

Seen and Heard

Rev. John Allen

I have recently become well aquatinted with the different sounds that children make.

It is a stunning diversity. Beyond what I had imagined.

Coos and squawks. Cries. Gasps. Giggles. Squeels.

Sometimes Cora will just make one sound in the middle of the night, so loud it makes me shoot up in bed. I look over. And she is sound asleep.

When Molli and I were getting ready to welcome Cora, we took some childbirth classes, and read a lot of books.

I remember that so many of them let me desiring more straightforward answer.

How often should they eat? How much should they sleep?

Book after book, and teacher after teacher, said, in so many words: “your baby will tell you.”

Dr. Spock, the book I was raised with, says “only your baby knows the answers to these questions, watch her, and listen to her.”

I had not spent a ton of time with any infants before Cora was born.

But I had spent enough time with a few that I was skeptical. I was skeptical that they would be able to “tell” me things like that.

I was wrong.

Within days of having Cora home, I began to develop an almost instinctual ability to interpret her cries and sounds. Which ones meant she was hungry. Which ones meant she was bored. Which ones meant she was so tired that she was about to fall asleep. Which

meant that she had no interest in a nap at this time, thank you very much.

Now I have realized that while all those books and classes were helpful, the most important parenting teacher I have is her.

I had underestimated her.

I think that is something we do a lot. Underestimate children.

Jesus disciples were certainly guilty of that.

Mere moments after Jesus told them he was going to die, the disciples were bickering with each other about which one of them would be in charge when he was gone. Who was his favorite? Which one of them was the greatest?

Jesus emerges from a distance away and asks them knowingly: “so what were you all arguing about just now.”

They were too ashamed to admit it.

But Jesus knew. He knew them well enough by then.

So he sat them down, and picked up a child. And holding the little one in his lap he told them, if you want to be first, you must be last. If you want to be great, you must be the servant of all.

And if you want to welcome God. Welcome a child like this.

If he were not Jesus, and was a little more blunt, he might have said: “Who said you all were no great? Maybe God will want to put this kid in charge.”

But he is Jesus, so his rebuke is kind, it is gentle in a way, but it is resounding, it is direct, and it is clear.

Don't over estimate yourselves.

And don't underestimate children.

Because I am here to tell you that the most effective teacher I have ever had, was 4 weeks old.

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By the way, if you imagine that child sitting sweetly on Jesus lap, motionless and serene. Forget the watercolor paintings you have seen of this story and remember what actual human children are like.

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So a moment ago, Molli and I made a promise before God and all of you.

We promised to teach our daughter by word and example to follow Christ and we promised to offer her the nurture of Christian community.

By the way, if you are ever having a hard time getting the kids out the door to church, you could always try asking them to help you keep your promise.

You never know... It's worth a shot.

Anyway, we promised to teach our daughter by word and example to follow Christ and we promised to offer her the nurture of Christian community.

We can probably all imagine a lot of ways to teach our children about our faith. Reading Bible stories, singing songs, praying. Coming to church, participating in the service, going to Sunday School.

All of those things will be a part of her future to be sure.

But what about now?

What can this church teach Cora, or Lucy and Enzo who are being baptized next week. Or Caroline and Natalie who are being baptized the week after that.

How can we keep our promise now?

A renewed development psychologist named Dr. James Fowler asked this question too. His seminal book is entitled “Stages of Faith: Human Development and the Quest for Meaning.” In it, he explores how our search for meaning in the world develops as we age and how our spirituality or sense of the holy grows and changes over time.

Amazingly, Dr. Fowler says that the search for meaning, and the formation of faith begins the moment we are born, if not even earlier, when we are in late stages of fetal development.

The newborn cannot understand the idea of God. In fact newborns do not know a world beyond the person they are seeing in any given moment.

Their parents face is, truly, their whole world.

And our most important developmental task is to learn that the world will work for us. That someone will come when we cry. That we will be fed and held.

Sure we might try to dangles some black and white shapes to make our kids smarter or something. I mean, I did it too.

But that is a drop in the ocean compared to a child learning to trust the world.

Dr. Fowler describes this phase:

“The seeds of trust, courage, hope, and love are planted here. The strength of that trust, hope, and courage, developed in this phase is the foundation of all that comes later in faith development.

We learn that the world response to us. We learn what it feels like to be loved. We learn that in fact there is someone who loves us, who will care for us, who will protect us.

The infant mind cannot abstract that idea into the concept of God. But make no mistake, Fowler says, this is the moment where we learn our first lesson in the lifelong journey of faith.

So that is what we can do today. For Cora, and for the other children who journey here. We can imprint the very image of God into their hearts, with our own love.

Which is lovely.

But its also a lot of pressure. To realize that the earliest encounter with holiness that children have, are their encounters with us.

Earlier this week a friend of mine posted a photo on facebook. She was sitting in the pew a church she was visiting for the very first time, when her infant daughter began to make the kinds of noises infants make.

The photo was of a small card, preprinted for this very purpose, and handed to her by an usher which read:

“Thank you for your commitment to bringing your child to church. In order to allow those around you to focus on the sermon, please enjoy the remainder of the service in our lobby.”

She was kind enough to obscure the church’s logo before posting the image.

But if I knew what church it was, I would send them a copy of today's scripture reading.

Because Jesus loves to use a restless baby to puncture self-importance.

“Whoever welcomes one child in my name, welcomes me.”

Who's to say that kid wasn't praying. Or saying Amen, or Alleluia, the only way she could?

And what is she going to learn about God, and God's people, if every time she makes a sound, she is rushed out of the Sanctuary?

So, as I mentioned before. In the next three weeks, including this one, we will be baptizing 5 children here.

They will be seen. And they will be heard.

They have come to this church not just because their parents can't leave them home alone, but because from the moment they are born they begin to learn lessons about God, and they begin to learn about the church, who we are, and what we are like.

We begin to honor those promises the moment we make them.

We don't have to wait until they are old enough to speak, or read, or understand.

More than the children's sermon.

More than the Sunday School lesson.

Our children are learning how to be Christians by watching us.

They are learning how to live in this world by watching us.

What an incredible responsibility.

What an incredible opportunity.