

We Gather

Welcome, Announcements, and Land Acknowledgement

Call to Worship

Hymn: "Here in This Place" #10 VT

Lighting of the Peace Lamp

We Bless

Service of Child Dedication

- sharing by the parents

- hymn: "Your Love Is Amazing" #96 VT

- children's time

- litany

Hymn: "Lord, we bring to you our children" #90 STJ

We Pray

Joys, Concerns, and Recognition of Offerings

Congregational Prayer

We Reflect on Scripture

Scripture: Matthew 19:13-15 VT #18

Meditation: "A Blessing of the Children"

We Go to Serve and Bless

Prayer for the Meal

Benediction

Hymn: "Go my children" #830 VT

Matthew 19:13-15 ----- Jesus Blesses Little Children (NRSV)

Then little children were being brought to him in order that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples spoke sternly to those who brought them; but Jesus said, 'Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs.' And he laid his hands on them and went on his way.

Matthew 19:13-15: A Blessing of the Children

Intro: This past Tuesday many of us awoke to the news the Gordon Lightfoot had died at age 84. I own up to the fact that I really enjoy much of the music Gordon Lightfoot has produced through the decades. I recognize his quality of character was, at times, questionable. Some of his song lyrics are offensive to me and others. I am drawn, though, to his masterful work on the guitar and the tunes he produced. And the tenor of his voice. (He could sing his way through the phone book and it would sound great to my ears). With this background I listened intently to the radio interviews on Lightfoot on my Tuesday drive to Tiefengrund.

They shared a clip from the documentary made of Lightfoot some years back. To his biographer he recounted that some of his first exposures to music came at church. Lightfoot mused about a Sunday School teacher. At the conclusion of a SS concert at age five, the teacher gave them a blessing. “You are loved by God. Do your best” is what she said, or something like that.¹

We could do worse than reminding the children, and the child within each of us, that we are loved. We could do worse than encouraging our children, and the child within us all, to do our best. This simple two-fold routine is the basis of our scriptures, the basis of our songs, the basis of our support within the church community. After 30 years of pretty hard living Gordon Lightfoot remembered that message of love and encouragement from his home. I found this recollection touching knowing some of his life beyond the studio through periods of his life. This short segment from the interview tied into my reflections for this morning.

Section I: Children in Church Children have not always been present at religious services. In Matthew 19, the author “is concerned with the place of actual children in church life. In contrast to contemporary Jewish and pagan religious life, the Christian community encouraged participation by the whole family”. In Judaism there may have been rituals for the male child and family, like circumcision, but nothing akin to the family being together in worship. Other religious systems of the day had “men’s” groups or “women’s” clubs. The early church, however, had the whole family present. The disciples of the text represent the ideology of the early decades of that first century limiting access of children to the teacher and worship in general. Jesus represents the reality of Christian communities in the back half of the first century. In light of this, then, it should not surprise us to see Jesus offering the children a blessing, for they too were a part of the worshipping community. In Matthews gospel the physical interaction of Jesus with the children is clearly a pastoral blessing; Mark just uses the term bless. “It is

¹ [Tuesday May 2, 2023 Episode Transcript | CBC Radio](#)

likely that the practice of the Matthean church is reflected here, in which children are welcomed into the community in an act of blessing”.²

Further to that point, Christian worship of the 1st century would have been in a house setting.³ I doubt the parents would have sent the kids out to play in the streets of 1st century Rome, Corinth, or Philippi during the worship. Almost by necessity, the children were a part of worship. The children learned about Christianity from their parents AND the rhythms of community worship. One 21st century apologist, Wolfgang Reinhold, suggested that if each household raised one of their children in such a way that they would embrace Christianity, as well as one other person in their circles, it would explain the dramatic rise of Christianity within the Roman empire.⁴

Section 2: The reality of children in a 21st Century Church Marlene Kropf was a seminary professor of mine in the area of liturgy and worship. In response to debates of the day whether to keep children in worship or scuttle them off to children’s worship, she wrote an article in support of worship integrating all the ages being present. I will paraphrase some of her conclusions.⁵

1. In Anabaptist / Mennonite understandings of the church, children belong in the worshiping community. Even though they are too young to make a personal commitment to Christ, they can respond to God in love and begin to understand what it means to be a Christian and a part of the church.
2. Children do not have to understand everything that happens in worship (not all adults do either): the most important thing children experience is that they belong to God’s family, and that the people around them love God and each other.
3. Including children in worship requires an investment of love and creativity from everyone in the congregation: parents, preachers, worship leaders, music leaders, and anyone who sits close by them. If children are brought to worship and not considered in the planning, they may receive a powerful negative message about their lack of importance.
4. Even young children can tell the difference between being included in a genuine act of worship or being kept busy in an activity that has little significance.

² M. Eugene Boring, *Gospel of Matthew* in “The New Interpreter’s Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes” (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press: 1994), 387.

³ Alan Kreider, presentation on the early church at Mennonite Church SK resourcing in the fall of 2014.

⁴ Alan Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church: The Improbably Rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2016), pp. 119; 129-130.

⁵ Marlene Kropf, “What about Children’s Church?” in *Builder: A Resource for Congregational Leaders* (Fall 1994), pp 15-16.

5. Frazzled parents do need help. Providing non-parental care for infants and toddlers who are restless or tired is a ministry of compassion.
6. Children [and adults I would say] who have no background of church experience can learn.... [through] worship: repeated prayers (like the Lord's prayer, repeated songs, reading Psalms together).
7. Everything we do in worship teaches children about the church: the songs we sing and how we sing them, the prayers we pray, the visual environment, attitudes of ushers, sermons, scripture readings and dramatizations, rituals, the manner in which we eat together—sacramentally and socially.

This takes me to my last section:

Section 3: Church with Children in Mind

Earlier this century, the worship committee of Stirling Avenue Mennonite Church in Ontario put together a tour de force document on areas of a church's worship life in which children and youth can participate. They provide specific examples of how it might work. It has the look of a document prepared for a larger church assembly; I have a copy but not the bibliographic citation. I will read through the areas they highlight without delving into their specific suggestions. Rather, I will pause for a moment or two between each section, providing time for people to consider how we at Nutana Mennonite currently do things or might do things. My rationale in going through this list is as much affirmation as it is encouragement to consider additional dimensions of inclusion for the youngest among us. So we begin:

- Greeting, ushering, and other aspects of welcome
- Scripture reading or other parts of worship leading
- Processions and drama
- Music: children friendly songs; offering preludes and special music; helping accompany with instruments
- Praying: teaching of prayer; hearing their joys and concerns
- Children's Time: sensory, movement, age appropriate language
- Sermon: visuals, children's art of scripture or sermon, drama
- Inclusion of in special services and rituals of the church (like communion)
- Social times together as an intergeneration church family

Conclusion: Earlier I quoted from Wolfgang Reinhold. On the next page Alan Kreider gave a helpful elaboration to Reinhold's speculation. "Some children, no doubt, responded positively to their parents and faith community; and others did

not”.⁶ Our best efforts as parents, grand-parents and a faith community do not ultimately determine the choices our children will make. Sometimes the invitation of Jesus to abide in his love takes hold within our children, and sometimes not. That would be as true of faith communities of the 1st century as the 21st. Ultimately, we entrust them into God’s care who continues to seek them in ways we are not able.

Consider young Gordon Lightfoot. Would his home congregation and parents believed that he would remember the blessing offered by a Sunday School teacher so many years ago? Would his parents and home congregation have supposed that he would publicly offer words of remorse for hurt he had caused others? Gordon became sober. He tended financially to those who had been a part of his family at one time or another. He kept his band on retainer even when not touring because they needed to eat too. He was no saint, none of us are, but at some level the message of God’s love and invitation to care for others was never lost.⁷

Maybe the best we can do is to remind ourselves, and our children, that God loves us and encourages us to do our best. And who knows what their best might come to be: an inventor, a song writer, a compassionate journeyman, a loving parent, a teacher / doctor / lawyer, or maybe even a pastor. May we all remember that God loves us and may we seek to do our best. Amen.

Patrick Preheim, co-pastor Nutana Park Mennonite Church

Parent-Child Dedication Litany

[Susanne will ask parents to come forward at the end of children’s time.]

Opening:- Patrick

We give thanks to God for children and entrust them to God’s loving care. As families dedicate themselves and their children to God, we welcome children to the church community and commit to nurturing them as our own. We ask for God’s blessing on these children, their parents, and this community as we grow together in God’s love.

⁶ Alan Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church: The Improbably Rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2016), pp. 119; 129-130.

⁷ <https://www.cbc.ca/news/entertainment/gordon-lightfoot-legacy-1.6829139>

SUSANNE: Raising children is an act of faith in the God of Life, God the Creator, God the Mother and Father of us all. We welcome Sylvie warmly into this congregation. Following Jesus' example, we bless you, Zac, Aleta, Eli, and Sylvie, as you are already a blessing to us.

Questions addressed to the parents:

PATRICK: Do you commit to creating a loving home in which a relationship with God can take root and grow? If so, answer, "We do."

Parents: We do.

SUSANNE: Do you intend to teach your children, by word and example, what it means to live in Jesus' Way of justice, peace, and compassion?

Parents: We do.

PATRICK: Surrounded by God's love, do you invite our community of faith to support you in caring for your children?

Parents: We do.

SUSANNE: Empowered by the Spirit, may we help your children learn the joys and challenges of discipleship and experience the depth of God's love.

Blessing

(SUSANNE holds Sylvie while PATRICK says:)

Sylvie, may God bless you and keep you, may the very face of God shine upon you and be gracious to you, may God's presence embrace you and give you peace. [*Present with certificate and book.*]

Congregational response: (on screen)

[Susanne: You have offered Sylvie to the strong and tender care of God.]

People: We rejoice with you and give thanks for the gift of your children.

With God as our guide, we will share in your children's nurture and well-being.

We will support, by our example and words, your efforts to provide a loving and caring home where trust in God grows and Christ may be known. Our prayers are with you and for you. May our shared life and witness help you grow as a family in faithfulness and joy. AMEN