

Malcolm Clemens Young

Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA Y13

2 Easter (Year B) 11:00 a.m. Baptism and 6:00 p.m. Eucharist

Sunday 8 April 2018

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Acts 4:32-35

Psalm 133

1 John 1:1-2:2

John 20: 19-

The Spiritual Life of Children

"We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes... and touched with our hands concerning the word of life" (1 Jn. 1).

You think about your children before you even have them. In your dreams you watch that imagined person travel through the joys and tribulations of life before they even exist. At first December 22, 1998 in Boston felt like a spring day with temperatures in the sixties and brief downpours. By noon snow squalls were gathering and I took a break from my academic work at Lamont Library and returned to our apartment for lunch.¹

After checking the answering machine I called my wife Heidi at work. She told me that she was pregnant. I immediately took the subway into her downtown office and we called every person we knew. It was only two days before Christmas Eve and suddenly we were part of one of the holiest stories in history.

Although at the time I recognized their inadequacy, I wrote down words describing what I felt. "Synchronicity, great comfort, natural trust, hope, joy, love." It was a spiritual experience. Suddenly I had a new relation to the universe and God.

On an August afternoon during the first week our son was home from the hospital he was lying on my chest. I looked into his eyes and suddenly felt overwhelmed by the conviction that he had just seen God. Many of you might have your own stories about feeling awe, mystery and transcendence in the face of new life. The sleep deprivation and other challenges of early childhood also may make us forget the power of these moments.

But today, I do not want to talk so much about the spiritual experience of having a child. Instead I want us to consider the spiritual experience of *being* a child. I'm not going to hide the ball. The most important point that I have to make is simple. Children are not like an empty pitcher that you fill up with religious knowledge. They already have a rich spiritual life. This is the truth about being human – we hear a mysterious call from beyond ourselves.

Our goal is to learn how to be a kind of gardener for the spiritual life that children are nurturing. I mean this for us both as adults who are responsible for particular children as grandparents, parents, uncles, aunts, teachers and neighbors, but also for this Cathedral congregation.

I'm going to offer a few complex adult interpretations and then share a child's perspective on today's gospel.² After the crucifixion Jesus' closest friends feel absolutely demoralized. They had believed that Jesus would be a Messiah, the Warrior King who would overthrow the Romans. They were terribly disappointed, probably embarrassed, afraid for their lives. Although they had heard that Mary Magdalene had seen Jesus, they do not seem to really believe her. Then Jesus comes among them, but Thomas is not there.

When the others tell Thomas what he has missed, "he says unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands... I will not believe" (Jn. 20). It amazes him that bitterness is not enough for him to abandon his friends. Church is like this too, isn't it? We are all in various stages of belief and doubt but we keep showing up. The next time they are gathered, Jesus appears and Thomas is there. After seeing his friend Jesus, Thomas declares, "My Lord and my God." Jesus says, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

1. One thing we have learned over the last two hundred year is that modern people have a hard time letting faith be faith. As a result, we want to turn it into certainty. We tend to treat the Bible more like a faulty science textbook than as a love letter from God.

In 1799 the German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) wrote a book called *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*. In it he outlines a version of faith entirely in modern terms. He has no room for anything supernatural. The twentieth century thinker Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976) proposed that we can "de-mythologize" the Bible. His contemporary Paul Tillich (1886-1965) re-described all of theology using the language of philosophical existentialism.

The Swiss theologian Karl Barth (1886-1968) did just the opposite. Rather than trying to describe faith in modern terms, he describes modern life entirely in Christian terms. He points out that our picture of the universe is always changing. Isaac Newton imagined one picture of physics. This was supplemented by what Albert Einstein taught us in the twentieth century. Barth argues that we should not begin with a scientific picture of reality that is constantly changing. For him we need to start by being God's children not by being God's judges. Barth famously writes that, "the Gospel is not a truth among other truths. Rather it is a question mark against all truths."³

Where do I stand in all of this? I believe that as a species moving deeper into the twenty-first century we are coming to a new appreciation of our connection to all other creatures. We are more than just rational beings. We are creatures that dream, imagine, draw, compose, and love. There is room for faith. We have good reason to experience ourselves as being in God's hands.

2. Our daughter Melia heard the story of Thomas when she was eight years old and proposed her own interpretation. Quite simply she said, "maybe Thomas wasn't doubting. Perhaps he just felt like a bad friend." For Melia the story is about human nature. We have a harder time believing when we feel isolated and alone. The people who surround us build up or undo our faith. Human life and our experience of God simply don't happen in a vacuum.

A few years ago I interviewed Lisa Miller a faculty member at Columbia University. Dr. Miller believes that children have what she calls a "natural spirituality" and that we are severely neglecting the spiritual life of children, especially in affluent communities. As a result our children suffer from much higher levels of drug and alcohol addiction, depression, mental illness, hopelessness, sexual promiscuity, isolation, eating disorders and suicide.⁴

My teenaged children confirm Dr. Miller's claims. Some of their amazing classmates travel the world leading incredibly enriched lives. But at the same time they are totally ignorant when it comes to religion and feel spirituality empty.

Let me offer three practical suggestions for helping children to cultivate their spiritual lives. First, begin right now to inaugurate family rituals that direct us to God. Pray at meals and before bedtime. Learn about the church's calendar and observe the various seasons of the church in your own home. Read books about spirituality.

Second, talk about faith. In her book Dr. Miller quotes one parent who says, "I didn't realize for a long time that when my child asks a question and I say, "I don't know," and just leave it at that, I'm actually stopping the conversation (47)." Don't be afraid to talk about death or any other topic that addresses the mysterious or transcendent. If you need help in these conversations talk to someone like Mary Carter Greene, our expert in children, youth and family.

Finally, participate in the life of a spiritual community. Grace Cathedral may be too far away for some families but we are committed to helping every child and every adult realize their full spiritual potential. Figuring out what faith might mean for you is so

much easier in a community. We have wise elders, energetic young people, survivors of great tragedies, creative people with lots of heart.

This week we have been observing the anniversary of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s martyrdom and his example has been deeply on my mind. Once Dr. King was awakened late at night by a man who screamed at him over the phone and threatened to murder him and his family.⁵

Dr. King couldn't fall back asleep. He paced the floor, couldn't stop worrying about his family. He began to go over all the theology and philosophy he had studied. He probably longed to go back to a northern college and lead a quiet scholarly life. He wanted to quit. He brewed coffee in his kitchen. He felt so alone that he even imagined going back to live in his own parents' house.

With tears in his eyes he put his head down and prayed. "Oh Lord, I'm down here trying to do what is right. But, Lord, I must confess that I'm weak now. I'm afraid. The people are looking to me for leadership... I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I can't face it alone."

At that moment King felt a kind of presence, a stirring in himself. Suddenly it seemed as if his inner voice was speaking to him with confidence. "Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for truth. And, lo, I will be with you, even unto the end of the world." King saw lightning flash and thunder roar and it became for him the voice of Jesus promising that he would never be alone. His extraordinary spiritual strength changed the world.

You think of your children before you even have them and they may come to think of us long after we are gone. In dreams we meet the ones who have gone before us; people like Thomas, Friedrich Schleiermacher and Martin Luther King Jr. Do not fear the mystery of transcendence. Do not be afraid to be wrong. Cultivate your faith and nourish the spirituality of the children. This is the truth about being human – we hear a mysterious call from beyond ourselves.

¹ Malcolm Clemens Young, Harvard Journal Notes, Chapter Six (12-22-1998) 6.

² Put first let me share a huge revelation I recently had. During Holy Week I found myself meditating on the massive windows above the South Transept. They are some of the largest stained glass windows in Western America and they refer to today's gospel and another story.

Salome was the mother of two of Jesus' disciples, James and John. She goes to Jesus and asks for her two sons to sit at your right and left hand when Jesus come into your glory. The biblical story seems to be about a terrible irony that she does not at the time see. That is, Jesus comes to glory on the cross and no mother would ask for her children to be crucified.

That seems to be the end of this story. It seems as if she did not get her wish. But then twenty centuries later at this great Cathedral at the edge of a still unknown continent James and John are in a kind of glory at Jesus' right and left hand.² In the same window we have Peter who denied he knew Jesus three times. Then on the far right-hand side you can see Thomas. The official notes say that the figure depicted in the windows is John the Evangelist not the John who is the son of Zebedee and Salome, but I'm not sure. See Michael Lampen, *Cathedral Source Book*, Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, California, 2015 Revised Edition, 21.

³ Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 6th Edition, Tr. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (NY: Oxford University Press, 1968) 35. All Saints Day (11-6-16).

⁴ Lisa Miller, *The Spiritual Child: The New Science on Parenting for Health and Lifelong Thriving* (NY: Picador, 2015).

⁵ Stephen B. Oates, *Let the Trumpet Sound: The Life of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (NY: Harper & Row, 1982) 84-5.