

James 2.14-17
1 Samuel 3.1-10
Ordinary Time

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(A disclaimer: This sermon was written to be spoken, which does not always translate into correct grammatical form for a document written to be read.)

For Everyone Born, A Place at the Table

A number of years ago a family came to this congregation. The parents had both grown up going to church but had been away from the church for much of their adult lives. They had a five-year old and a baby and as they looked in wonder at those children they wanted their children to grow up to know themselves cherished and loved by God. Well, actually, the mother was tired and knew that church would be an hour when she could sit by herself in relative quiet and someone else would care for her children.

The parents brought each child for baptism. It wasn't their tradition—having grown up Baptist—but it was the tradition in this congregation. When the minister held the little baby in his arms he intoned the words that people have said for generations and generations...“I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.” The water rolled off the mostly bald head of the baby while the congregation made their promise to care for this little one—to help her grow deep and strong in faith with the prayer that one day she would answer the baptismal questions on her own: Is Jesus Christ your Lord and Savior? Do you trust your life to Jesus Christ and God's great love? Do you intend to be Christ's disciple, obeying God's word and showing God's love?

One day about 13 years later she stood in front of the congregation and answered those questions herself. And in those intervening years, faithful people taught her the stories of the Bible, prayed with her, celebrated the gifts they saw in her, loved her, showed her a faithful way to live by the example of their lives.

And in the years that followed, faithful people again taught her the stories of the Bible, prayed with her, celebrated the gifts they saw in her, loved her, and showed her a faithful way to live by the example of their lives.

If you look around, some of those people are still here. Some have moved away. Some have joined other communions. Some have joined the great communion of the company of heaven. And of course, other people have come and joined this congregation and are now part of keeping the promises made to that tiny baby in years past. The promises of God continue and the promises of this congregation continue.

And then about 18 years later on a beautiful June morning, that tiny baby stood before us as a lovely young woman full of light and life. On the brink of leaving the nest of both family and congregation to soar with God into a future of great possibility.

Of course, I am talking about Molly Atkinson. We will hear from her a little bit later in the service about her plans for the future and we'll hear from Melissa and John about the significance of this congregation in Molly's life.

It seems rather rare these days for a child to be baptized and grow up in one congregation. But that is Molly's story. And it has made me think a great deal about the significance of a congregation in the life of children and the significance of children in the life of a congregation.

I've been here for the last ten of Molly's years. Some of you were here when Molly was baptized. Many more of you have come to Central more recently.

No matter if you were here or not on the day in September 1988 when Molly was baptized, we are all part of the community of God's people who have promised to be part of Molly's life and to guide her in the life of faith.

In the story of Eli and Samuel that Gordon read this morning, we don't know how old Samuel was but he is portrayed as a child or youth. So we see in the biblical story that the call of God is not reserved for adults. God calls the young and works through their lives.

And we also see that the young Samuel needed someone to guide him. He hears someone call his name at night and he assumes it is the priest, Eli, with whom he lives, who is calling him. But it is not Eli. After Samuel shows up at Eli's bedroom door three times, Eli figures out that it is God who is calling for Samuel and Eli instructs Samuel on how to respond to God.

Samuel needed someone who knew God so that he too could come to recognize God's voice and to respond in faith when God called his name. In the story, Eli is that mentor—or guide—for Samuel.

Now I wonder if we couldn't also think of Eli metaphorically—think of Eli as the community of people who teach and live by example for others. So that we are Eli for the children and youth in our midst. We help them recognize God's voice and respond in faith. You know that African proverb, "It takes a village to raise a child." That's what I'm talking about.

Molly has been blessed with a big village: parents, a sister, aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents, public school teachers, choir directors, coaches, neighbors, after school care providers, camp counselors, friends, all of us...and I've probably missed some people in that list.

We have a great American mythology about "pulling yourself up by your own boot straps" and "the self-made man"—the illusion that we grow ourselves up and make our own way in the world. There's a piece of that which is true—it's true that no one else can live our life for us. But it's totally false for any of us to think we got to where we are without the assistance of anyone else.

Not everyone has a big village in which they are raised up—it may be a tiny village—but it's a village, none the less. Research on kids who come from fragile families indicates that the difference between the child who makes it and the child who doesn't may be as little as having one adult in their life who believes in them.¹ One adult who believes in you can make the difference between a child who makes it and a child who doesn't.

Doesn't that seem like a tiny thing? For the majority of us in this place this morning, we have had at least one adult—and many of us have had many people in our lives who believed in us.

But plenty of children and youth have no adults in their lives who believe in them. That can happen across all economic brackets but when you add poverty to the mix it's especially devastating. On Friday, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights described poverty as the "most serious, [unfairly discriminating] and widespread human rights violation confronting the world....It is poverty and underdevelopment—both in cause and effect—that

¹ This came from a Search Institute report I read several years ago.

exacerbate abuse, neglect and discrimination, denying millions the enjoyment of their civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights, and ultimately their right to development.”²

I could quote a lot of statistics, like, in this country, more than one in six children live in poverty and seventy percent of those children in poverty have parents who work.³ I’ve seen those statistics come to life in some of the children I read with once a week at Engelhard School. The second grader I’ll call “Shania” who could barely sound out any but the simplest words. She lived in a homeless shelter. What kind of environment is that for a child to be able to practice reading amidst the noise and chaos and instability of a homeless shelter? Or “Todd”: going into third grade who reads way below grade level. He is an only child who lives with his mother and his mother is deaf. She is unable to help him practice reading. And from all that I can tell, his real companion at home is the tv.

Many of you know children like these. Reading isn’t their only challenge. They may be sexually abused or emotionally abandoned. They may be the kids who get free breakfast and lunch at school and go hungry at home on the weekends. They’re the kids whose parent is in jail and those who are in the custody of the state. They’re the kids with no winter coat. They are the kids who are left to fend for themselves, who have no adults in their corner, who have ended up far, far away from a village of any size.

So I’ve been wondering if perhaps the baptismal covenant we make with children is not just about the individual children whose names we know in this congregation. What if we thought of that covenant as also a covenant with a multitude of God’s children—or even just one child of God outside of this congregation. And just as we promise to be part of helping the child who is baptized grow into all that God has created her or him to be, what if we also promised to do that for a child who is not part of this congregation? What if we committed ourselves to making a place at the table for children inside and outside of our congregation? What if our commitment was, as we will sing in a minute,

For everyone born, a place at the table,
for everyone born, clean water and bread,
a shelter, a space, a safe place for growing,
for everyone born, a star overhead.⁴

The writer of James says, “Faith...if it has no works, is dead.” Putting our faith into action to seek justice for children is not the only way we live out our faith. But this morning as we give thanks for Molly, celebrate her graduation from high school, and bless her for what is ahead in her life, perhaps this is also an opportunity to consider how we will be part of the village for other children whose village is fragile or absent.

And God will delight when we are creators
of justice and joy, compassion and peace:
yes, God will delight when we are creators of justice, justice and joy!

² <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=18982&Cr=rights&Cr1=council>

³ Children’s Defense Fund, *Putting Our Faith Into Action to Seek Justice for Children – National Observance of Children’s Sabbaths Manual 2005*, vol. 14.

⁴ Shirley Erena Murray, “For Everyone Born,” © Hope Publishing.