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Texts in Context

Jesus' Prophetic Reach: Drawing Children to the Center of Congregational Life

TIM COLTVET

Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. Assuming that he was in the group of travelers, they went a day's journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, "Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety." He said to them, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" But they did not understand what he said to them. Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart.

And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favour. (Luke 2:41–52)

Jesus broke with the expectations of his day by inviting children into his ministry and mission—indeed, into the kingdom of God. Churches today must do the same, celebrating and including children rather than relegating them to the fringes of their worship.

GOD'S PROPHETIC REACH IN LUKE: STORIES OF BEING LOST AND FOUND

Luke's overarching theme of "lost and found" (prodigal son, lost coin, lost sheep) makes it fitting that the boy Jesus should lead the twenty-first-century reader in reflecting on the place and state of today's children and youth and the opportunity for the church to draw them into the mission of God.

"So, how are the children?" the rhetorical bumper sticker reads. If we watch the evening news, our daily paper, and blogs, we may come to this conclusion: "Not so well!" Childhood is by nature a vulnerable time of physical, mental, and emotional development. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that children continue to suffer at the hands of more powerful and often unreliable adults. Stories of kids and guns, child labor, and sex trafficking continue to baffle us as we read the daily headlines. We mourn the fact that "lost" is an understatement for the lives of millions of children on this planet, those born into situations of hunger and oppression, lack of proper care, and scenarios of negligence. In developed countries such as North America, where kids appear to be faring well (or at least *better*), we see children and youth being lost in their own way: lost in the shuffle of busy schedules and the constant press of time; lost in the digital emergence, an avalanche of information that is sometimes a gift and sometimes a liability;¹ lost to their tired and worn-out parent(s), who may be facing some of the greatest economic challenges of their lifetime, and trying to find quality time with their kids in the meanwhile. In this essay I invite readers to allow the "prophetic reach" of this twelve-year-old boy to draw them into a larger story that reclaims the place and state of children and youth in the life of the congregation and, more broadly, in the reign and kingdom of God.

JESUS GETS "LOST"

In the well-known story of Jesus in the temple, we see one of the last glimpses into the life of Jesus the boy, who would one day be recognized as the crucified and risen Son of God. On the one hand, it is a text that terrifies us as parents. Who of us has not temporarily lost a child at the supermarket, or perhaps have been the lost child ourselves once upon a time? It is also a story that brings a sigh of relief and an emphatic "Of course!" when Jesus is spotted at the temple, listening to, questioning, and teaching matters of faith with the religious teachers of the day. As we engage this text in today's context, I would like to offer some key markers or questions to help us see the urgency and need to think critically about drawing young people, particularly children and youth, into the center of our worship gatherings—not only as recipients of godly teaching but also as teachers themselves and stewards of God's grace and mercy: equal partners and servants in the *missio dei*.

¹A 2010 survey found that 8–18-year-olds spend 7 hours and 38 minutes per day or 53 hours per week using entertainment media, according to Drew Altman, President and CEO of the Kaiser Family Foundation. He states, "When children are spending this much time doing anything, we need to understand how it's affecting them—for good and bad." See "Daily Media Use Among Children and Teens Up Dramatically From Five Years Ago," *Kaiser Family Foundation*, at <http://www.kff.org/entmedia/entmedia012010nr.cfm> (accessed April 21, 2013).

JESUS IS “FOUND”

Of course Jesus is at the center of the temple! In one of the earliest moments foreshadowing his impending glory, we find young Jesus holding court with the religious teachers of the day. Somehow, in his divine orientation, he is not lost, but rather found, found where he “must” be, in his Father’s house. He is so much at home, in fact, that he (Jesus) seems to have lost track of his parents with no apparent concern for where *they* are!

Jesus is so much at home in the temple that he seems to have lost track of his parents with no apparent concern for where they are!

I recently stumbled upon an old video production of this biblical account shown on a religious television network. Done in the genre and era of Charlton Heston’s *Ten Commandments*, Joseph and Mary are costumed for the part and clearly navigating their way around Hollywood-like sets of ancient Jerusalem. The video goes to great lengths to build a plotline around Joseph and Mary’s tireless search for the young Jesus. Taking dramatic license was no problem for this video production crew as they embellished the story line of Mary and Joseph’s search by following them through the streets of Jerusalem. They hear a rumor of his being seen with another young boy near the temple, whom Jesus is apparently teaching and with whom he is staying. But when Mary and Joseph arrive at the house, they come up empty-handed. The final blow comes when Joseph and Mary are apprehended by two Roman guards late at night who charge them with breaking curfew. Pleading before the Roman authorities, they are pardoned with a slap on the wrist while being reminded that there are “kid snatchers” out there (clearly appealing to modern-day parenting guilt). Finally, they are compelled to check the temple, and they are greeted by a man who assures them that Jesus can be found inside.

Now, do you remember reading these two large embellishments of the text? I don’t either. This television episode, like so many other productions, tried to do what the text does not do—add details to an already interesting account. The text tells us only that Jesus’ response to his parents when they did find him is “Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” (Luke 2:49–50). This simple question marks Jesus’ first recorded words recorded in the Gospel of Luke. The verse is foundational as it relates to the incarnation story from verses prior and gives an indication of Jesus’ future all in the form of a question—a question that will point us to deeper meaning and truth.

Of course, Jesus is at the center of the room! He is the Son of God, we think to ourselves. And moreover, he is a Jewish boy. Boys like Jesus were likely socialized in their early years by a mentoring and apprenticing culture that would instruct them in the Torah and verse them in the cadences and rhythms of faith. The temple, therefore, was likely Jesus’ home away from home. More, Jesus speaks of this place

as central to his identity and his very constitution as a human being. God made flesh was at home.

CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN THE CENTER OF OUR CONGREGATIONS: WILL WE WELCOME THEM?

Kendra Creasy Dean thoughtfully draws on Anna Carter Florence,² who reminds us of yet another gathering of religious adults with a young person. Only in this story, the young person is not in the center of the room but is sitting rather far off in the back window. In Acts 20:7–13, we hear of the young man named Eutychus, who falls asleep during the Apostle Paul's sermon and falls three stories to his death (eventually, Paul has a hand in reviving him).

Florence calls this a "text of terror." The terror is not so much Paul's preaching methods, but more so the relegation of Eutychus to the back of the room. As Dean expounds on this text for our modern-day context, she aptly points out that far too many congregations have done this today in a figurative way, that is, relegating children and youth to the fringes of our worship life. When we start asking questions like, "Where are the youth?" it is far too late. As an illustration of this disturbing reality, Luther Seminary Professor Roland Martinson frequently shares a parable entitled "Peter and Penny Go Swimming." In this parable, Peter and Penny are regularly taken by their parents, both enthusiastic swimmers, to the swimming pool in hopes they too will take to swimming. Early on, the young children are consigned to a little room beside the pool, because they might cry and "disturb the adult swimmers." Besides, they are "too young to understand." By age three, they are told stories about swimming and color pictures of people swimming. Eventually, they are allowed to splash around in the wading pool and take classes to learn more about swimming. The story continues,

By the time Penny and Peter were thirteen, they had studied the Swimmer's Manual in even more detail and had learned the rules of the swimming pool off by heart....They had studied great swimmers of the past, including Olympic medal winners. They had heard about Canadian swimmers who went to other countries such as Africa or India to teach swimming, and they had seen slides of groups of African or Indian swimmers standing beside their swimming pools....At last Penny and Peter finished swimming school and were allowed to accompany their parents into the swimming pool every week. They tried it a few times. Much to the disappointment of their parents, Peter and Penny had lost interest and preferred to watch television instead.³

²Anna Carter Florence presents a compelling argument for how and why our current congregational life suffers from the marginalizing of children and youth in corporate worship. Florence says, "We have separated preaching and youth, both literally and figuratively, in the church and in the academy. We have separated them into distinct ministries, and then we have not talked about it, so that our silence perpetuates the problem and maintains a mute, marginal caste of Christians in our own churches." See *OMG: A Youth Ministry Handbook*, ed. Kendra Creasy Dean (Nashville: Abingdon, 2010) 44–47.

³Janet Metcalfe, "Peter and Penny Go Swimming," *Presbyterian Record*, vol. 122 (May 1998). For the full text of the parable, see <http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Peter+and+Penny+go+swimming%3A+a+parable.-a030178746> (accessed May 21, 2013).

Sitting on the fringes, being a spectator at best, Eutyclus becomes what many of our modern-day congregants are now seeing as “Peters” and “Pennys.” While in kiddie pools, wave pools, and splashing in the shallow waters, sadly Peter and Penny never realized the rush of plunging into the deep, churning waters, holding the deeper wonder and mysteries of God. None of the rich and robust questions of faith will be asked by Peter, Penny, or Eutyclus as they have been socialized to the margins of congregational life. And so, with this in mind, we make a shift now, from the twelve-year-old boy standing at the center of the temple to the God-made-flesh on the move far beyond the temple walls. Fueled by the *missio dei*, we now see our first glimpses of Jesus’ prophetic reach for children and youth.

JESUS’ PROPHETIC REACH

Later in Luke, Jesus expresses prophetic words about children through a kairoic teaching moment that beckons children forward, not to the center of the temple this time, but even more expansively to the center of God’s kingdom. Eutyclus, Peter, and Penny would have a much different experience in the church that is envisioned here:

People were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them; and when the disciples saw it, they sternly ordered them not to do it. But Jesus called for them and said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” (18:15–17)

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in a world that was radically inhospitable towards them,
we are urged to think about the congregational climate or
environments we create*

This pronouncement alone should be a wake-up call to us as stewards of public worship gatherings that usher in the radical hospitality of “God with us.” As we reflect on Jesus’ prophetic reach to include children in a world that was radically inhospitable towards them, we are urged to think about the congregational climate or environments we create. A good start might be to listen closely to the practices of others in our midst. Consider, for example, the efforts of Edina Community Lutheran Church in Edina, Minnesota. Pastors Eric Strand and Pam Fickenscher have made great strides in their worship gatherings by ensuring all children that they are more than welcome to wiggle and squirm in their pews on Sunday morning. In their pew racks is a message for young families that serves also as a reminder to all adults that we take part in Jesus’ radical welcoming of the youngest among us by acknowledging their presence and encouraging their participation. The card reads:

ABC'S FOR ADULTS WORSHIPPING WITH (AND NEAR) CHILDREN

ARRIVE in time to find a good place to sit. Children are short and appreciate being able to see. We encourage you to sit up front or near the musicians to allow this.

BRING something quiet to occupy them in restless moments. "Busy" bags and books are available for children in the narthex.

CALM them with hugs, sitting in your lap, and backrubs.

DEMONSTRATE how to sing familiar refrains, fold hands in prayer, stand for the gospel and prayers, and recite familiar parts of the service, such as the Lord's Prayer.

EXPRESS joy at having children worship with you. Smile at them and their parents. Dance with them when the music is lively.

FREE yourself of the expectation to be perfect. None of us would be here if we were!

GIVE your child something to put in the offering, and encourage them to give from their own funds as they grow older.

HELP parents of small children.

INVITE children to sit with you so that you may assist with bottles, dropped toys, and teaching kids how to worship.

If you have trouble hearing or concentrating because children near you are noisy, feel free to move to a quieter area.

THE CHILDREN'S SERMON—WELCOME TO THE CENTER OF THE ROOM

"Sermon on the Steps" or "Spark Moment" or "Children's Sermon"—whatever you want to call it, it is one thing to gather the children up front as a comedic break or to be "cute," and it is quite another to gather children up front with an authentic, sometimes playful, sometimes serious message of proclamation and peace that is well prepared for their hearing. By "well prepared," I mean hours of reflection, not minutes before worship begins. Preachers are sometimes advised to spend about an hour of study and writing for every minute preached or to ask the convicting question, "Did Jesus need to die in order for me to preach this message?" The preacher's task is never taken lightly and neither should be the preparation for the children's sermon.

For years, I have been a strong proponent of children's sermons in the context of cross-generational worship, and I continue to be. Granted, I have cringed along with the rest of you when a children's sermon collapses into convenient little moralistic takeaways or messages that simply don't reflect the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ.

I once brought a busload of high school students to a church en route to a

mission experience in western Montana. Along the way, we worshiped in a church where the church president was leading a children's sermon and highlighting the power of sin in our lives. In a very unprepared and naïve manner, he invited kids to raise their hands if they had sinned that past week and invited them to share. Even our high school kids began sinking in their seats as they felt the weight of the world resting on the children up front. Sadly, it was an elder child in the group who was called out and highlighted as the example. Not even ready with caring and compassionate words such as, "Jimmy, the good news today is that God wipes the slate clean and loves you and forgives you," the leader let the didactic moment fall apart. As a last ditch attempt at communicating the gospel authentically, several of our teens sought out the boy after worship, affirming him and reminding him that God loves him. Later on, as our journey continued, the teens discussed how the boy was "set up" during the children's sermon, noting that, in their opinions, the experience was not reflective of Jesus' ministry and mission.

My own seminary homiletics professors once squared off on children's sermons in a *Word & World* Face to Face column. Michael Rogness gave a short and succinct argument in support of such sermons. He briefly highlighted the following points:

- (1) They give children a "place" in the worship service.
- (2) They are a different kind of communication which does work with children.
- (3) In their different form, they also communicate to the whole congregation.⁴

Although the late Professor Sheldon Tostengard raised a word of caution with regard to diving into children's sermons too hastily (with possible ulterior motives of adding the "cute" factor), he also asserted that we should reclaim the art of telling Bible stories during the time allocated as "Children's Sermon." This sounds quite refreshing and appropriate for an increasingly biblically illiterate culture in 2013:

A Bible story well told could be a fine, if occasional, addition to our worship services.

The trick is to tell the Bible story well, with brevity, clarity, and the right addition of meaningless detail. Some have gifts for that kind of telling, and some do not; but even if it is not the pastor, someone in the congregation can surely tell such stories with energy and verve.⁵

In keeping with Tostengard's suggestion, Mount Calvary Lutheran in Excelsior, Minnesota, believes that telling Bible stories is the best curriculum for any children's sermon in worship. Not only does it serve the children well, it also is an introduction for adults who may have distanced themselves from the practice of knowing and rehearsing the biblical story—or perhaps they have never have been exposed to biblical stories in the first place.

Our worship needs the presence of children—not because the church is aging

⁴Michael Rogness, "Children's Sermons? Yes!" *Word & World* 10/1 (1990) 57.

⁵Sheldon Tostengard, "Children's Sermons? No!" *Word & World* 10/1 (1990) 58.

or dwindling or losing its gusto, and not because the children are our only hope for survival. Rather, we need children in worship because that shows that we are following the prophetic reach of Jesus Christ. When we view Jesus' life and ministry, his signal to us regarding children and youth is to include them, to celebrate them, and to draw them into the center of the room.

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The alternative will undoubtedly become a self-fulfilling prophecy of gloom and doom—Eutychuses, Peters, and Pennys who ultimately find their way to the fringes and sadly fall away from the church. With the *missio dei* as our guide, we are called to embody the radical hospitality of Jesus, inviting children and youth to the center of our life together in our preaching, our teaching, our serving, and our very being as a cross-generational church. The late Peter Benson of Search Institute once stated that the church is one of the few institutions in society where up to five generations of people are encouraged to gather together under one roof. This statement alone will cause any church—large or small, rural or suburban, house church or cathedral—to recognize the contextual beauty of two or three gathering in Christ's name.

We gather as church with these “lost and found” Lukan narratives in mind: Jesus, the boy, mingling with teachers and mentors of the day in a temple that welcomes youthful presence, questions, and insights. And Jesus, the man on a mission, breaking down barriers between young and old. Faithful to these stories, we can extend Jesus' prophetic reach—for Eutychus, for Peter, for Penny, for your children and mine. ⊕

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