a wonderful women's a capella group---they have a song---On Children—drawn from the words of Kahlil Gibran—that makes precisely this point--- “Your children are not your children,” they sing, “They are sons and daughters of life's longing for itself.” They explain it better than I do, so I'll let them take it.... [play song]

The Gospel as preached by Sweet Honey on the Rock speaks eloquently to this morning's gospel from Matthew. To be sons and daughter's of life's longing for life---that is a poignant description of God's creative act---God overshadowing Mary, God overshadowing the waters of creation at the beginning---the love within God pouring itself out to the world, in the creation of our children. And the children that proceed from this divine fountain, they are children whose souls dwell in tomorrow—that dwell in the places to which the Spirit would lead them---places that we can't know or imagine.

What does it mean to have responsibility for children such as these?

It requires a great deal of love—pouring yourself out into what's not your own---this is the greatest trap for parents and communities, I think. We pour ourselves out, and so we think that we own them---but we just can't. They escape and elude us---they are children of the universe in such profound and powerful ways, that our feeble efforts to possess the forces within them---well, they're just feeble.

But once we let go of this, and just pour ourselves out into them.... Oh my, what an experience to participate like that in life's longing for itself---to share in life's longing, to give ourselves to life's longing---It requires love to give ourselves to children such as these, but you receive so much love in return—from the children, but even more from

life---you've given yourself to life's longing—to life's overflowing love, and so that love bathes you in your most difficult moments....

It requires love to raise these children, and it requires faith---to raise them even as you know that they belong to a future that you can neither participate in or imagine. You are giving them to the unknown, and recognizing that their imagination of that unknown future, their participation in it is theirs to shape as they will---the future is theirs to engage, as they are carried by God's spirit, and you must just give them up to it.

This is the greatest anxiety of parenting---giving your children up into the unknown.... You have to trust that the future is God's future---that to say that they are children of tomorrow is to say that they are children of the Spirit, because tomorrow is the realm of the Spirit.... That doesn't give you any more control---the Spirit is more beyond our control than our children are---but it does let you know that, although you can't dwell or imagine their tomorrow, God already dwells there and imagines it with them.

It requires love, and faith, and it requires hope---or maybe I should say that it offers hope. There is a collect for the end of the Prayers of the People in which we remind ourselves that God will give us more than we can ask or imagine---that God's future offers us a promise that fills us precisely because it eludes us---it is a promise of that Christmas gift that stuns us, because we never even knew that it was a possibility. Something like the original gift of Christmas, promised to Joseph long ago. That's the future that we are promised in our children—a future of hope in what we cannot imagine, but that we might see emerging over the horizon as our own boats set sail for another shore.

We, here at St. Thomas, we treasure our children and our youth. That's one of the things that drew me to this place---the deep commitment you have to this community as a place where we can nurture these children of the Spirit. This is a place where we can give them our love in faith, so that they, in turn, can offer us hope. We treasure our children here, and you have done so much to give yourself to them, in your work with them, in Barbara's programming with them, in Anne's time with them....

And we continue to give. Our Christian Education program carried on strongly in the Fall, and we have begun to lay the foundations for a rich a vibrant winter and spring program, as well. Rachel Manteuffel and Barbara Parker, Gray and Margel Snead have worked hard to reshape the program for our youth, and I met this week with Dolly Greenwood and we brainstormed how to give the programming for our Senior High Youth more structure. I want to meet with all of the youth parents in the new year to see how we can carry through on this. Likewise, in vestry last week, we struggled with budget numbers, so that we could find a way to fund as assistant to join us and lead us, filling Barbara and Anne's role, so that the foundations that they've laid would be built on with vigor and care.

In Matthew's Gospel, Joseph is asked to parent this child, Jesus, who would embody God's promise to be with us. Now we are asked to parent these children, who are the fruit of this promise—these children in whom the faith, hope, and love that was born in Jesus come together—in each and every one of them, as they are given to our care. What a privilege and challenge we've been offered—to nurture the children of the Spirit. That is God's call to our community, and I am certain that we will continue to strive to embrace it.

Amen.