

Becoming

Jeremiah 31:7-14
Ephesians 1:3-6,15-19a
Luke 2:41-52
Psalm 84

One of the best sounds in the world is the laughter of a child. Anyone disagree with that? Personally, I love a great giggle. Children are excellent laughers. They are much better at delight than most adults. Grownups become curmudgeons from carrying the weight of life's burdens, but most children haven't collected that type of baggage yet, so they are quicker to embrace joy.

The primary role of childhood is to learn, to grow; to become. Kids need to develop the framework necessary for the next stage of life. The only way to do that is to try, to test limits, to experience new things and see what happens. Childhood is not about perfecting anything, it's about development, it's about laying the groundwork necessary to be able to tackle something more. Developmental psychologists assert that the primary work of childhood is play. It is through play that kids experiment, testing out the world around them, and their place in it. The imaginations and behavior of children is unhindered by concerns over propriety because their job is to find the edges of things and push past them. Most adults spend their lives upholding the boundaries they've learned, whereas, scholar Jack Halberstam calls children at play, in a "potentially permanent state of rebellion". Rebellion is the job hazard of childhood because there is a very fine line between learning the boundaries that should be maintained versus the ones that ought to be challenged. One of the reasons I love children's giggles so much is because they demonstrate a lighthearted willingness to learn that contrasts so delightfully and irreverently with the hardened respectability of grownups.

It is mind-blowing that God sent Jesus as a baby who would grow up through childhood. There is not much scripture that details Jesus' years as a kid, skinning his knees, saying

inappropriate things, learning to manage feelings that were too big for his little body. We don't think about Jesus in that way, but he spent years of his life dedicated to the work of play and development, trying and failing, pushing past boundaries, even appearing rebellious, as he navigated clumsiness with his physical body and in his relationships. This is the work of childhood. If it makes us uncomfortable to think of Jesus bursting into tears over disappointments or rolling on the ground in inappropriately timed laughter, we may need to question the way we think God feels about these things. The High King of Heaven is unconcerned about the messiness of human development. Somehow God designed it that way and seems to like it. Entering it, becoming it, developing through it, are all part of the ways God demonstrates love for us in it.

Today's Psalm says that the birds make nests for their young beside God's altar. Like the quiet gentleness of the nativity scene, we imagine this image with such tender feelings. It's safe, peaceful, and lovely. But do you know anything about baby swallows? They are loud beggars, constantly preening, and even as they learn how to feed themselves, they are extremely clumsy and awkward in their attempts to bathe and fly. A bird's nest, once the eggs hatch, is not a tranquil environment. The beauty of the Psalmist's image is not that a lovely sparrow rests quietly near God, but that the mother of fractious, loud, growing chicks, trusts God's patience and love enough to want her and the family so close. Momma swallow knows God's love will protect her and the squalling, developing family, in all their messiness, for as long as they stay near that altar.

Somewhere along the line we get it in our heads that God wants us to arrive at maturity, as if it is a destination that we can achieve and then we will be acceptable. But that is not something our scripture teaches. In fact, we are continually called God's children. If anything, our Bibles teach us that we will never arrive at that destination while we exist on

this earth. As children, the purpose of our earthly lives is to continue to develop, to grow, and lay the foundation necessary for what comes next.

Our story from Luke shows Jesus as a twelve-year-old boy in the temple. At that time and place, 12-year-old boys were viewed as minors on the verge of full religious and moral responsibility. Their adult status wouldn't be formally reached until their 13th birthday. Their twelfth year was full of intensive study where they were encouraged to question, memorize, and learn their faith. The Bar Mitzvah wouldn't be formalized until centuries later, but at thirteen years, a Jewish boy would be considered a "son of the commandment", an adult responsible for keeping the law. His status as an adult part of the community meant he would be counted among the men, able to bear witness, own property, and marry. In today's story Jesus was navigating between his childhood obedience to his parents and his adult responsibility to his Heavenly Father. His immaturity showed in that, while his heart was in the right place, his communication skills with the people in his life needed some work. He was still learning.

At the end of this story, Luke tells us he continued to increase in wisdom, in years (plural), and in favor with both God and people. His community would have accepted him as a full-fledged adult in one year's time. But God knew that, as a human, his development would continue throughout his lifetime.

In our reading from Ephesians, Paul also speaks of this ongoing development. He explains that our wisdom will grow through our relationship with God. Paul linked this growth with the development of our faith. Like Paul, Saint Augustine said, "Believe in order that you may understand." He added... "understand in order to believe more deeply." Growth creates a spiral rather than a straight line of faith. As our knowledge grows, as we see God's limitless resources and recognize OUR access to those resources because we are God's children and God is our father, so too does our ability to navigate the practical

complexities of growing and developing during our life on this earth. We are always developing, not seeking to arrive. As we learn more of God's love, we approach this "becoming" with less anxiety. God, the father of dearly loved children, enjoys the lighthearted laughter and play of those children, knowing that this is how we were designed to learn and grow.

Today we are welcoming three new children into our baptized community of faith. According to the canons of The Episcopal Church, these girls are not yet old enough to be responsible for making the faith declarations on their own. These girls have affirmed their faith in the promises, but because they are still children, their family and we, their faith community, will be promising to uphold them as they continue to grow and learn what it means to live into these promises. Part of our faithfulness in that support is humbly acknowledging that we are all still growing in our understanding of these promises and how to live into them. Jesus grew throughout his life on this earth, and he did it without sin. When we choose, like the mother bird, to stay near God, dependent on God, trusting God's love, we will keep returning to the safety of God's presence, even after our failures. To faithfully affirm the promises we are about to make, we look to God our father's love to hold us, and power to sustain us as we all grow throughout this life.

May we be a people who embrace a life of childlike development, growing always closer to God, with the laughter and joy of those who know they are truly and deeply loved at every stage of our development.