

Wisdom and Her Children

Matthew 11.16-19 (NKJV)

Jack Price

It is good to be home again after three weeks away from Crossroads and Kansas City. We celebrated our son's college graduation and enjoyed a wonderful family trip, a vacation to Italy and Greece. There were so many sights and a rich variety of experiences. As we continue to unpack our suitcases, I look forward to unpacking these experiences and sharing them with you. My role today is to offer a few words of introduction and to set the stage for my friend Paul Steinberg who will share his own insights and experiences from a journey he has been taking.

The scripture lesson is from the Gospel of Matthew (Matthew 11.16-19, NKJV):

But to what shall I liken this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to their companions and saying:

‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance.

We mourned to you, and you did not lament.’

For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon.’

The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and a winebibber, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’

But wisdom is justified by her children.”

The truth of these words of Jesus is self-evident. The frustration of trying to please everyone and being accepted by the crowd is something we all have probably experienced. John the Baptist expressed his faith through a disciplined life of fasting and abstinence. And he was criticized for it. People said he must be possessed!

Jesus expressed his faith through personal freedom and the integrity of inclusiveness of those who were outcast. He was living in his own life the joy of being one with God. And people criticized him for loose personal morals. People criticized him for failing to guard their religious faith by failing to exclude those who didn't measure up or fit in.

Jesus concluded, “Wisdom is justified by her children.” The fruit of our lives, its results, bring their own judgment on how we have lived. Jesus' faith was very pragmatic. Essentially, do what works for you and measure how you do by the benchmark of love. Does your life lead to love? Does it produce love? Does it encourage love?

Do our lives provide a fertile field of love for God: for the spiritual underpinning of the universe, for the ultimate truth of life? Are our lives filled with love for neighbor: for other people, anyone in need without limit of nationality, race, religion, or social or economic class?

Jesus' faith was and is all about the freedom to live life as we see fit. The measure is love – both practical and idealistic. Jesus' faith also was and is all about personal responsibility – the personal responsibility you and I have to grow, develop, and realize our potential.

In Florence, Italy, the Academia Museum has the statue of David by Michelangelo Buonoforte. Seeing this statue was an experience of profound aesthetic joy at the ability of the sculptor to bring marble rock to life. As we approached Michelangelo's David, both sides of the hallway were lined with a series of unfinished statues by Michelangelo. These carvings of men and women were in the process of coming to "life." They left me with a profound sense of striving in our lives: striving to become, to live, and to realize our potential. It became clear, that's why we are here: to strive, to become, and to live.

I realize that I am not the first to be touched by these statues. Ann Lewin was inspired to write this poem:

God's work of art, that's me?
Then beauty must lie in
the eye of the beholder.
I feel more like
one of those statues
Michelangelo left
half emerging from the marble block;
full of potential
on the verge of life, but prisoned still
by circumstance and fear
Yet part of me is free—
and you are still creating,
bringing to life the promise that is there.
Sometimes by hammer blows
Which jar my being
Sometimes by tender strokes half felt
Which waken me to life.
Go on, Lord
love me into wholeness
set me free
to share with you
in your creative joy
to laugh with you
at your delight in me
Your work of art
("Revelation" by Ann Lewin, from *Candles and Kingfishers*, 1993)

Church is one of those places where ordinary people like you and me have the privilege of watching people emerge from the stone that imprisons them. We have the unique opportunity of being in touch with their potential. Nowhere is that more evident than in children's Sunday School. Those who teach and shepherd have the God-like opportunity to love children into wholeness, to help set them free, and to delight in the process.

Paul Steinberg

Well, let my first appearance before a microphone be a lesson to you all. Don't tell Jack you are excited about something going on in the church right before he goes on vacation.

My sharing today has to do my being a Shepherd in our Sunday school for 3-5 graders.

A little background on me--

First, I never went to church other than for a wedding or a funeral until I was 45 years old. I did go to Sunday school a few times when I was very young, and that was because my Mom made my Dad drop me off and pick me up afterwards. The only thing I remember at all about it is the order of 'Mathew, Mark, Luke, John', and I made a little box out of glue and pop cycle sticks with a decal picture of Jesus on the top. He was in profile. He was white, had the nose and chin of a movie star, and long flowing brown hair that looked similar to the Prell Girls in Look Magazine. Dating myself a bit here, but, after all, I am 60 years old. Cynthia early on told me that I was the quintessential unchurched. In fact, when one of my oldest buddies from the old neighborhood, who has lived in California for many years now, heard I was going to marry Cynthia and had met her at a church, he said "what happened, was she walking out of the church while you were walking out of the bar across the street and you bumped into her? Obviously he was still, as my mother used to call us both, a Heathen.

Second, there is the topic of being comfortable around children. I was in a 20 year first marriage where we mutually decided no kids needed. In fact, when my buddies started having children I couldn't believe it. You wouldn't imagine how that interferes with Friday night poker, or Tuesday night softball, or playing touch football every Sunday. Even the guys at work. They were dropping out of our golf league because they had to take their kids to little league practice or music lessons and things like that. Made no sense to me at all.

When I married Cynthia, her two sons were in their teens. Even though they weren't 'little' kids, they were still kids, and although I love them both dearly now, my view of them in the beginning was as a liability. And as hard as that beginning time was, I couldn't imagine what it must have been like when they were even younger. So, clearly, I knew very little about how to be with children under 14.

Well, this info probably makes you wonder how it is I am now a Sunday School Shepherd for the 3-5 graders here at our church. In fact, some of you parents out there are looking a little bit worried...and I wouldn't blame you.

Well, here's how it all happened.

About a year ago, my really good buddy Bob Rockford was soliciting for members to participate in Sunday school. His method was to invite groups of folks interested in a new Team Teaching idea of his to meet and hear about it, and asked me if one of the meetings could be at our house. I said, sure, be happy to host those good folks. You know, "those" folks. Those of you out there that have been in Sunday school since you were two. Those

of you that graduated from, or spent time in, seminary. And, yes, those of you that do know more books of the bible than the 'Big Four'.

Hmmmm, that reminds me of a story that further demonstrates my background.

I had been a member of this church several years, and thought I should contribute to SOME sort of team or committee. So I went to our direction setting retreat and when I heard how excited Terry Mai was about a Stewardship Committee, I thought, this must be important enough that I could contribute in some sort of way. (I later figured out that Terry gets excited about just about ANYTHING that has to do with our church). Anyway, we were meeting one night and Jack came. Didn't know him hardly or him me. He suggested we break into teams of two and each teach an adult Sunday school class. Even gave us the topics. Sooooo, being REALLY nervous about what I had gotten myself into, I immediately latched onto Kathy Jaros as a partner, and requested we take the story of Daniel because I had heard something about him and the Lion in a song somewhere. Well, as we were closing the meeting, I remember thinking, 'I better at least read this story, even if I secretly intended to have Kathy do all the talking in the class.' So, I quietly said to Jack, 'Hey Jack, remind me what book of the bible the story of Daniel is in'. Jack, being the gracious man we now all know him to be, just leaned into me, looked over his reading glasses, and softly said "Uh, that would be Daniel, Paul".

Well, back to what happened at the meeting at our house. Wanting to be a good host, even though I was not on the invite list, I sat in on the discussion. Afterwards, my really good friend Kathy Ralston came up to me and said with an inspired smile, 'Paul, want to be on my team?' I gave her a shocked look and said 'no, I'm just hosting and besides, I don't know anything about being with kids'. Kathy, being kind and generous I thought, walked away and started talking to my good friend Mary Varner. Well, very shortly, here came Kathy with Mary in tow. 'Want to be on OUR team?' I repeated my answer, and they were gracious enough to walk away.

Well, later that night, and into the next day, I thought to myself 'I'd probably do this if I knew more about being around kids'..... 'Or perhaps if I knew more scripture'...then I thought, 'well how does one figure out how to be around kids, and what's one way to find out more about the scripture. The obvious answer – Be around Kids, and, be involved in teaching Sunday school. They always say teach what you want to learn and this is actually based on some solid research that shows we learn or integrate or incorporate in our life only 10% of what we read, but 80% of what we say and do. (SLIDE). Plus, I had also been thinking about when I was a kid. And how our kids here at church might feel if not enough adults were interested in teaching them about God, Jesus, the Bible and all the stuff we adults talk so much about in church. I reflected on the song we sing that says 'Hear I am Lord,- it is I Lord', and how that always made me nervous when I sang it. Well, that particular time I felt very uncomfortable about it.

So, I sent Kathy an email the next day and said I'd be a shepherd... but not a teacher. After all, I was still going into uncharted water as far as I was concerned.

Well, here's what I really got up here to share.

One of our core values here at Crossroads is "Our children are the future of our church; and as such we value age appropriate teaching programs to enable their spiritual development". Cool one, huh? Who all still likes that one and believes it's still one of our core values?

Well, Two miracles happened to me over the last 9 months by being a Shepherd with the 3rd, 4th and 5th graders.

One, 'Little Paul the Heathen' got to be taught Sundry School for the first time by a 'Super' team of awesome teachers. Kathy Ralston, Madelyn Gengelbach, Annie McGill, Terri Oberle, and Mary Varner.

And two, the program enabled MY spiritual growth, and that was thru what the kids in our class taught me.

Example: One of our fabulous teachers had an activity where the kids had paper strips laying in front of them and the assignment was to write a behavior that Jesus would endorse on each one, and then make a chain out of them. One of the kids, who is continually doodling, but is always listening, started writing on his slips of paper before the assignment was made. He made a string of about 10 or so rings I guess, and naturally I wanted to look at what he wrote on those first three before he was told what to do. 1. Make good choices. 2. Respect yourself. 3. Care for others. I had to ask. 'What made you choose to write those first? Did you know where the lesson was going?' He said 'No, it was just stuff I was thinking about'. (Pause) Wisdom. Children have it. They may lose it for a time when they become young adults and middle aged grown ups to some degree, and have to acquire it again though life experience as they get older, but children have it to begin with.

Another one of our fabulous but ambitious teachers had the idea of constructing a 'Love Bug'. A car out of scrap cardboard with pasted on flowers and butter flies with words on them from a bible verse about love. I thought, tough assignment for kids this age, but maybe it will be cute and even look a little like a car when it's complete. Well, a car almost the size of a Volkswagen Beetle was constructed in just two classes one hour each. (Show Photos) I had to buy three roles of duck tape! These kids were excited and had no reservations about whether they had the know how or whether they were taking on taking on two big a game. Everyone pitched in and each helped the other. No showboating or bragging about individual contributions. They stood Tall and Proud when it was complete. (Photo of car and group,1, then 2) I was proud to be part of it too! I took this photo of them. Reminded me of when I stood with my platoon upon graduation from Marine Corps Boot Camp. These kids demonstrated real Pride and Inclusion.

Fairness. They take turns. They show respect for each other. And the adults in their class. One day, one kid came in with an obvious burr under his saddle. I don't know what had transpired before he got there, but, like all of us display from time to time, he was obviously in a surly mood. Shortly after we started the lesson, he displayed behavior a bit disruptive. The teacher sitting beside him mentioned in a quiet voice his

inappropriateness. He snapped something disrespectful back. As I watched and started to think 'how does someone police someone else's kid in a situation like this? My thinking had barely started when one of the other kids, got out of his seat, went over to him, and in a quiet and respectful, yet firm voice said 'Don't talk that way to her. She's our teacher'. And then sat down. It was not a scolding, and wasn't received as one. Merely one peer reminding another about appropriateness, and fairness.

I also believe God also brought me to this class for a boost in my Humility. My growth in this area came often. It was in the form of me learning that kids this age have as much raw intelligence as adults, and a greater desire to learn and excel. I'll give only two examples. Again, one of our fabu teachers gave the class a puzzle. One of those where specific identified words are embedded in a square pattern of letters. They are spelled correctly, but could be upside down, diagonal, backwards. I forget what they are called., but you know the kind? Anyway, I was challenged by the kids to take the puzzle too. OK. Only about eight easy words. These were 3-5 graders after all. Turns out it was easy (and several kids pointed that out) and all of us got all the words in the allotted time. Sooooo, the next time this teacher taught, she brought the same kind of puzzle, but exponentially more difficult. About 20 words and a much larger pattern of letters. And Big Biblical Words. You know the kind. Those words that only Jack and Terry Rayburn's tongue can get around. Well, I thought too tough for this age group, but they will get some of them. I, myself was not worried. My scores on the IQ and Mensa tests I'd taken over the years had me pretty confident.I think you know the end to this story. Slam dunked by a couple of the kids, and THEN, even given advice on how I should have crossed the words out as I went.

The other story was when a father of one of the kids came in with her to show the class the rocket they had built. A real rocket. One that actually flies into the sky and parachutes down. Well, assuming the father had built it for the girl while she hung around, I asked her about the different components on the rocket after the presentation. Not to quiz her, but because she seemed so proud. I should say here that as some of you know, my profession requires me to know VERY MUCH about such things. I started with a simple question. She answered it correctly. We went from there to a discussion on the need for light yet strong materials. How important the placement and angle of the fins were. The relationship between the weight of the nose and the tail of the rocket. Her knowledge was remarkable.

We have an Engineering Intern program where I work. We go for the best University juniors and seniors every summer. My Director will be surprised next year when I suggest a girl in between 4th and 5th grade.

Last part. Last November, the class was asked to write a letter from Jesus to anyone they wanted. It was to invite them to His Thanksgiving Table. I'd like you to hear one.

These letters to me demonstrate probably the most important thing I have gotten by being involved in the Sunday School Program. I really got how children have the heart of Jesus and why He spoke so often about them and held them in such high regard.

So I got all of this. More wisdom. Better understanding of Pride and Inclusion. Importance of fairness, humility and the Heart of Jesus. AND, as a bonus for an adult, it was all wrapped in FUN!

So as you see, it is no empty platitude to say I learned more than I taught, I was blessed more than I blessed – it is really true, service is not a sacrifice, but a gift to yourself.

What area of your life or spiritual journey do you want to grow and expand? What gift of the spirit do you want more fully expressed in your life? In what ways do you want your walk to be closer to the walk of Jesus? Don't wait to have it "done" to you – you will probably not get that sitting on the pew, observing or even just by listening – it will only happen when you take a step and say 'Her I am Lord.'

One last and very important thing for me personally. The folks I spoke of and you just saw on the overhead, are no longer just kids at my church. I consider them my friends. I hope some think the same of me. Thanks for letting me share.