

St. Paul's Congregational Church  
Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20; Matthew 18: 1-5a  
October 15, 2017 – 22A  
The Rev. Cynthia F. Reynolds

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Think back to one of your early memories of Sunday School – what are you remembering? I think of a large room divided by screens in my home church – we didn't have separate classrooms – there was a lot of noise for sure. But I remember pictures being tacked onto those screens every week, those spaces became my classroom – it never occurred to me then how much work it was for the grownups to set that space up every week. And I remember hearing the Bible stories – the times when we went to the “big church” for part of the service – being bored with the sermons when we had to stay the whole time – but somehow realizing that being together – all ages in worship – that time of being together was important. I didn't always understand why but I remember the sights and sounds and smells of that beautiful old New England meetinghouse – I remember thinking that I was a part of something bigger than my little classroom surrounded by screens and those pictures – and I remember knowing that I belonged there. What a great memory that is – one that has carried me through the good times and the bad my entire life. The seeds planted in those early days of my faith life, those beginning days of my faith journey, continue to grow, to re-seed, to multiply like those morning glories in my garden.

As I look back on those days I realize the priority my home church put on Christian Education – we didn't have the space for separate and individual classrooms but we made it work. Then along came the 1950s and we built an addition to the church which provided those permanent spaces – doesn't that sound familiar? That's our story too here in Nutley – along with many other churches – it underlines the importance most churches place on Christian Education, at least for our children.

Maria Harris has written a book called, “Fashion Me a People” – she's been a professor of Christian Education for many years and is considered a real authority on this important subject. She writes, “Education in the church is life long. This for a people called by the gospel in baptism and confirmation, there is no time in our life when that call ends. Our education into it is ongoing and ought to become increasingly richer and more complex as we develop through adulthood.”

In the sacrament of baptism today we welcomed two children, Sara and Brielle, into the life of the church – we know that God has always loved those beautiful little girls – that baptism is not some kind of magical act that makes them children of God – baptism is as much about the community as it is for the child and her family. We make some very profound promises as we promise to love, support, and care during the ritual. We take responsibility as a community for the Christian nature of those children and their family. We welcomed those girls as sisters in Christ – such a happy time. Such an important time in our life together.

And when we have a confirmation class – here or anywhere – we as a congregation again make some pretty profound promises: we promise our support, our encouragement, and our prayers as the confirmands continue their faith journey. We have acknowledged that faith formation is the job of the entire community by the promises we’ve made. We all have a stake in this process too. Baptism, confirmation, themselves are each a stop – important ones to be sure – but nevertheless just a stop on a life long faith formation. The question is, do we really believe that? How do we live that out? And whose responsibility is the educational ministry of this or any church?

We answer that when we make our promises in baptism – it’s our responsibility, isn’t it. The church doesn’t have an educational program – it is an educational program. Certainly some of us have stronger gifts as classroom teachers but we’re all responsible – and if you think about it, our children and youth learn much more from what we do than what we say: how we live out our own faith journeys, how often we come together in worship, the importance we place on the educational ministry – our commitment to our own continuing learning – it doesn’t take our children and youth long to see the discrepancies between what we say and what we do – kids are very sharp this way! They learn so much from watching us - we’re teaching all the time, aren’t we – parents know that. And our children are learning all the time. How often have you heard your child parrot something you’ve said and it stops you cold.....wow. We don’t realize what we’re teaching, do we, or what they’re learning.

And the same is true here in this church community – our children and youth are learning from us by the way we treat each other, by the priority we make out of participation in worship, in the various programs we offer, by our own attention to our life long learning. Now, there’s the challenge isn’t it – how do we continue our own life long education – it’s not just about our children. Our faith journey isn’t over when we’re confirmed, when we graduate from Sunday School.

Maria Harris says, “We are, of course, talking about children when we talk about education. But the truth of education is that if it is assumed to be only for children, it will not be good for anyone – especially not for children. Children will observe that they are the only ones being attended to and will long for the time when they are “done” with being educated. They will think of education as something that can be finished.”

I have heard parents of confirmands say, “You don’t have to go to church any more after you’re confirmed.” And you know what, we don’t see those youth in worship any more – and often when the youngest child is confirmed, we don’t see the parents either. Our Christian Education is a 12 month, 24/7 covenant, isn’t it – and that’s true for all of us, regardless of our age.

So how do we do this? How do we live out our promises that we’ve made to walk with these little ones on their faith journey?

By getting back to basics : by telling and retelling the story. And by making the story part of our being.

The Bible is a wonderful collection of stories – told over and over again down through the ages. We never get tired of hearing them, do we. And I know that we hear them differently as adults than we did as children – there’s a richness to the stories that grows with us. Our repeating of the Christmas story and the Easter story year after year, for example, illustrates this – we hear them over and over again until they become part of who we are, deeply ingrained into our being.

There's not much more basic to our faith than the Ten Commandments. It's good to hear them read, to review them, to think about them, probably more often than we do. The commandments have to do with community – community united in love and service of God – community rules of behavior – how we are to treat each other. But we begin with God. With who God is and what God does. The promise of God's love to those who keep God's commandments.

The command to keep Sabbath – now, how often do we do that? So much to do, so little time – the news pulling at us, our instant communications – when's the last time you put your phone on vibrate and left it in another room for an evening? Or took a walk and left it at home? We need those reminders to unplug, don't we. Therefore, the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it. How do you hallow your Sabbath?

Then there are all the commandments that start with you shall not....rules for how we treat each other. And all of these commandments – and take note of the word – commandment, not suggestion – boil down to the Great Commandment: love God, love neighbor, love yourself. Those are the basics, aren't they – timeless, really pretty simple – do unto others as you would have others do unto you.

Believe me, our children and youth are paying attention to how we live those commandments – and how we don't live those commandments - every minute of every day. What kind of role models are we? How are we living out our baptismal vows every day?

This church doesn't have an educational program – this church is the program. And we're all part of that – no matter our age, no matter how long we've been attending here, no matter where we come from or where we are going, no matter what we do in our daily lives – we are the educational ministry of our church. We're all in this together, aren't we. Young and old, men and women: we're all joined by a common faith and a common desire to become closer to God. Thank God we have each other to share this awesome journey – none of us can do it alone. And thank God we have been called together in this time and this place. May the seeds we plant and those planted in us continue to grow and multiply as we go forth to share the good news with all we meet. Sara and Brielle, thank you for reminding us of who we are and whose we are. God's blessings on you, your family, and this gathered community now and always. Amen.

Let us pray: Gracious God, we give you humble thanks that you have honored us by your presence with us today and always. We thank you that you have entrusted to each of us your story – help us to walk with each other in faith and hope, nurturing each other on our faith journey that your story be told for generations to come. Strengthen us to live your story wherever you have called us and empower each of us to tell your story by not just our words, but by all that we do. In the name of Jesus Christ, your Son, our Brother we pray. Amen.