

“An Afterthought” – AUGUST 2 2015

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Thank you Sterling.

“Sometimes I’m up, sometimes I’m down... Sometimes I feel like a motherless child, a long long way from home. Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen... Nobody knows but Jesus...”

This is the tremendous nature of gospel music: to allow us to bring all of our cares into this space. You don’t need anymore description or words beyond these expansive lyrics; silent synonyms sound out across our sanctuary all on their own: Sometimes I feel like a motherless child... Sometimes I feel discouraged... Sometimes I feel silenced... Sometimes I feel abandoned... Sometimes I feel like an afterthought...

Yes, sometimes I’m down. But Lord, O Lord, sometimes I’m up... Thank God, I can bring all of that here. We can all bring that here. As we sang in our opening hymn: “We come in celebration” – a celebration of our ability to bring whatever burden we carry into this place...

Speaking of celebration... You would think the people who have been surrounding Jesus in the stories we’ve been considering from the Gospel of John would be *celebrating him*. In the two stories that immediately precede the one Patrick read for us this morning Jesus fed five thousand people with a few loaves of bread and a couple of measly fish and he (Jesus, not Patrick) then proceeds to walks on water...

But no. Jesus is almost an afterthought at the outset of our story this morning – what he has accomplished doesn’t cause wonder at all. After eating their fill of loaves and fishes, the story begins with the people slowly becoming aware, as if they’re coming out

of a food coma – like they just woke up on the couch after Thanksgiving dinner, when they were supposed to be in the kitchen helping with dishes – “Hey, where’d Jesus go?” They cross the lake to find him – but any recollection of his miraculous achievements is now only an afterthought. Why? Because they’re hungry again!

They feign innocence that they’ve just crossed this lake in search of him, “Rabbi... ah... when did you... ah... get here?”

He recognizes their real intentions, “The truth of the matter is, you’re not looking for me because you’ve seen signs; you’re looking for me because you’ve had your fill of the bread...” And probably want more...

If this were *The Lion the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, the crowd would be a whole bunch of Edmonds looking for more Turkish Delight... which would make Jesus the... White Witch...? Maybe that illustration doesn’t work... But the point is that when the crowd should be full of awe and wonder – they are instead distracted by *physical* hunger.

This is unfortunate because *WE* have come to understand these occasions to share bread as opportunities to fill the soul – but as this story unfolds, *spiritual* fulfillment is a thing on the periphery... an afterthought...

Jesus understands we become distracted by the very real pangs of hunger. When your stomach is imploding, everything else is only an afterthought.

Perhaps this is why he fed the five thousand – before their imaginative curiosity could be piqued, their physical appetites needed to be sated.

Simple food becomes the *vehicle* for understanding. In Patricia’s words from last week, this is when “ordinary becomes extraordinary.” In her reflection, Patricia reminded us that the feeding of the five thousand (feeding with simple loaves of bread and fish) is

so important that the story appears in all four gospels. All of the gospel authors make it clear that it was a moment when ordinary became extraordinary – not a peripheral moment at all. Jesus holds center stage and his efforts are not marginal, his wondrous action not an afterthought, but an opportunity to address base needs before all else.

Now John doesn't make clear if all five thousand go across the water in search of Jesus. In fact it's not even clear that there were only five thousand present, ... because as Matthew's version of this story unfolds, he states, "There were five thousand, *not including women and children...*"

Talk about an afterthought. Thankfully, this is the moment it hopefully becomes clear that "An Afterthought" is the *title* of my sermon and not a *description* of my sermon...

For Matthew's version of this story, women and children hardly play supporting roles in the cast of characters acting out this part of the larger biblical plotline. But for John, women and children make no appearance in this section of stories at all. In fact an actual *child* is only mentioned once in the whole Gospel of John. John doesn't offer us a version of the Christmas narrative, so even the Christ child is absent. Children are mentioned in a variety of ways 49 times in Luke and 40 times in Matthew – and the shorter gospel of Mark even makes 20 references to children. For John, however, children are almost non-existent – almost as if their worth is tallied in their absence.

It is in part the negation of women's presence and roles in narrative that has given rise to feminist, womanist, and mujerista voices when approaching these texts. Inspired by feminist discourse, a new interpretive lens is bringing young people back into our tradition. This has been dubbed *childist interpretation*. It is an opportunity to pause and

recognize both the absence of children in some stories such as these we consider today and, further still, to recognize the integral roles some children play in biblical narrative even as they go unnamed.

Using this lens, we recognize John is not alone. The absence of children is a larger problem plaguing the pages of our sacred text – in part because of the nature of the stories, and in part because of who gets to tell and then interpret these stories. Further still, we recognize that children are left invisible and unnamed in ever-widening circles in literature, media, and worship.

I am a guilty participant, I confess. I have preached to Diverse Harmony, and offered a sermon inspired by the “It Gets Better Project,” yet I have never once preached a sermon that was explicitly about children since arriving at First Baptist. Clearly their presence and their worth is paramount to me; the word “Children” is even in my job title – they are by no means an afterthought in my daily work for you and this community. But my own fear of placing myself in an illusory box perhaps muted my efforts, and prevented me from addressing their own concerns directly from this pulpit. For that, I express my own regret.

Because I – we – cannot be silent about the plight of children and the often heartbreaking tragedies unleashed upon them by the sometimes nefarious world we live in. Children require protection and edification from the communities they mature in, even when they don’t know how to ask for these things themselves. Even when the unjustifiable nature of the evils that subdue them is revealed, we sometimes fail to recognize the scars that will be left by traumatic events they’ve been exposed to.

We use our sacred scripture as a lens through which to interpret and make sense of the things we see unfolding around us – what do we do when those things are absent from that scripture?

For, if they experience the beginning of their lives as mere afterthoughts, they will go on to treat others as afterthoughts, too. Such is the pattern we risk creating.

David Gushee, a Christian ethicist, spoke to those attending breakfast at the Baptist Peace Fellowship gathering this summer. He celebrated the SCOTUS decision that makes freedom to marry the law of the land. David also had a warning, as he encouraged all of us to understand that this same decision might create potential backlash. Those, he argued, who would be the easiest targets, are our LGBTQ youth, their ally friends and children who are gender-expansive.

While we, too, celebrate the decision made by SCOTUS among ourselves, and with the youth in Diverse Harmony, who rehearse in our building, we should also be reminded to continue to be intentional about creating safe space for them and other LGBTQ youth. To that end, we are in the process of placing Seattle Police Department safe space posters at our entrances, so that youth in danger know that ***this Baptist*** church is a haven to them when they face discrimination – so that they know, friends, that their safety is no mere afterthought to anyone who rightfully calls this space a *sanctuary*.

We should also remember to look beyond the walls of this church and be willing to name the injustices happening in our nation. Two Immigration and Customs ***detention*** centers in Texas have applied for licenses to become childcare facilities, in part because (by law) children are not permitted to be detained. Now, families are already being separated. Due to this separation – temporary though it may be – these children will grow

having a keen understanding of those haunting lyrics... “Sometimes I feel like a motherless child...”

These are but, of course, only two examples in a world fraught with injustice. Our own accountability rises up from our willingness to be aware; lest we subject ourselves to the catastrophic consequences of our inattention.

So we gather at this table recognizing that the “Last Meal,” as our tradition refers to it, was not *the* only communion Jesus shared with those who followed him. That at one time he ate with five thousand – as well as many more, which undoubtedly included women, children, gays and lesbians, and people of different ethnic and religious backgrounds present at a much larger feast where everyone was filled – no one left hungry – not one person an afterthought.

We eat here recalling his words that we eat the physical bread to nourish our bodies, but the bread for our soul comes from him, from his words, from his actions. “I am the bread of life,” he declares in our passage this morning; when we eat remembering him, we are compelled to remember all that he represented. When we do it here – when we gather here, we remember further still that he declared: “Let the little children come to me, for it is such as these that the kingdom of heaven is built,” – not mere afterthoughts, but the motivation to make our world – the heaven in our midst – more just.

John may not have referred to children in terms age, but eight times in his gospel he calls all of us ‘children of God.’ This is our reminder, and we gather here remembering everyone – even those nameless and invisible – who were nourished with meals and nourished with love.

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Oh, and one more thing... The time that John does mention a child? It's when Jesus requests food to share and a little child brings it. Maybe the real nourishment on Sunday mornings comes when Spencer and Norah and all of the other children have the confidence, in front of this great big congregation, to take the microphone and tell us all what they think about God. May we recognize this sustenance today... and may we continue to do so...