

“Let the Children Come”

Luke 18:15-17

Richard C. Allen

September 18, 2016

South Glastonbury

Connecticut

When I think about our church Homecoming Sunday, I think primarily about the significance of community. I think about how we are all in this discipleship work together; that everyone counts; everyone matters; we need each other. I think about the strength of community that holds us up and holds us together. I think about the youngest of children needing the eldest of the elders, and the eldest of the elders needing the youngest of the children. I think of the church community as the place where spiritual friendships form and deepen; where people pray together and imagine peace together; and work shoulder to shoulder to bring light to the dark places of the world. When this South Church community comes together on Homecoming Sunday, there is, for me, a sense of hopefulness.

Singers have come early to prepare an anthem. Church School teachers have come to greet their students. Barbeque specialists have fired up their grills. Moms and dads have tossed salads and baked brownies. Middle High and High School students anticipate their next mission excursions. I just love the community that we find here, that we build here, that we offer to everyone who comes along.

Community begins with caring about each other. I'd like to share three brief stories about the kind of caring that builds community. What all of the stories have in common is children. Jesus said, “Let the children come to me, and do not stop them, for it is to such as these that the Kingdom of God belongs.”

Late this spring, I took to having a second cup of coffee outside on the front porch before coming to work. The chair is just inches away from a walking stick tree. Do you know this tree? It looks like something created by Dr. Seuss. One morning, I was startled by a rustling sound among the leaves. Looking closely, I spied a robin's nest. Looking just as closely, that robin spied me. Neither of us gave way. Over the next several weeks, I witnessed that mother bird raise her young ones. She'd fly out to the lawn and dig a worm and rush back to feed it to the waiting family. Sometimes, she'd return with grass to secure the nest. Over and over, she'd make these little forays out into the brush for food. I watched the little ones grow feathers. And then one morning they were gone. Launched. Off to seek their fortunes.

I like to think of the church community as a nest, as a place where life is born and celebrated and nurtured; where faith comes alive; where our spiritual identity is formed; where our questions and doubts are honored; where we grow our feathers, so to speak. And from that nest we are launched into the life of discipleship.

The second story takes us back to the 1950's when I was a boy living here in South Glastonbury. Many of my friends had dads who took them fishing. They'd come back with marvelous stories of camping and fishing and how the really big one got away. My dad was not into fishing, and I knew I would never have the joyful stories to tell as my pals did. Now, one of the men in this village at that time was Jim Kinney. He ran Kinney's Corner Store, right over there across the street. It's now 2 Hopewell. Jim Kinney loved children. And we all understood this. We had this deep knowing that Mr. Kinney somehow understood us in ways our parents didn't. So, I called Jim Kinney on the phone one day at the Corner Store. I remember this conversation as if it happened yesterday. I was probably nine or ten. I asked him how much a fishing pole would cost. He asked me where my dad would be taking me fishing.

Having not anticipated that question, I had to make up an answer on the spot. “Big Bass Lake,” I said. There was a silence on the other end of the line. “Fifty cents,” replied Mr. Kinney. “A fishing pole will cost you 50 cents.” Now there were three things that Mr. Kinney knew: my dad was never going to take me fishing; I could probably come up with 50 cents though the real cost was surely much higher; and thirdly, that in that moment, a child needed to be loved. I never bought the fishing pole. But I got what I needed. I tell you this story because it reveals the kind of caring that I have witnessed over and over again here at South Church. It’s indicative of the kind of caring Jesus insisted upon for all children everywhere. Without that kind of caring, there can be no meaningful community.

The third story comes from our most recent mission trip to Africa. The four of us spent lots of time out in villages, chatting with people at the wells; watching children play with their home-made toys known as gallimotos; and watching women grind their maize into flour. One day, we watched a brother-sister act. The little boy was doing everything he could to place himself in harm’s way. He would chase a goat, head toward the road, taste something not meant to be eaten. The older sister was anticipating and reacting to his every connivance. Before he could stub his toe or bang his head or stick his finger where it didn’t belong, his older sister rescued him; kept him from danger; cared for his well-being. We were moved by her vigilance, by her caring, by what can only be described as her readiness to love.

I share this image from the Malawi mission trip because it speaks to what community is all about. Christian community at its best is a network of people who care about the welfare of the other. In the passage from Luke, the disciples come off rather badly. When it comes to understanding community, they’ve missed the boat. They see the children as a hindrance, as a nuisance.

But Jesus sees that children sometimes are the ones who can teach us about caring for the other. The older sister in that Malawian village was the very child Jesus was lifting up in the story. We are all to become like that girl, like that child. We are to care for each other.

On Homecoming Sunday, I look out upon a congregation and what I see is a community. What I see is people of all ages committed to caring deeply for each other. Thus, I remain in the greatest of hope. Amen!