

they can have a proper adult conversation. And Jesus will have none of it.

But not only is he annoyed that the disciples are too self-focussed, but he's annoyed that they're missing out on an opportunity to grow in their faith. Because it's not just that we adults show those young 'uns how to be proper Christians, it's that they teach us something too.

Jesus says, "Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." See, Jesus just reversed the roles. The children are now our teachers for how to receive the Kingdom of God.

Now, let's not misunderstand. We still have a role of raising up our children in the way they should go. Let's not forget that a human being is never more self-centered or violent than a toddler – We've still got to raise that child. But Jesus is saying that children are uniquely receptive to faith.

Catholic Theologian Karl Rahner once said, "Children model to the entire community an infinite openness to the infinite."

As we age and mature our minds tend to close and become hardened. We are less receptive to the work of God in our lives and in our world. We tend to say things like 'miracles are for children's stories.' But children can teach us to be open once again to the wonder of God. Children aren't afraid of being in awe of a Holy God. And they aren't afraid to believe. And that's why a focus on children's ministry in this church is actually good for all of us.

You may not know this, but I actually preach two full sermons a week. I preach to the gathered congregation every Sunday morning, but I also teach a twenty-minute lesson to the Cornerstone kids every Wednesday night. They're a tough crowd. This is easy compared to that! But preparing to teach kids has helped me to speak more clearly and to address questions better. I'm

better at this because I do that on Wednesday nights!

Jesus' shocking attention to children reorients the community of God not inward but outward. Children are always new. There's always another one to welcome. But don't be surprised when they teach us how to be a little more faithful.

And so, the church (Jesus' church) should always disproportionately prioritize children. We should go out of our way to send kids to camp, to involve them on Sunday morning, to allocate budgets generously toward activities, programs and events that will benefit them. And consistently adapting to meet the needs of a "next generation" who thinks and acts just a little differently.

And always asking, who is missing and then asking why? So that we can roll out the red carpet and welcome Jesus into our midst. Because when we welcome one of the least of these, we welcome Jesus himself. And in the presence of God all things are made new and healed beyond our imaginations.

Our mission is clear. Our work is not finished. I can't wait to see this church ten years from now – living out God's calling in new and innovative ways – raising up yet another generation of followers of Jesus.

Thanks be to God, Amen.

## ***"Raising Up a Next Generation"***

*February 25<sup>th</sup>, 2024 — Selby United Church — Scripture: Mark 9:30-37*

*By Rev. Mike Putnam*

I'm now in my tenth year here at Selby United Church, and as is often the case when you come around to a big anniversary you do a little reminiscing. I've been thinking about all of the fun we've had and the hard work we've accomplished together, by God's grace, in this place.

I'll never forget that first Sunday here. It was a hot and muggy labour day weekend. I was excited to lead worship here for the very first time but didn't really know what to expect.

I was just a student minister back then. I had completed my theological studies at Queen's and was now beginning a two-year internship in a place I'd never heard of. Selby – where's that?

At that time, this was a lovely little country church with all the challenges most every church is facing – declining attendance and participation, limited financial resources and a small group of dedicated people who were feeling a bit weary.

In the Needs Assessment document that the congregation prepared for attracting a new minister it said that based on current numbers they thought they could afford full-time ministry for about another five years or so.

But that's okay, I didn't plan to stay that long. Student ministers usually don't. I was just excited to sink my teeth into real ministry and hone all those skills I had learned in seminary. But where should I start? Where should I begin?

Those first months I visited a lot, I tried to lead good solid worship every week, and I went to meetings, participated in church events and led Bible study. But none of those things seemed to be very transformative. Don't get me wrong – it was all good ministry stuff – but I recognized that if this ministry was

going to come to life and reverse the trend, it was going to need something more. We were going to need to stick our necks out, take some risks and try something new.

Back at Queen's I was taught to exegete Bible passages. "Exegete" means to interpret the meaning of the passage and apply it to the congregation. But at Selby Church I learned to exegete the congregation.

I listened carefully to the stories that people told. I listened to how people spoke about their church and the "good old days". What made this church tick? In the good times, what brought the church to life? What was in this church's DNA that could enliven it again in a new way.

And what I heard again and again were remembrances about ministry to young people. "Sigma C", large Sunday schools, youth groups, Young People's groups, The Selby Youth Services, and events for children. I started to see that what got people really passionate around here was children's ministry in its various forms.

Slowly, we began to experiment with new ways to engage kids in our church. With Rev. Ed McCaig and Tricia Cammaart we started our "Rock Café" breakfast in 2015, along with a very ambitious Sunday School program. We planted a new youth group in 2016 and our Sunday morning service format changed significantly in 2017. We made a concerted effort to involve kids in worship and we invited and connected with families outside our church.

And what happened next was a bit surprising. Slowly and surely folks of all ages started to join the church, get involved and new life was starting to happen. Our focus on young people actually had an overall effect the whole church.

Before long word was getting out

that our little church was doing something right. Something was happening in Selby that was greater than our individual efforts. It was surely the work of the Holy Spirit enlivening this willing and faithful community in new ways. The growth was slow and not too dramatic – but year by year the transformation was happening. Until today, where our once sleepy little church is literally bursting at the seams – with faithful activity happening almost every day of the week!

But why? I'm regularly told by people outside our church that we're just "lucky". But I don't think it's luck. No, the reason for this church's vitality is a clear and unrelenting mission and vision for what we do, how we do it, and why we do it.

Now, churches are not simple organizations where everyone falls in line and buys into a carefully scripted idea of what it ought to do and be. Thank God churches are diverse – we do a lot of different things here meeting a lot of different needs in a lot of different ways.

But the reasons that this church is almost uniquely vibrant in the landscape of churches these days has to do with our clear and well-defined sense of call to accomplish something important in our corner of the world.

After ten years of ministry here I feel confident in articulating, unapologetically and rather boldly that our collective calling is to "Raise up a next generation of followers of Jesus."

Why am I so confident? Well, as I say it's consistent with our church's history and past success and because we have ten years of data to show it works. But most of all, I'm unwaveringly clear about our mission because Jesus told us to do this.

This morning Jesus specifically says, "Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me..."

And that was a really a shocking thing to say two thousand years ago. We live

in a culture that tends to elevate children – we almost worship them in our culture. We say things like "Children are the future." If a child is sick, we triage them ahead of adults. We have whole hospitals just for kids, we have "make a wish" programs to make kids dreams come true, we're always raising money for children's this and children's that.

But two thousand years ago, kids weren't viewed as that important. They were almost disposable. Afterall, without birth control there were a lot of them around. And with infant mortality rates as high as they were, you didn't want to get too attached.

And yet, Jesus makes a pretty big deal about children. In fact, in Mark's gospel Jesus goes out of his way to heal three children on three different occasions (Mark 5:21-43, 7:24-30, 9:14-29). Which is kind of surprising in a culture that sees children as disposable.

But why? What's so great about kids? Why is Jesus bucking the trend, and spending so much time and energy on children? Because "they're the future?" Well, I suppose in a sense that is true, but that doesn't appear to be his motivation.

Jesus begins this passage that turns to the subject of children by addressing a problem. His disciples are fighting again. They're back on that old hobby horse of a subject – which one of them is the greatest? And you can just imagine Jesus' annoyance. They've talked about this before. How can these people be followers of Jesus and be so lost in the woods. Who is the greatest? Not you!

So, Jesus has a problem with his disciples. They're too self-centered. They're too focussed on their own glory. So, what's Jesus' antidote?

Jesus says, "Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all." To follow Jesus means putting yourself second.

But you wouldn't always know that

by how many of Jesus' churches work today. Listen to the music on Sunday morning in most United Churches – it's at a minimum 30-40 years old. Look at the programs most churches offer – it's most often for the majority – perfectly tailored to a baby boomer generation. Look at how decisions are made – it's a system of governance that suited a way of being from 100 years ago but makes no sense to those living in a digital age.

Which means most churches necessarily exclude anyone under the age of 60, all the while complaining that Sunday sports ruined the church.

And I'm sympathetic. Afterall, we have 1500 years of history behind us, we don't want to just throw out our traditions and practices to suit the flavor of the moment. But I've always had a hunch that if the church created a Sunday morning worship environment that was better suited to young families they would actually come. And turns out, that's true!

So, Jesus says be a servant to someone else. Choose music that isn't your favorite because it will connect with someone else. Organize the church so that younger people can connect and engage. Generously run programs for people who are younger as well as those who are older. Look around and see what age groups or demographics are missing. Ask why they're missing. And roll out the red carpet for them.

And what happens when we stop being self-focussed and follow in the way of Jesus by being other focussed? The text says, "He took a little child whom he placed among them. Taking the child in his arms he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me."

What happens is Jesus shows up. And what happens when Jesus shows up? Healing, wholeness and renewal. When Jesus is welcomed miracles start to happen.

Jesus never once suggested that the purpose of the church is to be a country club for the well-adjusted and comfortable. He also didn't suggest that the church should be a social service agency. But many times, he suggested that his church is to be on a mission. And to illustrate the mission of God, Jesus placed a child at the centre of his gathering.

If you've ever had someone, come to visit your home and they bring their children then you know it's hard it is to carry on an adult conversation. They want your attention. They want to be the focus. They can be downright disruptive. They want to play with your Royal Doulton figurines and to eat your cookies.

So why did Jesus say children should be at the centre of his church? Well, what if it's because it turns his church outward. It reorients the focus and makes the church missional. And churches that join Jesus in his mission missional enlivened because they're filled with the Spirit of God.

But this isn't the last time Jesus mentioned children. Remember, he's healed three of them, now he's saying when you welcome a child you welcome him. But now turn the page to chapter 10 verse 13. Listen to what happens next.

It says, "People were bringing little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them, but the disciples rebuked them. When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, "Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it."

Jesus doesn't lose his cool too often. He's generally pretty level-headed. But this morning Jesus gets a little hot under the collar. What was the source of his anger? His disciples are once again trying to reorient the focus. Jesus has been crystal clear – he wants children in his church. But the disciples want all these noisy and disruptive kids out of here