

## THEIR HOME IS IN THE STARS

Sermon preached by the Rev. Anne Richards

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[John 14: 1-14](#)

“How can we know the way?”

Thomas asks this question at the Last Supper. Jesus has hinted strongly that he is going to die soon. But he says not to be afraid. He tells us to believe in God. He says we know the way to where he is going.

And Thomas responds, “Lord, we *don't* know where you are going. How can we know the way?”

It's the quintessential human question. “How can we know the way?” Life is great, but it's tough. It's filled with struggle and confusion and heartache. We want God but sometimes we don't know where to find God. How can we know the way?

I want to talk with you about children and Christian education and formation, which is something we are more and more realizing is vitally important here at St Mark's both for its own sake and for the health of our parish. You've probably often heard it said that “children are our future.” But children are also our present, which means that they need to be our priority now. The vestry will be discussing this on Tuesday night. I'm just priming the pump this morning.

When the kids start leaking in at announcements time, it's easy to smile and hope they don't make too much noise and assume that they have gotten their dose of Christian education back in those classrooms (or somewhere) with those kindly parishioners who, God bless them, offer themselves as teachers week after

week after week in a kind of invisible ministry.

Sunday School is great. But it's only part of forming a kid as a Christian. Josh figured out that even if a child comes to church school every week all year, she or he gets only about 11 hours of education in a year. That's all the time we have with the kids. It's not much. And so we need to understand that Sunday School can't do the whole job, because faith is not taught – it's “caught.” It's the responsibility of an entire community.

Our culture works powerfully against any understanding of the spiritual formation of children. Our culture thinks of children as material beings. Did you read in the Times last week about how padded bras are being marketed to 7-year-old girls? Kids as consumers; kids as sex objects; kids as celebrities in training; kids as widgets on a conveyor belt, getting assembled into high-achieving success machines.

How can we know the way to help our kids become true human beings, in love with life and with the world and with God? The answer to this question has everything to do with how this parish continues to become a real parish, true to the gospel mandate to respect the dignity of every human being.

It's only in the last 200 years that religious faith has gradually become, in most people's minds, an optional extra in the raising of

children. For many thousands of years before that, religion was understood to represent the distilled wisdom of the human race. Religion was seen as a reliable way to “know the way” to God and to a complete and fulfilling life.

But with the Enlightenment came a great emphasis on individual reason and independence and a de-emphasis on external authority of any kind. Some of this was salutary, but it cast the practice of religion into a downward spiral in this country and many parts of the West.

Every priest sees one of the consequences of this disaffection with religion when young couples come in for pre-marital counseling before their weddings. Many of these young people’s parents have not given them any religious education. And yet they are coming to the church to be married – and not only for the venue. Most of these young adults express a great, albeit vague, yearning for God. This is what a lot of them have said to me: “My parents didn’t bring me up in the church because they said they wanted to expose me to a lot of things so I could choose a religion for myself when I got older. The problem is, they didn’t ever expose me to anything.”

I have said before, at baptisms here at St Mark’s, that the decision to have a child is the decision to let your heart walk around outside your body for the rest of your life. We want our kids to grow up to be strong, loving, and wise. We want them to come out right. And yet the job of a parent is not to manufacture a product. As a parent, you need to cast your bread upon the waters. It is no job for a control freak. Children come out from the womb as the people they are – no assembly needed. We do not “construct” them. Josh, for example, as Director of Children’s and Youth Ministry, does not act

as Kaplan tutor, bringing your child from a low score on the God SAT to a high score. Children are free from the first breath they take, and there is a certain poignancy in that for all of us who see them growing up in a challenging world. And so what do we do, or who should we be, to help them know their way?

There is an Episcopal priest named Tony Jarvis, who was for a long time the Headmaster of Roxbury Latin School in Massachusetts. In his talks with parents and children and in his speeches to the public, Fr Jarvis says this over and over: “Children’s deepest needs are spiritual needs.”

Which simply means that kids are hardwired to ask questions about meaning: “Who am I? Why am I here? Why is anyone here? What is life about? What is the meaning of my life? Why do I feel so continually pulled out of myself toward something or Someone larger than myself?”

Children have a nose for the transcendent. In their artwork, in their writing and poetry, in their prayers and their play, they know that their home is in the stars – by which I don’t mean Hollywood. Their home is in the great intangibles: beauty, mystery, love, faith, self-sacrifice, compassion, generosity, conscience, connection, reverence, balance, joy. Even the very smallest children know intuitively that in those things lies their true happiness. Even the very smallest child knocks on heaven’s door – because that’s what children do. They know their home is in the stars.

The job of a Christian community is to form other-directed children, not children focused on themselves alone. To give our children an alternate vision of a world that says that achieving, owning, and looking good are life’s highest goals. The culture of affluence

encourages our kids to understand themselves as the center of the universe and their parents see in their own homes the unpleasant result in empty, over-served, distressed, and distressing kids. Rich or poor or anywhere in between, we can all feel the effects of the culture of affluence if we have bought into its seductive promises – namely, that the most important needs are material needs, and that money and success guarantee happiness. These are lies.

Scripture tells some stories about children who are victims of the affluence worldview. One of them is Salome, the teenaged stepdaughter of the ruthlessly rich and successful King of Galilee in the time of Jesus. Herod's married Herodias, his brother's wife, in violation of Jewish law, and he was publicly criticized for it by John the Baptist. Herod and Herodias were furious that John would dare to condemn them. And so Herod threw John in prison to shut him up for awhile.

And then Herod threw himself a birthday party, and as a gift, Salome danced for him. It's one of the most titillating stories in the Bible. Herod, known for his eye for the ladies of any age, was very pleased with her dance, and he said to her, "You have done such a good job that you can have anything you want. Anything. Ask for it, and it's yours."

Salome, prompted by her mother and knowing the currency of her request, said to Herod, "I want the head of John the Baptist on a platter. And I want it now. You promised." The Bible says that Herod wanted to take back his promise, because although he had been angry with John he had also been intrigued by his outspokenness and moral courage, but he caved. So he sent word that very moment that John should be beheaded.

John's head was brought into the party on a platter and given to Salome. I imagine it ended up in the trash that night. And so you see that when children are given anything they want, when parents ignore their best instincts and capitulate to their children's worst instincts, something bad almost always happens. When the voice of moral courage is silenced, something bad almost always happens. I wonder if it's this story that gave us the old quip about the danger of serving up life to your kids on a silver platter. The Bible doesn't say anything more about Salome, but this little glimpse of her as a teenager makes me worry about how her life turned out.

Another story, a more hopeful one, is the one about Jesus getting lost as a young boy. He's probably about thirteen years old – Bar Mitzvah age, Confirmation age. He goes to Jerusalem for the Passover with his parents, and after the holiday is over, they start the walk back home to Nazareth with a group of other people from their town. Mary thinks he's with Joseph; Joseph thinks he's with Mary. It takes them awhile to realize he's not anywhere. He disappears. For three days.

They are just as frantic as you or I would be if our child disappeared. They look for him everywhere. They retrace their steps all the way back to Jerusalem. And they find him in the Temple, where he knew he could find God. When they confront him, they say, "What were you thinking? Didn't you know we'd be worried sick?" he responds, "What were *you* thinking? Didn't you know that I have to be about my Father's business? In other words, Jesus says, "Don't you understand? I am who God made me to be. I can be no one else. I will do what I was made to do. My home is in the stars."

The Scripture doesn't say that they understood. But neither does it say that they prevented him from following his path and becoming the person he was meant to be: a child who didn't have two dimes to rub together, who never went to school, who never travelled, who never saw great art, who know no more than a hundred people in the course of his life, and yet who was the most other-directed person in the history of the world. A person so completely directed toward God that he was the *Son* of God.

Many people have envisioned Jesus in the temple and they have thought of him as a little religious genius, lecturing to the rabbis, instructing them. I bet not. I bet he was there as a regular eighth-grader: disheveled, with bed head, a little grumpy, intrigued by what he was learning and but not quite grasping the whole story; really not wanting to be home with his parents, especially if meant walking back there in their embarrassing company; and most of all – asking questions,. Wondering. Yearning, reaching beyond himself. Know that his deepest needs were spiritual needs. Knowing that his true happiness lay in compassion, generosity, reverence, self-sacrifice, joy. And beginning to find his way to his real home, his way back to God.

And his parents gave him a great gift. They let him go. It looked to them like maybe he was headed down the wrong path, but they let him go. They loved him well, they taught him well, and then they let him go. Because his home was in the stars.

When I taught the Bible to 5<sup>th</sup> graders back in the city, the kids and I one day were talking about what made Jesus so mysteriously powerful to nearly everyone he met. The kids spoke of his courage and his kindness. And then one boy, ten years old, who had had exactly zero religious

education said, "I think it's like a baseball game. Some people are in the game; some people just watch the game. Jesus was always in the game." That boy was beginning to see that there is a way to find God, and that finally that is what life is all about.

And so this will be one of our major goals in the upcoming program year. We need to keep reminding ourselves that our kids' deepest needs are spiritual needs. That kids need parents who are not only present and functional, but who know that life has meaning and that life is a path to God. We need to tell them how they can find the way. And we need to be adults who want to find the way, too. We can do this together.

Love them well, teach them well, then let them go. Children's deepest needs are spiritual needs. Their home is in the stars.

Amen.