

August 21, 2022

Post-Pandemic Purpose: Children

Matthew 19:13-15; 18:1-4

About fifteen years ago, Christian scholar Phyllis Tickle put out a book called *The Great Emergence*. Her thesis, put simply, was that every five hundred years or so, we have a religious revolution. The dominant church collapses under its own weight, and a new manifestation appears. Briefly, we began with Jesus of Nazareth, at about the year zero. Then, five hundred years later, the Early Church ended with the fall of Rome, and was replaced by the medieval church. Another five hundred years, there's the Great Schism of 1054, and then, around 1500, the Protestant Reformation. I'm skeptical of her historical argument. She never explains why 500 is the magic number, and it seems to me that she cherry-picks the religious revolutions that fit her schedule. But for all that, her description of the structure of religious revolutions rings true. A new expression of faith arises, beginning with a radical idea that defies its surrounding culture. This prophetic movement builds and attracts more followers until it changes from being a scary new cult, to a minority sect, to – eventually – the established church. Now, accepted by society, it begins building institutional structures to support its mission, but after a while the adherents of that religion begin to mistake those later structures for the religion itself, and the institution becomes so enmeshed with its culture that it loses all distinctiveness. Finally, having forgotten its reason for being, that version of the faith collapses, and a new movement arises to take its place. As I said, all this rings true.

There's a second part of Phyllis Tickle's argument, which some of you have already guessed through addition. She believes that we – now five-hundred years after the last revolution – are due. She thinks the current expression of Christianity has lost legitimacy and is fading away, soon to be replaced by a new expression of our faith, which she calls "The Great Emergence." I'm have problems with this argument, too, mostly because global Christianity is *not* fading away. In South and Central America, in Sub-Saharan Africa, and in Asia, Christianity is booming. It's only in Europe, Australia, and North America that we're struggling. The only way to say that Christianity is about to collapse is to assume that white Christianity is the only part that matters. And that ain't so.

Still, we're a part of that struggling slice of Christianity, and we do see definite signs of decay – our numbers are dropping, our influence is waning, and our reputation is in tatters. None of this is new to you. We've been watching these things for decades now. But now something has changed: we had a global pandemic that kicked that process into overdrive. I'm not sure why the pandemic had that effect, but the people who study such things are astonished at how dramatically the past two-and-a-half years have changed the American church. I attended a conference Zoom meeting for pastors last week that began with a prayer expressing sorrow for the church that we knew before Covid-19 and that is now gone forever. What were gradual changes have become rapid transformations. Cracks have become canyons. Where Evangelical and Mainline Christianity were divided before, we have become almost different religions. Denominational differences were already losing significance; now they feel like quaint reminders of the olden days, like printed calendars. And for better or worse, millions of people have begun re-evaluating their commitment to their church. It's like a great building that we've known was sinking slowly into the ground, but we thought still had plenty of time. Then a flood washed away a layer of dirt to reveal that it's only being held up by a couple of two-by-fours.

To summarize, while worldwide Christianity is doing fine, we have some troubles in this corner of the faith, and those troubles have been laid bare and made worse by the past couple of years. Three years ago, I was concerned about what the American church would look like in twenty years. Today I'm not sure what it will be like in five. Now it is possible, even probable, that all this is alarmism from someone who spends way too much time reading religion surveys and demographic studies. But, in another sense, it doesn't matter, because whether the American church is in dire straits or not, we have the same course of action before us: it is time for us to look behind our institutional structures and beyond our position in society to rediscover what our radical founder taught his first followers. Today, we have two readings from the Gospel of Matthew.

We read first Matthew 19, verses 13-15.

¹³ 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; ¹⁴but 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.' ¹⁵And he laid his hands on them and went on his way.

And now we read Matthew 18:1-4:

¹⁸ At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, 'Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?' ²He called a child, whom he put among them, ³and said, 'Truly I tell you, 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.'

Believe it or not, one of the revolutionary ideas of Jesus was that children mattered. Today we would all agree with that statement – whether we follow through on it or not – but at the time of Jesus, and for most of human history, children were basically a resource. They represented future farm labor and, in the long run, a retirement plan. In scripture, having many children was one measure of wealth. They were as valuable as sheep, although maybe not quite as much as oxen – I don't really know the exchange rate. But, until they were old enough to send out into the fields (ten years old, say) they were still an unrealized gain: potentially valuable, but right now just a nuisance. You can hear that attitude in the disciples' wish to get rid of the rug rats so that Jesus could get on with his important work, but Jesus shocks them. "Leave the kids alone. Let them come to me. This is what the kingdom of God is like." In the second reading, he makes that even more clear: "You want to know who is greatest in the kingdom of heaven? The one who is most like this child." Not only do children have worth in and of themselves, but they have valuable lessons to teach the adults.

It appears that one of our sacred tasks as followers of Christ is to receive, affirm, teach, bless, learn from, and love children. As we look toward an uncertain future in American Christianity, I know of no more important task for us to be about. But let me stress one thing: that does not necessarily mean just beefing up the Sunday School. Let us not confuse our familiar structures with the purpose itself. That's when we lose our way. Sunday School, as a program, was invented only a couple of hundred years ago. Before that, religious education of children was primarily in the home. They didn't do stuff at church. But the home plan was hit or miss, depending on who in the home was teaching the children, and how consistently. That's why the Sunday School movement of the 19th century began: to offer standardized (if somewhat shallow) religious education in a classroom environment to everyone. This model became

standard up through the 1970s, but even by then it was fading. So, in recent decades, many large churches dropped the Sunday School model and began offering a separate “children’s church,” removing kids from the rest of the church, but this model is hard to maintain unless you’re a large church with a large staff. Finally, just in the past few years, still other churches have been experimenting with programs and worship services designed to bring generations back together. One example is a program called “Messy Church,” invented in a small Anglican church in the UK. It’s something like our IM Church: a monthly gathering for all ages with activities and games and music and teaching and a meal.

My point is that honoring, teaching, and learning from children isn’t about any one program. There are a lot of options, each with their own strengths and weaknesses. We can learn a few basic lessons from this quick survey of history, though. First, if the goal is to raise up followers of Christ, no once-a-week Sunday School class or separate Children’s Church is sufficient. Those do well at teaching Bible facts, but faith is not something we can memorize. Faith is learned from relationship. I’m guessing that most of us here would affirm that: whatever we may have learned in Sunday School as children, we got our faith from our parents or grandparents or some other mentor figure. With that in mind, you might say that the ideal model for raising children in faith is the home model, and for some homes I’d say that’s true. But not every home can provide the same opportunities. Some parents are new to the faith themselves. Others are working multiple jobs and struggle to find time. To those families, the church needs to be intentional in providing support – again, not just Bible facts, but models and mentors in the faith.

So here’s where we are at Lake Street. We had a remarkable Sunday School program here in the 1950s, as some of you remember. But that program has been in decline ever since, and in many ways has become an afterthought for most of the congregation. Even before the pandemic, recruiting teachers was . . . arduous. So we’ve tried to reach out to children in other ways. One of the things we have been intentional about in the past few years has been involving our children more deeply in worship – with the children’s area in the back, the activity boxes, acolytes, and so on. These are good things, and I’m proud of how well the congregation has responded to the increased prominence of children in the pews.

But one of the things the pandemic has affected most in churches across the country has been children’s programming, and that’s true here, too. Some of our families with children are now opting for the home model, others have disappeared entirely. Our old program depended heavily on paid staff, which in the new economy we have not been able to find. We’re planning a children’s education time to begin in September that will be “hybrid” in a sense – adaptable both for home lessons or for a church education hour – but even as we plan we have no idea how many to expect. Or if we’ll have enough volunteers to keep it going.

As I said at the beginning, this is a new day in the church. There is a sense that something old and familiar is passing away, and faster than we’d expected, and we’re stepping out into unexplored territory. But behind all these dramatic changes is one solid immovable reality: receiving, accepting, caring for, teaching, and loving children is not optional. It is an essential part of following Christ through the church. Whatever means we use, whatever it costs us, this is one part of who we must be.

Final Word: Preparing for the online Living Room service – which involves leading a prayer – I thought I'd go online and find some prayers written by children. Nothing. All I found was prayers to pray over children or, worst of all, some very sweet prayers that adults had written for children to learn. The thing is, and some of you may have had different experiences with children than I, so you may disagree, but in my experience, kids aren't all that sweet. Don't get me wrong, they're great, but not primarily sweet. The thing I like most about the prayers that children pray is that they are honest. This week if you have a chance, listen to children, especially if you can hear them pray. They have lessons to teach us. The Bible tells us so. Let's pray:

God, it's Jerry. Morris. I guess there are a lot of Jerrys. The one in Wisconsin. God thank you for my cats. And my dog, too, but she's really Rebecca's. But I like her, too, so thank you. They're all good company, and I can tell them anything, and they don't mind and they don't say I shouldn't say things like that. I guess you don't either, so thank you for that, too.

Thank you for hamburgers, especially grilled ones, because they're better. And also blueberries and soft ice cream, but not eggplant. I don't know why you made eggplant. But I guess you had a reason, so, you can do it if you want.

Thank you for books with happy endings, and not the ones that people write to make you sad. God, help those people to write better books.

Thank you for my best friends. Human friends, I mean.

God, I have a friend who died a couple of days ago. You know the one. I guess you can't keep healing people forever, but it's still sad. Take care of her now. But you always do that.

God, I saw some mean people on television who were shooting at each other. Can't you make them stop? It would make your world better if you did. Well, think about it.

Oh, and thank you for hot dogs, too. I should have said that along with hamburgers, but I forgot. Grilled ones, with relish. I guess that's all for now. Love, Jerry. I mean Amen.