

In God's Own Image, Adele Boy LLWL

It's hard to believe the summer has come and gone. I don't know about you, but I have an internal battle with myself to accept being structured and scheduled after two months of utter freedom to do as I choose. Like some of you who attended and worked in education you will get that September is the true start of a new year. Although I am no longer attending school in any way shape or form, thank you God, I did receive pictures of my granddaughter starting her first day of grade 3 and pictures of friends' grandchildren as they began their new adventures for another year. If that wasn't enough to shock me into reality, I see young families loading into their cars, going to day cares or school, as I walk my neighbourhood each morning. I always marvel at the degree of energy they appear to have.

These occurrences prompted me to think more deeply about the future of children in general.

In doing my research for today, I discovered that in the World Council of Churches' pilgrimage to justice and peace program, there has been an emphasis on children. They have suggested three priorities in this programme. 1. to promote child protection, 2. to promote meaningful participation by children within the church programs and 3. to raise church voices for intergenerational climate justice by supporting initiatives for and with children and adolescents.

We all know that the presence of children in the United Church of Canada, according to recent data for the programme Towards 2035, has declined by 98% since its heyday in the 1960s. I have no magic wand to wave to make

that change in our church or in the denomination as a whole. Sadly, we do not have the gift of children's presence at Sandford Zephyr on a regular basis, but we certainly celebrate the occasions when Ruth's grandchildren enhance our music program and Karen and Tanis's grandchildren light up the sanctuary with their energy and high spirits. We all appreciate how Rev. Li engages the visiting children and treats them with respect which is important in our community

Research regarding the decline in the attendance of children in our churches has indicated that Sunday School practices in the 60's in the spiritual formation of young people were not getting it quite right. Psychological and medical studies over the years have evolved, revealing interesting findings about children's brains and varied learning styles.

That is not to say that teachers were not doing their best, or that children were not learning about the Bible. The common practice in both of these institutions was to see children as empty vessels to be filled with information. In our case, about God and faith. It was implied that adults had all the answers and that children were to sit back and learn from them. That was certainly true in my experience.

In our scripture this morning, we hear Jesus offer two different examples of how that method and belief are not true. In Matthew 18, the disciples ask Jesus "who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" Jesus' response is to place one lone child among them, declaring that "unless we become like children, we cannot enter the kingdom of heaven." Jesus values children not for their future potential but for the spiritual gifts they already bring: openness, humility, wonder. His teaching reminds us that children have an

innate deep, God given spirituality. The context of this scripture verse is important as it will illustrate how radical this statement was at the time.

Children in the first centuries in Roman and Jewish homes were valued because of what they could offer later on in life. They would provide care for their aging parents, produce more children to extend the family line and they would work to help support the family as it grew. But in the present, they were a liability. Small children could help, yes, in small ways. However, they were another mouth to feed. They needed looking after, they often succumbed to diseases and died early in life. Most importantly, small children could not be relied upon to be productive in any way, shape, or form. Children, like females at the time, were considered to be property. So when Jesus placed a child in front of the disciples, he did so, fully aware of how poorly they were regarded. It would have shocked or at least surprised his followers. He is giving a lesson here, that when you welcome a child, the most vulnerable and one of the most looked down upon members of the community, you welcome Jesus.

In the following chapter of Matthew, Jesus offers another teaching as it seems clear that the disciples did not get the message the first time. They still seem to think that children are not worth Jesus's valuable time, for they speak sternly to the people who are bringing their children to Jesus. Now to give the disciples some credit, perhaps they see that Jesus is growing weary, and they're trying to protect him. However, Jesus says, "Let the children come to me, and do not stop them, for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs." Jesus models acceptance of the most powerless and lowest members of society, elevating their importance in God's realm.

I would offer that western society, in its behaviour, is much like that of the early Romans and Jews. I don't mean that as individuals we all don't value and love our children, giving them every opportunity to succeed, but as a collective society we are failing children. Let me give you a few examples to prove that point. In the Durham region, statistics say that one in four children live in food insecurity. There are 760,000 people who access food banks in Ontario, 29% of whom are children.

In terms of the ever-increasing climate crisis, caused in great part by the overuse of fossil fuels, we have failed children all over the world.

Collectively we have done such great damage to the environment, it is a very wounded earth we are leaving to the next generations.

In countries further afield, we have government agents tearing children apart from their parents and putting them in holding spaces, like animals. Some separated a few years ago have still not been reunited. It has been reported that 19,000 to 35,000 children from Ukraine have been kidnapped and re-homed in Russian homes. Only 2000 have been returned as cited by the international coalition for the return of Ukrainian children, which is co-chaired by Canada.

In my own experience in war-torn Palestine in 2018, I witnessed repeated abuse of children. I watched families stand helplessly by as bulldozers tore down their homes. Some children were taken by Israeli soldiers from their homes in the middle of the night, imprisoned without trial and sometimes tortured. Oftentimes this is done to intimidate the family. Sometimes the children have thrown stones...one of the few ways they can defend themselves.

I watched a father coaching his 8 year old son about how to interact with an armed Israeli soldier as they crossed through the Occupation Wall to their own farm on the other side. Failure to learn this lesson could result in harassment, injury or imprisonment.

I was equally affected to hear my black friends' stories of feeling it necessary to teach their sons how to behave in Toronto if stopped by the police.

The United Nations reports that there have been 20,000 children killed in Gaza, with more than 44,000 injured since October. Those who have survived are suffering because of mass displacement, severe lack of clean water and food, and the collapse of the healthcare system.

The world numbers are staggering and I have not touched on the plight of children in Cuba, Africa or South America.

Perhaps this is why Jesus chose one child to set before his disciples.

These examples of poor treatment of children exist but we may feel removed from them. So allow me to bring our focus back to the challenges faced by our own families, our own children, our community. Food insecurity continues to rise, education cuts continue to marginalise students who are neurodivergent, addictions and alienation exist, while graduates cannot find appropriate jobs. So the question remains, what equips children the world over to be resilient?

From whence does their resilience spring? I would offer human and spiritual connections. Ralph Milton, a United Church Minister's response is "that although adults may know of God's love, children understand things about God's love that adults cannot, so ! He advocates, don't rebuke

children, but listen to them and honour them.“ Based on Jesus’ words in today’s scripture, children have everything they need within them to understand God’s love and grow with God. They may not term it God. Maybe zest for life! Intuition, curiosity, spirituality. We can learn from children about God if we just listen and respect their intuition.. remember the saying ‘out of the mouth of babes’?

There are many examples of the brilliance of children and young people. Take the accomplishments of Malala Yussafzai, who was shot at the age 15 by Taliban for her activism for women and girls in her society. She won the Nobel prize at age 17 for her heroic struggle against the suppression of young people and children. At 29 she continues her work through her own foundation.

Autumn Peltier, an Anishinabek child, addressed the United Nations at age 13, advocating for clean water practices. Her knowledge and influence was so respected she was made Chief Water Commissioner for her own Anishinabek nation in 2019. She grew up on Manitoulin island, the world’s largest freshwater island. They lacked clean drinking water which is still the case in 37 indigenous nations in Canada who can’t drink tap water.

And Greta Thunberg, the woman who at 15 started a solo school strike outside the Swedish Parliament buildings every Friday regarding climate change. Her advocacy work has become so well known regarding climate change and social issues that it is now known as the ‘Greta effect.’

Listening to children. Honouring their visions.

Matthew’s text reminds us that children are not simply future participants in society, but are God’s beloved, who already embody the values of the

kingdom of heaven. We are called upon to listen and act, to enable, to support. We have seen in a few examples that have been cited here that children's nature, spirituality, and connection to God can often exceed that of adults'. Children are open, simple and straightforward. These qualities enable them to do wonderful things because they approach faith without the same barriers or cynicism that we as adults have developed over time.

As always, Jesus and his approach to ministry are our guide. He is the ultimate model for reaching out to children and youth. He was present, attentive and deeply engaged. He didn't merely tolerate children, waiting for them to contribute to society. He celebrated their existence, making them an example of greatness in God's kingdom. He assured adults that God created children to have an expansive consciousness and so we can be assured that God is willing and able to accompany children wherever their wonder takes them.

As we strive to support children, it's important to return to Christ's model of relationships with all children: respect, honour and listening.

I leave you with questions to ponder in your quiet moments as the new school year begins. Where in the world do children need our voices to recognize their inherent human dignity and how could we as a church advocate for this? With whom could we partner to help end child poverty? How can we foster intergenerational relationships?

I offer these encouragements, as I remind you that as a church, where we usually have no children present, we are still working to support children around the world. We are donating to Alayna's future studies as she continues her faith and education journey. You have donated to a refugee

fund so that my friend Zeini can start a new life in Canada. Many of you donate to Mission and Service whose funds go directly to children. We support several foodbanks in the region. Scripture in James reinforces these actions. “ Faith, by itself, if it has no action, is dead. “

James Baldwin, a human rights advocate in the United States wrote “ the children are always ours, every single one of them, all over the globe ..”

If you are looking for opportunities to support youth, there are myriads of organizations, looking for volunteers to write letters, to sign petitions. It's not all about donations. Be the smile that lights up a difficult day. Our relationship with a child, one child, is a gift for both parties. Being seen, heard and supported could change the life of a child, community or a country.

In closing I'd like you to take a moment and recall people in your own life and in your faith journey, who really understood you, saw you. How did that make you feel? Was it a parent? Relative? Perhaps it was a favourite teacher, who listened to your questions or inspired you to follow your dream. Maybe a choir director who encouraged you to sing, maybe a coach who helped you develop skills or conquer nerves or simply a kind soul whose face lit up whenever you came in the room

As Jesus said, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.”

May it be so.