



The Rev. Alan Sutherland, Rector

September 20, 2009

Proper 20

By the Reverend Donna Barr

I remember well, the story that many of you told me when I first came to St. John's. You had just been through, what was described by some, as the fires of hell. A number of your members.....not just members but your friends - people you called family ..... people you had prayed for and ministered with , set up the altar with, taught Sunday School with.....even biological family members had left this church.....picked up and left .....many without even saying good-bye.....some who wouldn't speak to you or explain why. Now that's what I call hurtful! The sting of this event even causes tears to well up in some of you today. Grief still remains. The pain continues when we run into our friends at the grocery or downtown shopping..... who still to this day do not even utter a friendly hello.

But I also remember the story people have told me about the first moment that you knew that St. John's was back from the dead – resurrected and living again. Several of you told the story like this....."When Fr. Alan came we might have had 12 people on a Sunday. He hadn't been here too long when a few of us took the offering plate back to the office to count our gifts. We looked into the plate and found our usual checks and a few dollar bills. Then we all saw at the same time the

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*Established in 1847*

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miracle we had been waiting for. Our faith and hope would be restored by the sight of a few small pennies at the bottom of the plate. You see the gift of pennies that was given to you that day actually meant the miracle of children in church. Resurrection had happened to St. John's in the form of new life by an unsuspected child.

These two stories came to mind when I read the story from the Gospel of Mark. Jesus takes a child - a little child - and put the child right in the midst of adults. To dramatize his message, he hugs the little one and says to the church, "Whoever welcomes such a child in my name welcomes me. Whoever welcomes me welcomes God."

Just when you thought that there might never be redemption in the heartache of your loss – there was God placing a little child in your midst. This is how Jesus teaches his own people about himself. This is how he teaches us to stop worrying about who did what to whom and who is right and who is wrong. Before Jesus places the child in the middle of the adults he has told the disciples for a second time about his death and resurrection. He will be humbled even further than he already is. On the cross, he will be regarded as small and insignificant. All the disciples can do is counter by arguing among themselves which one of them is the biggest and the best. Who's got the correct

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theology and whose interpretation of Jesus' words and actions is correct? That's when he welcomes the child right into their midst.

Most of us can agree. We need children in the church. For we are always one generation away from extinction. Like the Jews before us, we are commanded to teach our faith to those who come after us before we are gone. We know this. We agree with this. We say it at every baptism. But it's one thing to say the words. It's another to live them. Since that day when the miracle of the pennies was found let's take a look for a minute at where we find ourselves at St. John's today.

Last Sunday was the children's sermon day. As I watched more than a dozen children hop, skip, and jump for joy I whispered a little prayer giving thanks to God for Fr. Alan and "his" interpretation of scripture. As I think about our Reading Club and our gifts to so many children who need help with their reading skills I thank God for those among us who interpret God's message of teaching and care for kids. When I think of Backpack Day, I thank God that we value the lives of children's and hold them up in prayer. When I think of an Undie Sunday, I give thanks for those who are challenged and moved to care for children who need our help. And I give thanks for our outdoor services where the children are free to play on the swings.....free to be themselves – making a little noise and racket. I love it that the children feel this belonging at St. John's also. Linda Wardle's

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granddaughter remarked that she knew where God lived. Why he lived in her grandmother's church.

These are just a few of the miracles I see at St. John's.

Just when you were heartbroken and your family torn apart God gave you the miracle of the pennies but so much more. For at the heart of this event in the life of St. John's, welcoming children has become a central spiritual practice. If I asked you to name the primary spiritual things that Christian people are called to do, what would you say? What's on the short list? Well, there's prayer, worship, reading the Bible, and care for others. Those might be among the top four. But there's actually something more. According to Jesus, one of the primary spiritual tasks of our life is to welcome. To welcome. Specifically he calls us to welcome children. To welcome a child in the name of Jesus is, in essence, to welcome Jesus himself.

Think of how he comes to us: he comes in the vulnerability of a Christmas Child. He comes in the joy of a child at play. He comes, not in blistering power or brutal authority, but in smallness. To receive a child is to receive a fellow human being. It means setting aside any false superiority of age, or intelligence or power, and receiving others as they really are. We are called to receive them, not for how we want them to be, but for who they are, right now.

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I think the miracle of the pennies should teach us a lesson. If God wants us to understand – to embrace and to welcome a little child.....maybe he wants us to be free like his children - maybe it's time for healing and maybe when we see our friend who still does not speak...just maybe we can hop and skip and hold out our arms to hug them. Maybe they have never experienced the miracle of pennies and God's precious gift of himself in unconscious abandon. Our church community has received his words come true: if we welcome the child, it opens us to welcome God and our neighbor too.

With that in mind, let me close with the words of an old prayer by poet Ann Weems:

### **I Celebrate Children**

Who laugh out loud  
Who walk in the mud and dawdle in puddles  
Who put chocolate fingers anywhere  
Who like to be tickled  
Who scribble in church  
Who whisper in loud voices  
Who sing in louder voices  
Who run – and laugh when they fall  
Who cover themselves with Band-Aids  
Who squeeze the toothpaste all over the bathroom  
Who slurp their soup  
Who chew cough drops

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Who ask questions  
Who give us sticky, paste-covered creations  
Who want their pictures taken  
Who don't use their napkins  
Who bury their goldfish, sleep with the dog, scream at their best friends,  
Who hug us in a hurry and rush outside without their hats.  
I celebrate children who are so busy living that they don't have time for our hang-ups,

**And I celebrate adults who are as little children.**

*Amen*

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