

Sometime in late 2018 or early 2019 a dear friend of this congregation, Alan Reese, offered a children's time based on the message of 1st John. Alan put on a scarf which served as a stole and played the part of an elder who with gentleness reminded the little children present that day they are loved and encouraged them to be loving people. With gentleness he encouraged us all to love in truth and action. Interestingly, the author of 1st John never identifies himself or herself but does in the 2nd and 3rd epistles attributed to John and does so there as "the elder" (πρεσβύτερος; see 2nd John 1:1). Being the church historian and student of the bible that he was, Alan knew that based on style and substance the consensus among most scholars is that the same person authored all three letters.¹ Alan died June 3, 2019. It is a powerful thing when the elders in our lives affectionately extend a blessing upon us. It is a powerful thing when the elders in our lives tenderly offer words of wisdom that point us to deeper life.

This phrase "little children" (τεκνία; see 1st John 3:18) appears six times in 1st John (2:12, 28; 3:7,18; 4:4; 5:21) and once as "my little children" (2:1). Each of these references are in the diminutive (akin to *Jungen* or *Madchen auf Deutsch*), which is why translators chose the phrase "little children". It echoes a phrase from John's gospel in which Jesus, after disclosing that he will soon be going away, comforts his disciples by calling them little children. In each of these cases the term is of one of "endearment" and "tenderness"; certainly not scolding.² It was the tenor with which Alan offered his words in his final public offering in this sanctuary.

This all got me thinking how we contribute to shaping the moral and ethical lives of the "little ones" in our lives. This is a question regardless if the little ones are actually adults or children. This line of consideration will serve as guide for the remainder of today's sermon.

The inflection of the elder in 1st John points us in an important direction—using a tone of encouragement. We do well to steep all encounters in authentic care which highlight what is going "right" even if what is going "sideways" must be named. In a resource sitting on my bookshelf is mention of the "hamburger" method of constructive criticism: start with affirmation (the top bun), offer constructive criticism (the burger and toppings), and conclude with affirmation and support (the bottom bun). Everyone deserves to know that they are loved; that in one's eyes they are a dear one, a beloved one, a little child in 1st John language.

¹ C. Clifton Black, "The First, Second, and Third Letters of John" in *The New Interpreter's Bible*—Volume XII (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), p. 365.

² *Ibid*, 388.

In its own way this affirmative message fits a philosophical idea called the theory of “mimesis”. Humans, and all animals, tend to imitate what those important to them have done and taught. Take the birds of the air, for example. In this season we are beholding crow elders of our neighbourhoods beginning to teach the youngsters the successful way of crow life in Saskatoon. This amounts to intimidation through cawing ferociously at humans, cats, dogs and other birds; to showing the next generation the places where crows might hunt for baby robins; to train the younger crows in scouting out geese nests for future pillaging. Most animals learn from observation and imitation of the elders in their lives. This can be for the positive and negative—the young people in our lives are watching.

Walter Wink unpacks this theory in a readable way in his book *Engaging the Powers*.³ Simply put, value “is defined for us as that which someone we admire wants”.⁴ Often this has resulted in mimetic violence; the storming of the capital building in Washing D.C. earlier this year was a classic case of this. The power of the Christian story, Wink contends, is that we are shown a way to counter the negative through the positive. Jesus reveals “a way to fight evil with all our power without being transformed into the very evil we fight. It is a way—the only way possible—of not becoming what we hate...Jesus, in short, abhors both passivity and violence.”⁵ Our value of Jesus Christ ought to shape how we think, act and speak. When we live into a relation with Christ and exhibit Christ like behaviour, the theory goes, those who value us will be drawn into a relationship with Christ and Christ like behaviour as well.

These observations of the animal world and philosophy highlight that we learn through mentorship. It is, after all, the elder who is speaking to a congregation which has recently suffered trauma.⁶ This elder is seeking to guide a congregation through a challenging time. We, as a congregation and as families, can do this as well. The lead story of the March 29, 2021 *Christian Science Monitor Weekly* is “When everyone is a tutor: why tutoring may change how young and old alike learn”.⁷ The upshot of the article is that learning will be less tied to buildings and programs than to caring persons present in the lives of the learner; particularly in a time of social isolation. If you have a younger or older person in your life, good for you. Be friends. Learn what you can from them. Impart what you are learning. On to another stop in the learning curve....

³ Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers* (Minneapolis, Augsburg Fortress: 1992), pp.144--168.

⁴ Ibid, 145.

⁵ Ibid, 189.

⁶ Marion Soards, Thomas Dozeman, Kendall McCabe, *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary--* (Year B; Lent / Easter, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), pp.117-118.

⁷ Stephanie Hanes, “When Everyone is a Tutor” in *The Christian Science Monitor Weekly* (March 29, 2021), pp 22-28.

We learn by doing. Very few people learn to curl simply by watching curling; at some point one must take to the ice and throw rocks. Very few people learn to play the violin simply by watching a violinist; at some point one must take up the instrument. It is not enough to observe the values of those we value. To grow into those desired ways of being we are required to step out on the Jesus Way. And like learning to play a sport or instrument, it takes time. Growing in our imitation of Christ will entail mistakes, bouts of lethargy, and times when we wonder if it is really worth it. Still, though, when Jesus says, “pray for your persecutors”, we are invited to pray for the people who aggravate us the most. When Jesus washes the feet of his disciples, we are invited to practice servant leadership with those under our care. When Jesus willingly gives his life for friend and foe alike, we are invited to practice a sacrificial life which offers life to others. It is not a complicated theory; just really hard to do. Like the disciples and early church we will not get it perfect, but we launch out on the Jesus Way on account of God’s love for us and the love of Christ which extends to us and others.

This connects directly to my last point of mentorship. Not only does a novice curler or violinist benefit from practice, they benefit from those who have been on the path. They can normalize the mistakes made, the times of lethargy, the questions of “if it is worth it”. As we learn to be Christian it is vital others, and a few elders God willing, are a part of the journey. It is also important we have liturgical mechanisms for coming to terms with mistakes, lethargy, and doubts. This is true for all “little children”, regardless our age.

Contemporary Jesuit understandings of discipleship help us in responding to the reality of imperfection, and this too is an important lesson for little children to learn. We must find redemptive ways of dealing with the shortcomings of ourselves and others. The alternative is to lapse into self loathing, cynicism, and hostility. According to Jesuit thinking there is a three-fold movement that we can repeatedly cycle through: experience, reflection, action.⁸ We are invited to name the experiences of the morning or day (the good, the bad, the ugly). We then reflect upon them: giving thanks in some cases and expressing remorse in others. We invite God to help us translate these sentiments into action: repeating the positive moments and not repeating the negative moments. This cycle of processing one’s daily events in light of Christ’s life gives us room to affirm God’s patient love for us, to offer up regrets, to celebrate good moments, to conscientiously commit ourselves anew to the way of Jesus. On one’s own this may seem onerous, so we come together as a religious community for worship, discernment and encouragement which, reflect this three-fold movement.

⁸<https://epublications.regis.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://scholar.google.ca/&httpsredir=1&article=1086&context=jhe>

Little children like stories. Most of us love a good story. In a non-didactic manner we are invited to join the story before us. In Church we tell Jesus stories, surely, but also other stories. Take, for example, Rachel Naomi Remen's *My Grandfather's Blessings*. She is a cancer physician and master storyteller, who uses her luminous stories to remind us of the power of kindness and the joy of being alive. Dr. Remen's grandfather, an orthodox rabbi and scholar of the Kabbalah, saw life as a web of connection and knew that everyone belonged to him, and that he belonged to everyone. He taught her that blessing one another is what fills our emptiness, heals our loneliness, and connects us more deeply to life. Life has given us many more blessings than we have allowed ourselves to receive. *My Grandfather's Blessings* is about how we can recognize and receive our blessings and bless the life in others. Often, she notes, we find blessing in serving others.⁹

We tell the stories of those who have gone before us aware that these stories shape and inspire us. *My Grandfather's Blessing*, *The Martyr's Mirror*, various compilation of the lives of saints, the work of St Bede the Venerable in 8th century England, and the Gospel's themselves all testify that stories shape our story. And this is not limited to historical storytelling. Contemporary theologian Thomas Long contends that "saying things out loud is a part of how we come to believe. We talk our way *toward* belief, talk our way from tentative belief through doubt to firmer belief".¹⁰

So, then, we have reached the end of the sermon but not the end how we might live 1st John. Elders, bless those little children around you even as Alan Reese blessed us. Let us remember that we have people in our lives who come to value what we value, so let us value the more noble things of this world. Let us take time for those placed in our lives that we might learn from them and contribute well to their journey—mutual mentorship I would say. We learn by doing, so let us do what Jesus did and say what Jesus said. When we fall short of this, and we will, let us confess our shortcomings, get up, and try again. Finally, let us tell stories: of Jesus, of those who have gone before us, of our own journey. As we do these things, I trust, we will find blessing as the children of God. Amen.

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⁹ <https://www.amazon.ca/My-Grandfathers-Blessings-Strength-Belonging/dp/1573228567>

¹⁰ Thomas G. Long, *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), p. 6