

Children As Our Spiritual Teachers

Sermon by Reverend Rebecca M. Bryan

May 21, 2023

A few weeks ago, I defined spirituality as living with authentic, beautiful purpose and reminded us that purpose without authenticity and beauty is simply function. Purpose when combined with authenticity and beauty fills us with emotions like gratitude, belonging, and passion. It is meaningful, humbling, and awe inspiring. Our purpose will almost certainly change over the course of our lives, but its beauty remains.

If spirituality is authentic, beautiful purpose, then who better than children to teach us these things?

In their very essence children teach us about authenticity. This child spits out anything green, and this child cannot get enough vegetables. This child comes out of the womb singing and this one counting numbers. This child is at peace with who they are, and this child knows that something about how the world defines them is not true.

When children are unhappy about something, we know it. When they find something funny, they laugh. When they are frightened, they seek safety. Before the world gets to them, children know exactly what they like, how they feel, and who they are.

Good enough parents and communities protect children and their authentic, beautiful spirituality, which I believe is their true self. Good enough parents and communities, and this includes us, provide children validation that they are sacred beings, they are cherished, and they belong. Good enough parents and communities are there for children, listen to children, and nurture their gifts and talents.

Spiritual communities at their best are an extension of the family raising a child. Church is a place where children of all ages are seen, valued, and respected. Children seek the truth, their truth, at church and are celebrated and supported on their spiritual journey. Children's voices are heard and honored at church, whether singing, speaking, or yelling. Yes, even yelling. At church, children are an essential and real part of the fabric of the community. We are each other's teachers.

Dr. Bruce D. Perry writes about aboriginal cultures who raised and raise their children in community. Their dances, storytelling, and ritual teach children about the value of repetition, rhythm, and relations in relevant, relational, respectful, and rewarding ways.¹ We model these things in chalice lightings, and the annual bridging ceremony, and singing "The Circle Game." We model these things when we collectively care for and listen to our children and youth at FRS.

Children are our spiritual teachers because their future reminds us every day of the necessity of tradition, openness to change, and hope as a way of life. They are our teachers as they call us to our best selves, knowing our actions are modeling what it means to be a person of liberal religious faith. How we speak to each other, and others, is being watched by our children. Children and youth remind us that we are not the center of the universe. We will do things on behalf of children and youth that we might never do otherwise, including changing habits, healing generational trauma, and caring for this church and the Earth.

Children and youth are our spiritual teachers as they remind us to pay attention. To take things seriously and to measure that seriousness with humor, laughter, and play. They teach us to make music, pass on goodness, and share in the joy of being alive.

Our children at FRS have taught me that authentic intergenerational work is hard, even as it is critical, and that it is more important to pace ourselves and take breaks as needed than to ram through agendas. They have taught me that youth are paying attention and will be brave when we are respectful and brave in return. Our children have taught me that it's okay to laugh in church, to love church, and to offer hugs freely. Our children have taught me that questions are

1 Oprah Winfrey and Bruce D. Perry, *What Happened to You?: Conversations on Trauma, Resilience, and Healing*, Audible Logo Audible Audiobook – Unabridged (New York: Macmillan Audio, 2021), Chapter 8, 6:35.

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good and it's better to say you don't know than to act as if you know everything. Our children have taught me the wonder and beauty of diversity and self-expression. They have taught us all that it is our church and that they are an integral part of this church community.

Amen.