

## **The Spirituality of Children**

Deuteronomy 6:5-7, Mark 10:13-16, John 6:8-11

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*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down & when you rise.*

*Deut. 6:5-7*

*People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them. Mark 10:13-16*

*A large crowd was following Jesus and he taught them. One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?" Jesus said, "Make the people sit down." .... so they sat down, about five thousand in all. Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. When they were satisfied, ... they gathered the fragments left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets.*

*John 6:8-11*

### **Opening**

Johnny, 9 years old - "Dear God, thank You for the baby brother but what I prayed for was a puppy." Sophie, 7 years old - "Dear God, my Grandpa says you were around when he was a little boy. How far back do you go?" Mark 8 years old " "Dear God, in Bible times, did they really talk that fancy?" Lilly, 6 years old. "Dear God, I didn't think orange went with purple until I saw the sunset you made on Tuesday night. That was really cool."

Honest prayers from children. They wonder. Ask questions. Explore. Think about young children you know or have seen. Take a moment to think about a pleasant memory in your childhood. Maybe you are around 5 years old or so. In July the Worship Comm. and I have planned series of worship services and sermons to reflect on faith & spirituality in our life.

### **Developmental Models**

When we think about the spirituality of children ages birth – 10, it is helpful to know what we can learn from those who work with children and research that has been done. One of the primary names in children's spiritual formation is James Fowler.

Early Stage: Children from birth - 2 years of have an innate curiosity and wonder about the world. Through loving care from parents and other adults in their life young children start to build a lived experience of faith and spirituality in the forms of trust, courage, hope and love.

Stage 1: Intuitive-projective Faith Pre-school aged children. They experience the holy in nature, relationships, music, and tangible items. The cognitive development of children of this age is such that they are unable to think abstractly but only in concrete terms. Faith a set of impressions that are largely gained from parents or other significant adults in their lives. For children at this age, God is a real person who lives in a place called heaven or in a house of worship. God provides comfort (like a teddy bear or blankie) and cares for one like a parent.

Stage 2: Mythic-literal Faith Generally ages 6 to 12. Children at this age are able to start to work out the difference between facts and things that might be more fantasy. At this age children's source of religious authority starts to expand past parents and trusted adults to others in their community like teachers and friends. Faith and spirituality are to be experienced. Faith become the stories told and the rituals practiced.

For children 5 - 8. God is great in ways similar to superheroes. God watches people all year round (like Santa Claus) to decide who to reward and who to punish. God acts like a magician, making things happen that can't be explained. God is concerned with reciprocal fairness, i.e. making sure that everyone gets what they deserve. And then children 9 – 12, God is involved in the various ways that shape one's world. God is like a friend who takes a personal interest in one's activities. Who God is and how God works are puzzles to be investigated. This is the age when children begin to question the existence of God or have more complex ideas about God.

**Scripture** There are many places in the Bible where children are the focus. There is the theme of generations and the importance of adults teaching children the stories of God's presence and power and saving work. Stories where a child or children are main actors.

Our passage from Deuteronomy and what follows is originally addressed to that second generation of Israelites standing on the edge of the Promised Land. They and we are called upon even now to enter into and recommit to that relationship with the God of Israel.

Our reading for today from Deut. begins "Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one" — is known as the Shema (after the first word in the verse, Shema, Hebrew for "hear"). It is a central passage in Jewish theology and practice. Teach these words, this relationship to the next generation. So children are watching, listening, and experiencing the presence of the Holy one. The invitation is that we worship a God of liberation, of hope, of presence, in the wilderness, in the Promised Land, in all of life. The passage also commands us and every hearer or reader of the text to love God with our whole being — mind, heart, spirit, and strength. Combined with the commandment to love one's neighbor as oneself.

What did we hear about sacred stories? What did we learn about loving our neighbor? What did we learn about loving ourselves? How do we offer this truth to children we know, we meet, in our families? They want and need to hear stories. Maybe our own lives. Here is how God guided me, was a source of strength, loved me.

Mark 10:13-16 Children's spiritual formation was something adults were expected to do – to teach and instruct children. But something else is going on in our story from Mark. Children were not seen as people to be valued. They would become adults and then they would be useful and valued. And yet Jesus saw them, valued them, wanted to bless them, to touch them in love. What a remarkable story. Jesus, God incarnate, fully divine, fully human, valued children. And I believe they must have responded in trust, in joy.

Children sense when they are loved and valued. Children experience Divine love in relationships with people. The words come later. Think of the children who grew up in this church. They were valued. They experienced God's love here – relationships with families, in music, in church meals, church family camp, and later in youth group.

Were there people in our lives as a child who helped you experience God's loving presence or taught Bible stories or taught music? Or maybe you have been part of a circle of love for a child or welcome. Or not.

And our passage from John is one of my favorites. John tells the story of Jesus teaching to thousands of people 5,000 men plus women and children. And now it's time for lunch. A boy brings his lunch forward. A small act of kindness. 2 fish and 5 loaves. A boy. A boy who likely learned the Shema – love God and love your neighbor as yourself. And watched his parents and synagogue community make sure people had enough to eat. Words and actions. Developing compassion and empathy. Love God by loving people. So he did.

It is a miracle story. Everyone was fed and there were leftovers. Children would ask good questions, but also marvel at that. Wow. There was so much. Jesus multiplied it. Maybe he said – Let us share with our neighbor like this young boy did.

Who taught you about intentional acts of kindness? Of helping? These can lay the foundation for work of social justice later. Why are people hungry in my community? Who are the people who are picking the strawberries so I can enjoy them?

What does spirituality look like over our lifetime? We as lifelong learners, seekers, pilgrims. Our words about the holy, mystery, source of love, God, Spirit shift. Our words about Jesus evolve. Our images can change and expand or not. What do we need to let go of? What do we need to hold onto? What can we learn or rediscover from children?

**Robert Coles & Krista Tippett** <https://onbeing.org/programs/robert-coles-diane-komp-and-carol-dittberner-children-and-god/>

In 1960 Robert Coles was a young child psychiatrist working in New Orleans when he happened to drive by crowds of adults heckling black first-grader Ruby Bridges. In that year she single-handedly integrated the public school system of Louisiana. "Had I not been right there," he wrote later, "I might have pursued a different life." But Robert Coles got to know Ruby Bridges and her family, and over the next two decades, he listened to children all over

the world. He wrote books about the psychological, political, and moral lives of children. In 1990 he published the work for which he is now best known, *The Spiritual Life of Children* based on his listening to children for over 40 years from all different backgrounds. There is a wonderful interview from *On Being* with Krista Tippett talking with Robert Coles.

ROBERT COLES: Children are, by nature, questioning. 'Where do I come from?' 'Where are we going?' And those fundamental questions inform religious life and inform the lives of children as children. So you get a merger of the natural inquiring mind of the child and the inquiring nature of religion. And that merger is a beautiful thing to behold when you're with children.

The questions, the inquiry, the enormous curiosity about this universe, and the hope that somehow those answers will come about, which is what we do when we kneel in a church and sit and pray in a synagogue or whatever. They are open to mystery.

Mystery is such an important part. And mystery invites curiosity and inquiry. It's an invitation, and it's a wonderful companion, actually. Children are born closer to God.

... I see children's spontaneity; I may even call it their delving spirit. They're probing. They want to know. Almost physically they poke around and explore and touch things. They want to understand. They're yearning. This is just part of their being, and storytelling. We're the story-telling creature, the creature of language and narration. Creatures who have a spiritual life.

**Closing** One of the challenges in the church is to offer children experiences, images and words that are expansive about God, the Holy One. We don't want children to be stuck with an old white man with a long beard sitting on a throne in the clouds. And maybe we hold onto older images that keep our own spiritual formation in the past.

Here are some simple and profound answers to the question *Who Is God?* from children.

God is a spirit. —Layla, 8      God is a girl. —Isabella, 4

God is the person who created the universe. —Maddi, 8

God is God! —James, 8

God is someone that listens to me, someone that is always there. —Katrina, 11

I think God is a big hug that goes all around the world. —Liam, 5

God is a grownup. And he absolutely loves people. He doesn't like people that fight.

Neither does Santa or Jesus! —Liam, 5

God is like an umbrella that protects people. — Mark, 9

God is love. —Xainyia, 7

Amen.

Resources: *OMG!: How Children See God* by Monica Parker