

The Children Are Our Future

Today we are observing Children's Sabbath. It is a day that unites places of worship and all faiths across the nation in shared concern and action for children and youth, and common commitment to improving children's lives and working for justice with and on their behalf. This day was initiated in 1992 by the Children's Defense Fund, which was founded by Marian Wright Edelman in 1970. On this day and weekend, people intentionally work together in their respective communities to focus on the voices, needs, and concerns of children, and to advocate for them to live a life of health, wholeness, and access to resources that enables them to thrive.

As people of faith, we are called to care for children, so today we especially focus on the needs and hopes of young people.

Recently the U.S. Census Bureau reported that child poverty has more than doubled from last year, resulting in an additional 5 million children in the United States experiencing poverty in 2022. This represents a significant backtracking from the progress made in 2021 and is the largest one-year increase on record.

According to the Center for Disease Control, it is estimated that 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 13 boys will experience sexual abuse before their 18th birthday. Additionally, in 60% of these cases, the perpetrator of their abuse was someone known to and trusted by the child and their family.

More than 6,000 children have been killed or injured in the United States by gunfire in 2022, the most ever recorded in the nine-year history of a nonprofit that tracks shooting incidents. [*Gun Violence Archive*]

According to a recent report from the Surgeon General, far too many young people are struggling with their mental health and unable to get the support they need. COVID-19 added to pre-existing challenges that youth faced. Since the pandemic began, rates of psychological distress among young people have increased. The pandemic is most heavily affecting those who were already vulnerable. This includes youth with disabilities, racial and ethnic minorities, LGBTQ+ youth, and other marginalized communities. The American Psychological Association reports that more than 20% of teens have seriously considered suicide.

Jesus said, "Let the children come to me, for to such as these the kingdom of God belongs." The kingdom of heaven – God's beloved community – is happening wherever children are welcomed, loved, and treated with compassion, honor, and care. It is happening where and when the needs of the children of God are met.

During the COVID shutdown and other limitations, most churches experienced a change in how families connected. The result, according to countless articles and all my minister friends, is that many families with children did not return to worship when the churches reopened. It's hard to say why, but I suspect that for some, they just discovered it was much easier to stay home on Sunday mornings. Add that to the many who are involved in sports that play on Sunday mornings, and it has a huge effect on worship attendance among children and youth.

You may see few children on Sunday mornings, but we continue to care for and about them. To meet the needs, as we are called to do, **WE have to change** – to reach out, to be advocates, to offer safe spaces, brave spaces where children and youth can explore, be accepted, and grow. We have to connect with the children and youth in our lives outside the church. We have to meet them where they are.

There are many ways this congregation provides for children and youth, and we continue to seek to grow in our efforts. We are fortunate that, thanks to the amazing leadership of Sara Gannon and all who help her, our congregation has an excellent and well-attended program for youth on Wednesday evenings. We provide space for the youngest children on Sunday mornings, and we are seeking trained caregivers to meet their needs and to allow their parents to have time to worship. We have a confirmation class of 8 students that has just finished up. Confirmation Sunday will be November 12.

In addition, we provide space for Boy Scout troops and music lessons. During the winter we welcome Playpen Sports back to the Fellowship Hall for their sports activity classes for toddlers and preschoolers. This past summer, Sara Gannon and Lisa Coen offered a series of Triple P parenting classes. You'll hear more about that shortly. We offer additional activities for children and youth in the summer, and we have a Dungeons & Dragons game group. We provide space to play – ga ga ball, basketball, volleyball. We have a fire pit and youth center for gatherings.

Maya Angelou said, "Each child belongs to all of us and they will bring us a tomorrow in direct relation to the responsibility we have shown to them."

As you listen to John Wagner, Sara Gannon, and Lisa Coen this morning, I hope you will consider how you, as individuals, and we, as a church, can provide for the needs of God's children.

SCRIPTURE: Mark 10:13-16

¹³ People were bringing children to him in order that he might touch them, and the disciples spoke sternly to them. ¹⁴ But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, "Let the children come to me; do not stop them, for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. ¹⁵ Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." ¹⁶ And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

SPEAKER: **John Wagner**

SCRIPTURE Psalm 127: 3-4 *The Message*

Don't you see that children are GOD's best gift?
the fruit of the womb his generous legacy?
Like a warrior's fistful of arrows
are the children of a vigorous youth.
Oh, how blessed are you parents,
with your quivers full of children!

SPEAKER(S) **Sara Gannon & Lisa Coen**

SCRIPTURE: Isaiah 40:11

He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.

SCRIPTURE: Isaiah 11:6

The wolf shall live with the lamb;
the leopard shall lie down with the kid;
the calf and the lion will feed^[b] together,
and a little child shall lead them.

Children's Message – FPC October 15, 2023
John Wagner

Today we are celebrating children. Of course, children are the future. And when I say children, I mean all children...the rich and the poor and everyone in between. ALL children are special in my eyes and in the eyes of God. They're special because they are born with an innate need to love and be loved and it is during the first years of their life that they are most nourished by the love shown by their mother and father.

A person's brain grows prenatal through about 25 years. The most rapid growth is in the first 3 years (80%) (90% at 5 years). A child's brain from birth to 3 years makes 1 M synaptic connections PER SECOND. [adult brain has about 86B neurons.] Why is this so? Why is love during a child's early years so important? Love is critical because the connections made during this period will define the degree to which a child thrives and whether they will become a successful adult.

A most important question is: why is love so important to humans (and all mammals for that matter)? Humans are aware that they are aware. That makes us homo sapien sapiens. **We are aware that we are aware.**

The Bible tells us that innocence, compassion, and love are all aspects of God and Jesus. Of course, we know that Jesus loved and respected children [Mat 19:14 and Mark 10:14, and Luke 16:18].

If I were asked to choose something on the planet earth that best represents God in all of her compassion, innocence, and love, I would choose a child.

Earth is also replete with extravagant natural beauty. The essence of this beauty are the chemical compounds that were produced over time by fundamental forces that exist in just the right degree enabling a collection of atoms and a coordination of molecules over time to form the proteins and many other complex molecules of life. All of this happened on a world in a universe that cosmologists consider highly improbable. In fact, almost impossible.

These scientists and mathematicians tell us that the subtly tuned forces that produce life are a result of the breaking of symmetry, a "statistical" high improbability. The truth today is that even after nearly three thousand years of learning about how our planet works, we still don't know what caused symmetry to break nor do we fully understand how life began, or even how to define consciousness. We still can't reduce all that we see and know to a set of equations.

But is it really necessary to understand everything? Do we have to understand the underpinnings of atoms, molecules, love, compassion, or innocence? I think not. We feel these emotions as we grow old because we new them as children. Children are loved by Jesus and by God and children know that love.

Children's Sabbath –Sara's talk -Oct. 15, 2023

Children were important in my family growing up. I was the oldest of 6 children and my parents also cared for foster children. My mother and two of my sisters are elementary school teachers. While I have always cared for kids, I sensed that teaching school would not quite be right for me. I thought I might work with children as a nurse, and eventually ended up working in maternal-child nursing where I got to care for newborn infants and their mothers. In addition to caring for their bodily needs and healing, I had the privilege to teach mothers and fathers how to care for their new babies. I loved teaching them these basic skills like diapering and breastfeeding which are necessary for an infant to thrive. Many parents were nervous about taking their newborns home –especially if they were first time parents. Some welcomed this new role and others had a more difficult time adapting. It was helpful when parents had a support system, allowing them to have some rest and encouragement that helped to build confidence in their parenting skills.

When my children were young, I had a career change and became involved in Faith Formation here at First Presbyterian. In this role, I've had the opportunity to teach children and youth more directly, as well as to coordinate the faith education programming. Our classes have been a bit like a laboratory in that we've experimented with a lot of creative ways of learning. From filming a movie with the kids about blind Bartimaeus, to making sushi to illustrate the story of Jonah and the whale, to creating a Zacchaeus hanging mobile –we have had the pleasure of doing so many fun activities with the kids to share Bible stories and hopefully plant seeds of God's love. In March of 2020 we had a culminating event in our youth and children's ministry as we presented the musical, "The Enchanted Journey." It was a lot of fun and a great success, but the following week we were in lock-down due to COVID-19. Despite doing virtual Sunday school and seeking to stay connected through home delivery of materials, when we returned to meeting in the church building, our Sunday school did not look the same. Many children had grown into middle schoolers and now attended our Wednesday evening youth program. Other families followed the national trend and stopped attending on Sunday morning. The needs of the handful of children we do have coming, do not allow for the same formats as before.

So does this mean that First Presbyterian Church's ministry to children is over? I sure hope not. To me that is like giving up on the future. We will continue to find unconventional ways to minister to our few children and their families. Our methods may be more ingrained into the fabric of our church rather than traditional classes. And we need to be ready to welcome new children into our community, adapting for them. But perhaps we are also being invited to see our children's ministry field as not just to those families inside of our church – but to all children. Outside of our worshipping community, we have many children who are in our building during the week for music lessons, Scouts, and Play Pen Sports. How can we offer those children and their families hospitality, not because we want them to join our church, but because we are called to care about them and represent the love of Christ to them through kind actions and attention. The mission of our church is not to build our membership, but rather to spread God's love. How might we spread seeds of love to students in our neighborhood or those attending nearby schools? Many of you have grandchildren. How might we as a community nurture those grandchildren?

Interestingly, I've recently had the opportunity to once again work with parents to help them learn parenting skills, though these skills are different from the type of skills I once taught as a nurse. In the summer of 2022, I was contacted by Dr. Jennifer Eddy, who is a medical doctor and the director of the Family Resource Center. She wanted to know if I'd be interested in being trained in Triple P. At the time I

had never heard of Triple P –which stands for Positive Parenting Program. It was developed in Australia and prides itself in being evidence-based and developed through research. The program makes use of seminars, small groups and one-to-one situations to empower parents with strategies to modify their children’s behavior through positive means. Sometimes consequences are used to alter behavior, but only after first trying more positive strategies. Triple P is based on the foundation of a warm, loving, and nurturing parent-child relationship. It encourages parents to think about the child’s perspective and motivation. It requires slowing down and planning ahead and responding rather than reacting. It trusts that parents know their children and are capable of choosing the best interventions from a Tip Sheet of strategies. Triple P trained individuals help parents decide on how they will implement the strategies they choose.

Last fall I was trained in giving seminars and 1:1 primary care. I have had the opportunity to observe the primary care sessions at the FRC and have been amazed at how simple interventions have contributed to big changes in children’s behavior. For example one little girl’s behavior was changed significantly when her mother did two simple things. The mother stopped doing what she was doing to pay attention and get down on her daughter’s level when she spoke with her and she praised her for the simple things she was doing well. A lot of the time our attention goes to the negative and we don’t see the everyday positive or “normal” behavior. The strategy is about verbally noticing the normal positive behavior, which encourages the child to want to continue the normal good behavior, and has a positive effect on the psyche of both the child and parent. I am able to receive referrals from the FRC now and look forward to getting to share these skills with parents. Last spring Lisa Coen and I offered a series of seminars for parents and hope to continue to offer seminars and reach out to parents this year.

One of the seminars that we presented is called Raising Resilient Children. It’s my favorite of the three and it has good reminders for adults in how to nurture our own resilience. It addressed such things as helping a child to pay attention to their emotions and express them appropriately, encouraging positive thinking, encouraging curiosity, where to get support, how to calm yourself, how to deal with stressful situations and much more.

So this is just a taste of Triple P and I’d be happy to visit with you more about it individually. One thing I have realized as I have been more and more involved in Triple P and with other parenting programs in the past, such as “Love and Logic” -- is that parenting requires a lot of paying attention and responding creatively, with the big picture in mind –not just emotional or gut reactions to the immediate situation. In fact, this sort of parenting is a type of mindfulness. Spirituality is embedded in positive/mindful/intentional parenting. Parenting can be a form of a spiritual discipline in this respect – enlarging both the parent and the child and calling forth that inner spark of the divine. Currently we are offering an adult faith formation series called, “Painting the Stars” which is about reconciling faith and religion, but also focusing on how humans and their thinking and faith continue to evolve. One thing that seems obvious to me is that how we parent vastly effects human evolution and where our society is heading. Children who have been traumatized tend to repeat traumatizing patterns if there is no intervention. But even children from healthy families are impacted by their parents parenting. Those of you who have studied the enneagram may have heard about the “unconscious childhood message” or “lost childhood message”. These are unspoken messages we received or did not receive from our caregivers which continually play out in our adult lives as unconscious motivations. They often drive what we do when we are not even aware. Parenting will not ever be perfect, but the more conscious we can be of our parenting and how we interact with children, the greater the chance that we will pass

along life-giving, spirit-enlarging ways of being and thinking to our children and the children in our lives. We can simply think of how Jesus honored each child in which he interacted, as a precious being worthy of his attention. If they are worthy of his attention, surely they are worthy of our focused attention.