

“Faith and the Well-being of Children”
November 12, 2023

James 3:13-18

Someone gave me this box a while ago. You might not be able to read it from where you’re sitting. The words on it ask: “What would a kid’s life be like without faith?”

It’s a good question. Because I had a kid at the time, I put the box up on a shelf where I could see it while I worked. And even now, it is on a shelf from which it continues to question me.

As it turns out, research suggests that when we ask, “What would a kid’s life be like without faith?” the answer is “About as empty as this box.”

In a sense, this not a new realization. It is an ancient concern. We listened this morning as Mose encouraged and exhorted the Hebrew people during the wilderness wanderings: “Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart.” But don’t keep them in your heart alone. Moses adds: “Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home...”

It’s well known that children and youth in the United States are suffering from emotional and behavioral problems such as depression, anxiety, and thoughts of suicide. The Commission on Children at Risk found that a child’s environment and community can have an incredible effect on the development of their long-term mental and emotional health. They suggest that children are biologically “hardwired” for enduring attachments to other people and for moral and spiritual meaning.

The best way to ensure the healthy development of children? Meet their needs for relationships that last and for moral and spiritual meaning.

The Commission called on people to strengthen what it calls “authoritative communities” as the best strategy for improving children’s lives. Now those words might be a little jarring to some, especially to members of this congregation. Keep in mind, however, that these are not “authoritarian” but “authoritative” communities.

Authoritative communities do not tell others what to do. They are groups of people who are committed to one another over time and who exhibit and pass on what it means to be a good person. These groups provide the types of connectedness children and youth need and increasingly lack.

So, hear that again: “People who are committed to one another over time and who exhibit and are able to pass on what it means to be a good person.” At our best, that describes who we are, doesn’t it? And would we want to be anything other than our best?

This is significant for those of us at Congregational UCC because it tells us two things:

First: What we've been doing here—and what we *are* doing here—is of great value. By developing a strong and vibrant ministry to children and youth and their families—and by maintaining that ministry to children and youth and their families through all the ups and downs of recent years—we help foster their well-being. By being an intentionally intergenerational congregation that includes young people in our worship and work, we are contributing to the health not only of our congregation but also of our city and our nation.

And second: We need to take this calling to heart. Now more than ever we have good reason to be an active community of faith. The health of a new generation depends on this.

There is mounting evidence suggesting that children are hardwired to connect in two basic ways: they need close attachments to other people, beginning with their mothers, fathers, and other relatives; they also need close attachments with a broader community.

Humans also seem to be born with a built-in capacity and drive to ask the ultimate questions about life: Why am I here? What is the purpose of my life? How should I live? What happens when I die? This distinctive human pursuit has been closely connected to spiritual seeking and spiritual experience and to religious belief and practice.

What kind of communities do children and youth need?

- Places that include children and youth and treat them as ends in themselves.
- Places that are warm and nurturing, that establish clear boundaries and limits.
- Places that are multi-generational.
- Places that encourage spiritual and religious development.
- Places that reflect and transmit a shared understanding of what it means to be a good person.
- Places that are oriented toward the equal dignity of all persons and to the principle of love of neighbor.¹

Think about that? Don't those qualities describe the kind of community that we want to be as a church?

So, we need to realize that in a world of competing demands, a congregation—*this congregation*—is extremely important.

When Anne Lamott's son was 14, she wrote: "My son hates church, but I make him go anyway. It's good to do uncomfortable things," she said. "It's weight training for life."

She said that her son's friends would often come along with them to church, adding, "They don't hate church, because no one is making *them* go."

Why did she make her son go to church?

“Because I want him to,” she wrote. “These are bewildering, drastic times we live in, and a little spiritual guidance never killed anyone. I make him go because the youth-group leaders know things that I don’t. They know what teenagers are looking for, and need—they need adults who have stayed alive and vital, adults they won’t mind growing up to be. They are terrified that growing up means you become the anxious, overworked adults who surround them. They want guides, a certain kind of adult who knows how to act like an adult but with a kid’s heart.”

Well, that’s it, isn’t it? The community matters and it matters to the kids here and it matters for a lifetime.

Lamott concluded: “I think there are worse things for kids than to have to spend time with people who love God; teenagers who do not go to church are also adored by God, but they don’t get to meet some of the people who love God back. Learning to love back is the hardest part of being alive.”ⁱⁱ

It’s a struggle to bring kids to church on a Sunday morning. It always has been. But each Sunday, here they are. Parents are giving their children something essential for their lives, something they won’t find in other places. And parents, as you give your children this important gift, here’s a suggestion: bring your kids’ friends along, too. As Ann Lamott said, their friends don’t hate church, because no one is making them go.

And now, here’s the surprise. The rest of you—those who are *not* parenting children right now, you are gifts for the children and youth who come here. Your involvement with this congregation is not simply about what you get—in fact it’s not much about what we *get* at all. It is about what we are *giving*. And the rest of us are giving children and youth the chance to spend some time with people who “love God back.”

I’ve been reading recently about the concern of many theater companies, classical music organizations, and art museums about their audiences growing older and fading away. They are worried that younger people are not filling these dwindling ranks. The same concern is often voiced in churches, even in this church. “We’re an aging congregation,” people say with an ominous tone.

The Consultation of Religious Congregations (CRC) recently held its annual winter-wear distribution. They gave out over 1500 coats to over 370 households. As always, members of Congregational UCC were instrumental in this event. And, you guessed it, most of the volunteers from most of the congregations were on the old side.

But this is the great part: one child who came with a parent was overheard saying, “These old people are really nice.” They are. We are.

And children need to be around nice people.

That's why we need to listen carefully when James urges: "Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness and born of wisdom...The wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits..."

The children and youth here—and beyond these walls—are watching and listening. They are watching how we worship. They are watching how we treat each other after worship. They are watching how we give. They are watching how we respond to the pain and suffering in the world.

They are watching and they want—they *need*—to see your good life, to see your works done with gentleness born of wisdom.

This is a high calling, one that is worth our greatest effort. We've got a lot to spend our time and energy on and the rewards will be great.

We are called back again to humble and honest conversation with one another and to showing our good lives.

And in the light of what we know about churches and young people, ought we not ask what is good for them—what we will do to increase their health and joy and love and well-being?

We'll never get it perfectly. That is the good news from James. Remember? We all make many mistakes. And so we can set judgement aside and live in God's grace instead. Yes, throughout this letter filled with a call to show our faith in works is an underlying sense that all we do is made possible by the grace of God.

And so, James concludes a little later on: "Draw near to God and God will draw near to you."

I don't know about you, but I could sure use God a little closer to my life—and I guess it wouldn't hurt to have my life closer to God. I mean, after all, what would a kid's life be like without faith?

And all of us, each one of us—we are all children of God.

ⁱ Page: 2

"Hardwired to Connect, press release at americanvalues.org

ⁱⁱ Page: 3

Anne Lamott, "Because I'm the Mother," Salon.com, 7/4/03