

I WISH THE PREACHER WOULD TALK ABOUT...

Are the Kids Alright?

1 Timothy 4:11-16

August 27, 2023

This is a day of celebration for our congregation. Today, we give thanks for the gift of God's persistent, pursuing call in all of our lives and particularly in the life of Rev. Sara Dorrien-Christians, as we install her to the position of Associate Pastor for Children and Family Ministries at Second Church. To paraphrase Presbyterian author Frederick Buechner's profound definition of vocation, *the place where God calls you is where your gifts and the world's needs meet*. Pastor Sara brings an abundance of gifts to the work of ministry—the inspiring combination of a bright mind, compassionate spirit, and a heart for shaping the faith of children and those who love them. We honor those gifts as we install Sara this morning.

But first, I want to speak about the *world's* needs side of the equation. At Second, we're concluding a monthlong sermon series on questions and topics raised by members of our faith community, and one of the most common I've received is this: How can we ensure the future of our faith? How can we ensure that our children (whatever their age) find faith in a complex and troubled time?

Simply put, are the kids alright? The shortest answer to this very real question is, in many ways, no. Kids are struggling. As a parent and a pastor, the statistical and anecdotal trends on the health of our children and youth hit especially close to home for me. Rates of depression and suicidal thinking and behavior are rising at unprecedented rates. They are beginning earlier and earlier in life. The distress experienced by children mirrors and reveals the state of crisis in families, the burdens carried by broader society. Children do not exist in a vacuum. They are

particularly vulnerable to the disconnection and despair that we all encounter.

The causes of our collective distress are complex, to say the least. But for me, it is impossible to ignore recent shifts. The addictive ways that digital and social media amplify anger while driving disconnection are clearly part of the puzzle. The permission structure and example of outreach given by public leaders. But from my perspective, these are symptoms of a deeper disease among us. The heart of the struggle, in my view, is the collapse of community. Communities of support and accountability. The kinds of places where we learn values and *our* value. Places where we build relationships that bridge chasms of difference and model forgiveness when we are caused harm or when we harm. Places like this one. Indeed, I wonder: Are any of us alright when we spend precious little time in meaningful community and so much in the lonely light of screens that neither teach nor connect us?

It feels to me as if we are at a crucial and consequential moment. We have concluded, I think, that what we are doing is causing harm. Deep harm. This way of interacting is working for no one. Even the fleeting jolts of dopamine and energy we feel when we attack someone else are not worth the long-term isolation. We are failing. Our children are showing us how. And so, we must decide whether we'll do something about it or not.

I want to suggest this morning that the Church offers two gifts in response to the needs of the world—two places where our giftedness meets the scarcity in the world and the struggles of our children in this

moment. Both gifts are rooted in the idea of thick moral community.

First, here in this place, children can be seen and known. Perhaps the most important factor in the faith development of young people is that trusted adults beyond their family know their names. I speak from personal experience here. I stand before you because of the communities and saints of churches who chose to see me, not as a distraction or a disruption, but as a part of their family of faith. If you were to ask me about the moment I first knew I belonged to God, I would tell a strange story.

I was four years old. It was Sunday morning, and my sister and I were sitting with my mother in worship at Unity Presbyterian Church in Woodleaf, North Carolina. Now, this will surprise none of you, but four-year-old Chris lived for the children's sermon. It was my weekly opportunity to show the congregation what I knew and, if I played my cards right, get a chuckle from the adults in the pews. The service began that morning as it always did. My father, the pastor, led us in an opening prayer. That's when the trouble started. I turned to my mother in the pew. "Mom! I have to use the bathroom." My mom did what she would do. She scooted up to let me out of the pew, but I froze because if I left now, I would miss the children's sermon! Soon the situation was far too serious—I had to go. I sprinted to the boys' room down the hall, did what needed done, and sprinted back just as the children's sermon was beginning. I made it! I ran down the aisle, where my father was waiting with wide eyes. "Chris," he said, "please pull up your pants." Yeah, I got my chuckle that day. But to be honest, what I most remember are the feelings of grace and comfort. I remember knowing I belonged. And to this day, I wonder how much of my love for the church was birthed in moments like that one. Friends, I cannot think of a more important message for the church—our church—to deliver than this: children belong here. Not just in the building, but in worship. Not just as a symbol, but in the fullness of who they

are. In the messiness of who they are. Feeling seen and being known are essential to spiritual and mental health. And here, at our best, we take time to see and know each beloved child of God.

The second gift is the mirror image of the first. Here in this place, children see. They participate. They experience the holy. Again, research confirms what we know in practice: that the key to forming a faith that will stick with us through adulthood is seeing the people you love practice the faith in worship and prayer. Children learn by watching. They emulate the models we set for them. They absorb the priorities we stake in our own lives, values disclosed by how we spend our resources—our time, our money, our attention, our focus. Children see it all, and they know. So, bring your kids to church.

In fact, that's how it happened for Timothy. Though the Christian movement was still in its infancy, Tim is a third-generation disciple. He received the faith from his mother and his grandmother. In other words, Tim was raised in the church. Faith was a part of his identity, his self-understanding.

And according to his mentor, Paul, he is now ready to lead. Paul's words offer encouragement alongside responsibility. After reminding Timothy of that powerful moment when he received the gifts of the spirit and was welcomed into the church (think Confirmation Sunday), Paul implores Tim to "cultivate these things...immerse yourself in them...do not neglect the gift that is in you."

Now, look. This is not Paul's way of giving children a little time in the worship service; it is foundational to his message. *You* must not ignore the gift that God has given you, Timothy. And you, *the church*, must offer a place for those gifts to be discovered, cultivated, grown, nurtured. We do that in so many different ways, each of them sending a message—you belong here; you matter here.

Every time we gather around the baptismal font, we renew a covenant, a promise that begins with God's grace, is confirmed in the commitment of a family, and then extends to all of us who are part of this faith community. Every single time, you say that you will guide and nurture this child with words and actions. In other words, you accept a charge. This is not a purely symbolic ritual. We are answering the call to be the kind of place where the faith of children can be formed and shaped, recognized and celebrated. This is our collective responsibility, *and* it is a role each of us takes on as a part of this faith family.

I love to see you living those promises. I see you creating a community of belonging. I see you making room in your pew, offering the warmth of a smile, taking time to meet and know one another. I see you sending notes to children who read scripture in worship and making way for those who run the halls, even if you wish they wouldn't. And I see you, families who carry the chaos of overcrowded schedules. Parents and grandparents who come in here without much sleep, who hoist and lug heavy diaper bags, who corral wandering children. I see you, because you are here, maybe making it just in time, making this time a priority because you want your children to know what matters to you. You want to give them a hope they will find nowhere else. A place to feel at home. Families, we see you.

If our vocation is that place where our gifts meet the needs of the world, then our call is clear: to be a family of faith in a time of isolation. To nurture gifts and learn names. To intentionally create thick moral community. To make it our mission that every single one of God's children knows this: You belong. You belong. You belong. Amen.