

5/17/09 Sermon
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A few years ago, the Children and Youth Ministries division of the Episcopal Church, organized discussions in five dioceses across the country. These discussions involved people of all ages, and they were called: "Will Our Faith Have Children?" It's a little counter-intuitive...not "Will Our Children Have Faith?...which is a more obvious question, but "Will Our Faith Have Children? Now this title question was, obviously, intentionally provocative and designed to prompt conversation. Parker Palmer, the Quaker writer/educator/master teacher, who led the plenary sessions for the discussions, said that to him, the question, "Will Our Faith Have Children," means that, in order for practicing Christians to pass on our faith--our sacred stories, our wonder at the mystery of God, our wisdom, our excitement for the spiritual journey--in order for us to pass on our faith, we need to tend to our own spiritual groups. He put it this way: There is no way that our faith will have children, until we can say that our faith has adults. The bottom line is that we cannot give to our children, or anyone else, something that we do not have.

He went on to say that the primary task of the church, then, is to create seekers of all ages, who desire to be spiritually formed in Christ. How does that happen? According to Palmer, it happens by creating spaces that are safe enough for the soul to venture forth from within. He likens the human soul to a wild animal. The soul is tough, and resilient, even when it doesn't receive much nourishment, much soul food, or water. The human soul is also essentially shy, like most wild animals. When we want to encourage our soul to come forth, we can't go crashing and clomping our way through the woods, demanding that it come out NOW. That approach does not work. It frightens the timid soul. Rather, in order to see a wild animal, you have to walk in the woods--often at particular hours in the day, such as very early in the morning, or at dusk--and sit quietly. Going at the right hour and sitting quietly, still doesn't guarantee that you will see what you are waiting for. But you might. And if you do, you'll never forget it, for the rest of your life.

A wild photographer I know confirms Palmer's observations. In order to capture a single photograph of the reclusive wild animal, my friend often returns to the same spot, day after day, just waiting for a glimpse of the elusive animal. He watches very carefully, for signs of the animal, to learn about its habits, and where it might be. And sometimes--but not always--his patience is rewarded. Spiritual formation, according to this perspective, is a matter of learning to walk quietly in the woods with one another. To wait and watch quietly for the soul, to see if it will emerge. And if it emerges, to see what it has to teach. Spiritual formation, from this perspective, is a matter, then, of creating an environment that encourages us to wait, watch for, draw forth, the true authentic self.

Now--independent of Parker Palmer's insights, twelve sixth-graders at Trinity, have been meeting weekly since September, to talk about their vision of faith, and to create a church. They actually didn't just talk about it, but they argued, bantered, disagreed, poked and prodded each other about it as well. And in the end, they came up with their

church: The Church of Integrity. And this banner is being revealed for the very first time, right here before us. In the spirit of being the church--and anybody who has been involved with the church for any period of time, knows this--in the true spirit of being the church, there was not--and is not--uniform consensus, among the YA Group, about their name. The top two ideas for their name and identity, emerged at their second church sleepover, when some of them noticed the Core Values that are posted around Trinity. Now this is an observant group. Have YOU noticed all of the places that the Core Values are posted? Can you name all, or most, of the Core Values in your mind--just off the top of your head? Now, this is not a pop quiz, so I won't ask you to name them right now.

But two words from the Core Values stood out to them. Half of the group noticed and liked the word Justice. The other half of the group noticed and liked the word Integrity. The split came along gender lines. Half of the group--the boys--wanted to name their church The Church of Justice, or the Church of God's Justice. And the other half--the girls--stuck with, and promoted The Church of Integrity. Part of their discussions, once those two words emerged, revolved around the question of "what the heck Justice and Integrity actually mean". Although their initial definitions of those values, might have been a little "squishy"--as their intrepid leader, Bob Hickey said--the YA Group could easily point to examples of integrity and justice in action. Baseball athletes, who shall remain nameless, who have used performance-enhancing drugs, showed a lack of integrity. However, Tony Romo, of the Dallas Cowboys, showed integrity when he was at a movie theatre one night, and the man in front of him was turned away because of his looks and his smell. And Tony Romo responded by saying, "I've smelled a lot worse in the locker room." Promptly paid the man's way, bought the popcorn, and went with him to the movies.

Now while they might not have landed on a Miriam Webster, or Oxford Dictionary definition of integrity and justice, these twelve sixth-graders have shown a strong sense of integrity and justice in their actions and activities throughout the year. Here is a small sampling of some of things they have done since September, on Sunday mornings and beyond. Planned and hosted a Halloween party for residents of Williams Plaza. Decorated and co-ordinated the Christmas Giving Tree--also for residents of Williams Plaza. Dusted, mopped, worked in the yard, hung out with, cooked for, and delivered food to Swan house--a residence for people with AIDS. Cooked and served the Shrove Tuesday Pancake Supper at Trinity--through which \$147 was raised for an as-yet-undesignated non-profit---although rumor has it that the Humane Society might become the designee of their funds. They have cooked meals for both the Men's and Women's Transition Projects, and staffed the Palm Sunday Stations of the Cross in Kempton...and the list goes on... And this is all in addition to their multiple commitments of school, homework, sports, music, dance, computer, and other activities--not to mention time with friends and family. An impressive group we have in our midst! (Applause...)

They have had to make, throughout the year, on a weekly basis, the same decisions that are facing you and I, every week--which is, how do we value our time? How so we spend it? How do we live out our faith in our daily actions, where we are. It is worth

noting, that in co-ordinated studies around the world by ethicists, the two values of justice and integrity that this YA Group focused on, consistently emerged as top values held by people of multiple cultures. Did you guys know that? In fact, in a study involving forty different countries, and fifty different faith groups, integrity and justice jointly appear amongst the top values every time.

Even though the sixth-graders have exercised both integrity and justice throughout the year, today they are the Church of Integrity, because after weeks of discussion and surveys, on the day of the final definitive vote, more girls showed up for class than boys. (Laughter..Applause..) Gracious in defeat--sort of--the boys learned the truth of that old saying that "95 % of Life involves just showing up," ...or as the sticker on Canon Pastor Catherine Nichol's office door reads: "Get involved. The world is run by those who show up."

Once the YA Group decided on a name, they decided it was time to find out a little bit more about what integrity actually means. And their research revealed that integrity describes a state of "complete, sound, undivided wholeness." From a moral perspective, integrity connotes "honest, truthful, uncorrupt, trustworthy behavior." Or, as one of them said last Sunday when I visited the class: "Integrity means standing up for who you are, and what you believe." Now to me, that sounds an awful lot like Parker Palmer's comment that "the purpose of spiritual formation is to live according to our true authentic selves."

If spiritual formation is a matter of creating trusting, just, integrated space,--that encourages the wild, but shy, human soul to venture out--the early church community teaches us a lot about how to do this. In the writings of the Gospel of John, the Acts of the Apostles, and that letter from 1st John that we also heard, we need a God who brings all of creation into relationship. And who time and again heals and restores fragmentation and brokenness. We need a God who says "love one another, as I have loved you." Because it is only in meeting the challenge of living out that commandment every day--and it is a challenge on a daily basis--it is only in meeting the daily challenge of that commandment that any of us learns to live according to our true, authentic, integrated life.

In the liturgy of affirmation that we are all about to enter into, I encourage you to listen to the prayers and the blessings. And you have a part. Not only are Cleo and Claire, and Kelsey, and Chase, and Alice, and Rawls, and Elizabeth, and Jackson, and Gabriel, and Madison,--and two members of the group, John and Ben, are not able to be here this morning, but we remember them. They are being presented and affirmed in their journey today--but not only that--because also, part of what is happening is that we as a community, are affirming our commitment to tending to their souls, and our souls...to their wholeness, and our wholeness...to their integrity, and our integrity...because that is the work of this community.