



SAINT ANDREW'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Sermon for Sunday, July 2, 2017

Proper 8

Jeremiah 28:5-9 | Psalm 89:1-4, 15-18 | Romans 6:12-23 | Matthew 10:40-42

FR. ALAN GIBSON

In the Name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Protecting your identity is something of a second job for many people. Checking credit reports, changing passwords, updating software, shredding any unwanted document containing personal information are now routine activities for just about anyone who has any contact with the outside world. Almost as important is making sure you can prove you are who you say you are. One misplaced middle initial can get you pulled from the airport security line and that flight to a long-anticipated vacation leaves without you. But for all our diligence over security, we may have forgotten that confusion and inaccuracy can have their own rewards. For instance, from time to time I am the victim of mistaken identity, which I must confess I am a little too slow to correct.

At our 9:15 Family Service, we seek to teach the children stories, routines and traditions of the Church in an atmosphere where children can do what comes naturally to them: namely, behave like children. The goal in having this service is to help a child, from infancy, know themselves as a member of God's family and to encourage them to form an identification of themselves as a Child of God, fully loved for who they are at that moment. What they will become or who they will grow up to be, is secondary. It's an exciting task and I hope it has made a difference in the lives of the families who have committed themselves to it.

It has made a big difference in my life and work. This service has shown me how I am perceived, for better or for worse, by these rapidly growing little Christians. Once we deal with basic life skills such as volume level and Fr. Alan's one hard and fast rule – No Throwing – the children turn to more formal lessons. Language – such as terminology and titles – is one issue we address. In the spirit of equality in the eyes of God, I encourage parents to have their children address me in the same way they do. This produces a variety of names, all of which I answer to: Alan, Fr. Alan, Fr. Gibson (though the 'b' sound is hard for the very small ones), Reverend this or that.

From time-to-time there's one very little toddler who just loves coming to church because he or she is going to get to

see God. And not only do they see God, but God tells them a story, sings to them, and gives them a hunk of tasty bread to eat. And when they leave the chapel and are told by their parents to say good-bye to me, they raise their precious little hand, wave and say, "Good-bye, God." To which their parents offer a quick and stern correction. I, on the other hand, think it's charming.

Sadly, for my ego, this confusion doesn't last very long. Fairly quickly, children get their information straight and learn that I am not God, but just a man in funny clothes who tells them stories and sings songs to them about God. But what I truly love about that brief, dear moment of confusion is how natural it is for these little ones to welcome God into their lives on such a comfortable and intimate level. They don't think it is at all strange to sit down with God, hear stories, sing songs and then tell God about what they plan to do later that day, or about the birthday party they went to on Saturday.

It may sound like I prefer to hide in a world of children's fantasies and avoid the realities of life. (Maybe, sometimes, I do.) But one of the things these children have taught me over the years is what it means to welcome someone into your life. I guess I've finally figured out what every good parent and grandparent has known all along – a child is most likely to respond favorably when she or he is treated with love. And the way to be welcomed into a child's life is by first loving them as they are, not for what you want them to become. Yet somehow, as we get older and accumulate more information, that first basic life skill of loving gets pushed to the side so that we can deal with and protect ourselves from the realities of a tough world. And then we wonder why the world is the way it is.

Jesus said, "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me." Who does the world see in us? Is what they see welcomed or is it something to be avoided, pushed aside and dodged? We might say, 'it's not realistic to be so vulnerable, as love requires, in a world where even the tiniest bit of information will be used against you, where 'no good deed goes unpunished.' And we would be right. It's not realistic. It's a child's fantasy to think we can live in love with God and each other. Jesus summed

it when he said, “I have not come to bring peace, but a sword”
– a tool reserved for grown-ups.

Yet over the years, I’ve had the joy of coming to know some little children who, for a time, don’t know about swords and their lethal cousins. (Light Sabers were big for a while, but that fad seems to have passed). Swords, suicide bombers, assault rifles, hatred, prejudice, intolerance, intentionally crass behavior – those things don’t register on their young minds. Not until someone forces these things on them. I know parents do everything they can to keep the so-called “real world” at bay for as long as possible. And if that’s living a fantasy, I’m proud to be party to it.

If we can raise successive generations of children who first start coming to church because they want to see God, because they know God is happy to see them just as they are, then as they grow and gain more knowledge, they might learn that love as they know it from God **is** a viable way of life. If we can learn that from them, then perhaps we mature, information savvy, sometimes world-weary disciples of Christ might reclaim something we knew long ago: that people, of all ages and backgrounds and beliefs, are more likely to respond favorably when treated with love.

If we want love to be a viable way of life, we have to first try to love our “real world” as it is, as God does. It’s the only world we have. Love and its power will die if wait for it to become something else. Jesus tells us we can start with something small, a gesture of good will -- a cup of cold water given to a thirsty little one -- whatever shows the image of Christ that lives in you. From there we can move beyond where God’s love lives in songs and stories, and into the hearts of real people who long for someone to love them. If that can happen, then when the world looks at us there will be no mistaken identity, because it will be God that they see.