

Children and the Language of Preaching

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Journal articles abound that focus on the relation of the *age appropriateness* of the verbal language of preaching, and the child's *cognitive development*. Most of these articles have been written by Christian religious educators eager to involve the child more deeply in the context of Sunday worship. Age appropriateness is an important issue for pastors who seek to take more seriously the ministry of the laity (*laity* include all ages of persons in our congregations, not only adults), but in the last analysis it is not among the most important concerns.

In the following essay, I invite the reader to consider two basic areas of concern that should shape the pastor's approach to preaching as much as becoming acquainted with cognitive developmental perspectives. First, let us remind ourselves of the child's innate ability to think theologically. Second, let us focus on the pastor's understanding of the meaning and process of childhood. Last we will turn directly to the matter of age appropriate language.

One night a few months ago, my son Benjamin Lewis, age twelve, and I were driving to the local market to buy some bananas and apples. Somehow—I am not sure how—the topic of prayer arose. The conversation went like this:

Dad: So Ben. When you pray, to whom do you pray?

Ben: I pray to God. He listens to me.

Dad: He listens to you?

Ben: Yes. Except sometimes he fails me.

Dad: Like when?

Ben: Remember when I was trying to learn how to ride a bike in Richmond? Anabel was holding on to the seat of the bike, and I prayed real hard that God would keep me from falling down. She let go, and I fell into the rocks, and my head got all bloody.

Dad: God failed you?

Ben: Yes.

Dad: Does that worry you?

Ben: Yes. I don't know when I can trust God.

Dad: So when you pray, do you ask things from God?

Ben: Yes, most of the time. Sometimes I just thank God for things.

Dad: Ben, you said "he" when you talked about God. Is God a man?

Ben: Yes! I guess God could be a woman or an it, but I think God is a man.

Dad: Do you have any ideas where this idea came from, that God is a man?

Ben: From Sunday School. They always call God a "he."

Dad: Well, let's suppose that you could imagine God in any way you wanted to. How do you suppose you would think about God?

Ben: I think God is a baby.

Dad: A baby?

Ben: I think God would like to surprise everyone. Like Jesus in the stable.

Dad: Would you be comfortable praying to a God who is a baby?

Ben: Oh sure! Babies know everything. You just have to ask the right questions to get what they know "out."

Dad: So Ben, have you ever shared these sorts of ideas with your Sunday School

teachers before?

Ben: Oh, no! They would just tell me that I was wrong or something. Besides, they're never around after class to talk with anyway.

Dad: Ben, has anyone at church ever asked you about God, what you think about God?

Ben: No, never. They just tell me what to think.

It is very hard for many adults who grew up in the church to think back to the ways they engaged in constructive theology when they were children. As you continue to read this essay, remember back to the ways you thought about God as a seven year old, a fourteen year old, and how you understand who God is today. The ways children think about God, about their relation to God, and about trust in God are explorations into contextual, constructive theological hermeneutics. It goes without saying that such theological reflection is not the same as Barth's *Church Dogmatics*! At the same time, the child entering worship is probably already thinking about God in deep ways that most adults find surprising.

Whatever else Sunday worship is, it is a place where children are actively engaged in theological reflection. To use the words of Ana Maria Rizzuto, a doctor who has been attentive to the ways our understandings of God are formed in childhood, "No child arrives at the "house of God" without his pet God under his arm."¹ Benjamin Lewis is a special child, as all children are special. But viewed from afar, he is a pretty normal guy. He loves swimming, rock climbing, kite flying, hiking, and talking on the telephone with friends. In addition, he is a theologian, exploring the deep mysteries of the faith from a child's perspective.

The "failure of God" is an important theological motif in much current theological discussion. The directness of Benjamin Lewis's words are often discussed at the seminary level in terms of theodicy, the powerlessness of God, the silence of God, or the death of God. There is something brutally direct, especially in this Easter season, about questioning a God who allows a head to be bloodied. My mind turned almost immediately to the words of Albert H. Friedlander, "Isaac was not sacrificed; but a million children died in the camps."² The image of the crown of thorns came immediately to my mind.

What is important to remember here is not only that Benjamin Lewis is asking some of the most perplexing questions of our Christian faith at age twelve. It is also important to remember that an early prayer life and eventful bicycle ride was the basis of the theological reflection. When did Benjamin Lewis have this faith disturbing ride? He took that ride when he was *four years old*.

In the basic required course in Christian education that I teach at Columbia Theological Seminary, I require students to go out and talk with children in the elementary Sunday school classes. Most students find this to be a very perplexing assignment. In fact, I think it is fair to say that many preparing for ordained ministry, when you get right down to it, consider children to be inferior to adults. How many pastors teach ongoing elective courses for adults in the church? Legion. How many pastors teach ongoing elective courses for children in the church? Few.

One of the tasks for my seminary students is to have children draw pictures of God. Using Robert Coles's book, *The Spiritual Life of Children*, as a methodological guide, students are encouraged to listen attentively to the ways in which children understand God at different ages.³ This year (1993), students collected nearly one hundred pictures of God from children aged three to twelve. One eight-year-old child drew a picture of an angry God, sharp teeth dripping with blood. As the student talked with

the child, she learned that the child's father was violent in the home.

Another child, aged six, drew a picture of God who was male on one side of the head (short hair), and female on the other side of the head (long hair). The child explained that God was like Mommy and Daddy. Another ten-year-old child drew a picture of God that looked suspiciously like a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle! Armed to the teeth, the violent image of God the child drew was the result of fears about the future of the world. Television news scared the child, and this was a way of dealing with that fear.

Any sermon preached with children present, then, enters an arena rich in thought, imagination, and more often than not theological reflection. If I were going to take seriously children in worship, my first step would not be to read a book about children and worship. I would plan time, perhaps once a month for an hour or two, to listen to children reflect theologically (through behavior, art, or word) about issues of faith that concern them *here and now*. Knowing that our images of God are formed very early in life, and more often than not are informed by the feelings and behaviors of those adults who are primary caregivers to children, it is a good spiritual discipline for ordained leadership in the church to ask itself some basic questions about children from time to time. Are children valuable?

Are children vulnerable? Are children imperfect? Are children needing and wanting? Are children immature?⁴

I am very fortunate to be a member of a congregation that values children. But with a worship service that has not taken seriously the child in other than choir focused ways, it is all I am able to do to convince my eight-year-old daughter Katherine Naomi to attend Sunday worship. One Sunday after church, it occurred to me that I had never asked Katherine Naomi what she would consider to be "good worship." Her response was immediate. "If I could help plan church, we would sing and then talk. Sing and then talk. Sing and then talk. Sing and then talk...." Singing and talking are good healthy signs of a gregarious and happy approach to childhood.

Rarely are there churches that sing songs that children love. Rarely are there churches that allow children to ask questions about the worship service, or to talk quietly with a parent about a concern at school or home. Children in the church are sometimes reduced to attendance statistics. They are much more than this. They have complex social relationships in the band, in the school, on the playground, among friends and foes, at the doctor's office, at the grocery store, in front of the television, and at home. The child is in a complex web of relationships that shapes his or her attitudes, values, and feelings. Where do children have a chance to explore this field of relationships in light of the gospel of Jesus Christ? To be frank, there are very few places to do so with one's primary caregivers.

I remember with great fondness the Reformed Church I attended during my university days in Long Beach, California. The pastor loved children. Almost without exception, the adults in the church valued children as well. Children were not separated from their caregivers during the worship service, which is more and more a common trend in churches. Babies cried. Five-year-old children picked their noses and slipped under the pews on occasion! Scripture was read aloud by children, as the caregiver's finger slowly pointed to each new word in the text. This was not out of control social chaos! It was the people of God gathering together in dignity and love, fully expecting that children would be imperfect and immature *and* valuable.

In a day in which individualism has triumphed in many churches, it is difficult to recreate an appreciation for the messiness, complexity, responsibility, and noisiness

of the household, let alone the household of God. But the Reformed notion of worship as *truly corporate* must include persons of all ages. It is God who chooses those who will worship and give praise. It is not a congregation's responsibility to exclude on the basis of age, but to build a pattern of life together that gives witness to the risen Christ. *The church that insists through form and process that children must be little adults is limiting the work of the Holy Spirit.*

Yes, children in the church are actively thinking about their relation to God, and bring certain understandings of God with them into the sanctuary. This shapes the way a sermon will be received. In addition, the pastor's understanding of the child will shape the process and form of worship. This, too, will influence the child's feelings and appreciation for attendance in worship. Both of these factors are powerful forces in our ministries, and form the background for all else that is done in the act of preaching itself.

If a pastor loves children in attitude and action, she or he can make enormous blunders in regard to age appropriate concerns, and still create a sacred space of trust, mutual respect, and the praise of God. There are, however, a few rules of thumb that may be useful as you seek to prepare a sermon where you know children will be present. Children love a good story. Curiously, few sermons seem to know the movements of a good story. A good story will include the following movements: entry, anxiety, hope, despair, and grace.⁵ P. D. Eastman followed this pattern of storytelling precisely and gracefully. If you can follow the movement in *Are You My Mother?* you will have a powerful tool for childhood education available to you.⁶

Most children learn best *visually and experientially*. While the recent video tape translation by the American Bible Society of Mark 5.1-20 may not be everyone's "cup of tea," ABS is to be applauded for its recognition that a new generation of children and young people will best learn the stories of the Bible by sight, rather than by hearing and reading. In the past, preaching has tended to leave the visual image for the Sunday School classroom. Increasingly, the sermon must become multi-media in format.⁷ The days of the object lesson are numbered. Children expect quality informational presentation in virtually every other learning context of their lives. The church cannot ignore this trend.

Young children tend to imitate adult religious practice. Again, it is important to help all adult members of the congregation know that its attitudes, values, and behaviors are powerful teachers of children. If children are not valued consistently in the sermon, the children will know it. Most young children will take the stories of the Bible literally, as well as the symbols of the church. Do not get abstract with children through amazing convolutions of metaphors and seminary-speak. God is like a person. In fact, many children believe that the person/s with robes on in the church service are God. This is not something to be feared. Nor is it something to try to negate through logical argument. Model the God who loves children. In their own time, they will come to understand the difference. When children are ready, they make their own questions known.

The Bible is full of violence and mayhem. The story of Abraham and the binding of Isaac is almost never included in mainline curriculum resources for children. The question is not whether the story is important or not (as this story is certainly a crucial one for our adult understanding of God!), but rather how the story will be understood in a literal, concrete way. Abraham out to sacrifice his child because God told him to is a possible literal reading of the text. Such complex and potentially frightening stories that demand intellectual and theological sophistication of the student are best

left for the teenage and adult years.

Nothing is enjoyed by the six- to nine-year-old child more than a good joke. Look at the McDonald Kids' Meal box or bag some time. Play and games and rules are especially important during this period.

There are many good human development texts available today. The one that I use consistently with students is *Human Development and Learning* by Robert D. Strom, Harold W. Bernard, and Shirley K. Strom.⁸ By no means perfect in every regard, it is an easy to use reference text that may provide insight to such topics as stress, emotional growth, and developing intellectual abilities. Some of the best resources produced in the church are available from Presbyterian and Reformed Educational Ministry under the title, *Five Designs for Teacher/Leader Education*.

In conclusion, children come to worship with amazingly complex interpretation processes already in place. Theological reflection is probably already going on in ways that reflect life at home, at school, and in the wider community. If we choose to take this seriously, we take time to come to know what our children are thinking about, what they are worried about, and for what they hope. Our preaching, informed primarily by spending time with this part of our congregation, may well be shaped naturally by such conversations.

The language of a sermon needs to be age appropriate, taking into account issues of concreteness, story, visual imagery, and humor. But if such technical competence is demonstrated through a sermon in a context where the child does not feel valuable, loved, and esteemed, little is gained. Loving children in the whole life of the congregation is a spiritual discipline. It is an integral aspect of the Reformed understanding of the household of God.

NOTES

¹ Ana Maria Rizzuto, M.D., *The Birth of the Living God: A Psychoanalytic Study* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979), 8.

² Elie Wiesel and Albert H. Friedlander, *The Six Days of Destruction: Meditations Toward Hope* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 7.

³ Robert Coles, *The Spiritual Life of Children* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1990).

⁴ These questions are taken from Pia Mellody, *Facing Codependence* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1989), 113. This is an important book for those ordained persons working with children. In a very simple and convincing way, the author draws a clear relationship between adult spirituality and early childhood patterns of socialization.

⁵ "The Centerquest" curriculum resources that are published in St. Louis are built upon this understanding of the movement of a good story. No pastor should be without this resource in the church library or personal study.

⁶ P.D. Eastman, *Are You My Mother?* (New York: Beginner Books, 1960).

⁷ ABS Multimedia Translation of Mark 5: 1-20, *Out of the Tombs* (New York: American Bible Society, 1991).

⁸ (New York: Human Sciences Press, 1987).