

To Be A Cloud of Witnesses  
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church  
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Rev. John M. Cleghorn

Scripture:  
Luke 2:41-52

Last week a friend forwarded an email from a noted expert on the Reformed tradition. For any who are unfamiliar with the term “the Reformed tradition,” it’s often used to describe being Presbyterian ... though, as this email showed, it’s open to interpretation.

I’ll be the first to say there is something comforting about traditions, whether it’s in church or in other aspects of our lives. In a world that swirls with change, it’s natural to hold on to something that has weathered time. But we mustn’t hold on too tightly, lest we choke the thing we love to death.

In the email that my friend forwarded, the expert was arguing that we should avoid going too far in worship. The example he used was baptism. In its simplest form, the pastor sprinkles water on the child’s head in the name of the Trinity and the act is done. We should, the expert argued, go no further.

“Adding the making of the sign of the cross on the forehead indicates that baptism with water is insufficient,” the expert wrote. “Parading a baby down the aisle suggests that forgiveness of sin is not enough. Trying to be cute or funny gives the appearance of trifling with the command of Christ.”

Now, I know this man loves the church and has its best interest at heart. But within hours he received so many other views that he had to issue a second email trying to explain what he really meant.

I had several reactions. My immediate response to my friend was that this fellow would not be comfortable here at Caldwell. I also thought that perhaps he had lost sight of the church’s core belief that while we are reformed ... we believe just as fervently that we are always *being reformed*, led and guided by the Holy Spirit to be the church of tradition *and* of the current day.

Yes, God acts in baptism to seal the child into the covenant of faith. Yes, God grants that child new life in Christ at that moment. But that is only the beginning.

Surely, withholding the new baby from the congregation is the last thing we should do. After all, when we baptize children we charge the congregation that it is responsible for raising the child in the faith.

Don't we want to give the congregation at least a good look at the new member of the family? Don't we want to open our arms and say to the parents, "Bring your child here as often as you can? We accept responsibility for this child of God. Entrust your child to our care and we promise to love her as our own!"

Today in worship and in several activities in the coming weeks, we are offered the chance to renew that promise and commit to make good on it in specific ways. What better response can we make to God's rebirth of this church? Not that long ago, the youngest person in these pews was 60 years old or so. Now every Sunday we see the fresh faces of our future come skipping down the aisle and gather at the door for Sunday school.

In them, we see the diversity that is the Charlotte of tomorrow. And after years of decline in this church and in the broader denomination, we pray with confidence that God is at work, doing yet another new thing, molding a new family of faith. It is our sacred duty and privilege to know these children by name, just as God knows each of us by name. It is a gift we have been given, one each of us is called to accept with joy rather than relying on just a few steadfast teachers and parents.

All of us, old and young, single or married, parents or not, have vowed to be a cloud of witnesses that surrounds these children and leads them to God, just as God led the people of Israel in fiery cloud across the wilderness. This is the pledge to which we are bound, until each one is ready to make a profession of faith and claim his Christian identity.

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Jesus the Christ was at that very point of claiming his faith identity in today's story from the Gospel of Luke. In his tradition, a boy of 12 was ready to begin formal training in the understanding of scripture as testament to God's expectations.

The gospels include numerous stories that highlight Jesus' dual nature, both fully human and fully divine. But in this story, Luke provides our only glimpse of Jesus as youth. In it, we can see both the glory of Christ's divine calling as well as the human story of a boy seeking to discern and claim God's purpose for his life.

For example, we can all identify with the human aspect of Christ when, as an adolescent, he pushes the boundaries of independence from his parents. As we heard, Jesus travelled to Jerusalem with his family every year for the Passover festival. But this year, he stayed behind without his parents' knowledge.

We can also identify with Mary and Joseph's reaction when they discover that Jesus was not with their relatives or friends in the traveling party. I, for one, have been on both the giving and receiving end of the kind of admonition Christ gets from his parents when they say, "Don't you know we were looking for you and worried about you.?"

So we can see ourselves in this story, can't we? We know what it is to want to strike out in the world, even when it's a little ahead of our time? If we are parents, perhaps we know what it feels like to let our child wander out a little more every year, to give our child to the care of others whom we know and trust they will be a positive influence on our flesh and blood.

Here in America in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with so many dangerous influences and threats surrounding our kids, that is a bigger act of faith than it once was. In just the last two weeks here in Charlotte, one child was murdered at a school bus stop and another was threatened. Personally, it pains me to have to tell my 10-year old daughter that she cannot ride her bike around the neighborhood without a parent.

There are other signs that our society faces an equal number of problems at home. Robert Evans is a noted author who focuses on child development and the role of the schools. America, he writes, is in crisis when it comes to child rearing. Parents are over-stressed and in some cases under-equipped to be parents. In many cases, he observes, parents demonstrate their own lack of competence and maturity.

Too often, they bring their problems to their children's' school, yelling at coaches to play their kid more, intruding in the classroom instead of trusting the teacher, or, doing the opposite, dumping the child on the curb and expecting the school to raise the child in every way.<sup>1</sup>

For children to develop psychologically in the right way, Evans says, three things are needed: nurture, structure and latitude. This church is full of advocates for our schools, from teachers to elected leaders. A team of you now blesses the children, faculty and parents of the Merry Oaks Elementary School, filling in big gaps in how it provides the nurture, structure and latitude kids need, gaps that reflect the poverty of its families and the lack of resources provided to school staff.

Also, at tonight's public forum, we have a chance to hear our city's top leaders describe and commit to their understanding of justice for our children. Thanks be to God for these initiatives and opportunities.

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For us as the church, the body of Christ, all of this points to our particular role in the formation of the children God has put in our midst. In fulfilling that role, we can look again at the story of Christ as a youth.

First, this story helps us to understand how we can be a traveling party for our children. When Mary and Joseph left Jerusalem to return home, they did so as part of a larger group of family and friends. They knew that as long as Jesus was in their traveling party, he was safe and well cared for.

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<sup>1</sup> Family Matters, How Schools Can Cope with a Crisis in Child Rearing, P. 232

How are we as the church called to be a traveling party for our children as they make their journey from the crib room to confirmation class and beyond? How can each of us find a way to interact with each child, to provide the balance of nurture, structure and latitude that children need to prepare for adulthood?

Second, this story can remind us of the particular role of the church as a place where young people learn how to listen for and respond to God's call on their lives. It is the job of young people to discover and affirm their identity and purpose in the world. But that identity is anything but complete – in fact, it falls well short of complete – unless the child knows God has a purpose for their lives, that he or she is valued by God as an agent of God's will.

That is a word our children won't hear anywhere else. Forming our children to listen for that call is not just the job of the church – it is our sacred obligation. More than that, it can be the greatest gift we ever can give to our toddlers, our teens and everything in between.

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In the gospel of Matthew, in that verse known as the great commission, Jesus emerges from the tomb and holds a reunion with his disciples on a mountaintop. In his plain-English translation of the scripture in our second reading today, Eugene Peterson offers this version of that moment:

Jesus, undeterred, went right away and gave his charge: "God authorized and commanded me to commission you" Go out and train everyone you meet, far and near, in this way of life, marking them by baptism in the threefold name, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Then instruct them in the practice of all I have commanded you. I'll be with you as you do this, day after day, right up to the end of the age. (Matt. 28:18-20)

Did you catch that phrase "this way of life"?

It is, admittedly, a peculiar way of life that we in the church lead, but its uniqueness in society is why it's so important. We sprinkle water and call out to the three-fold God. We claim God's gifts for babies who know nothing of what we are doing, then claim that child as our own, just as we were claimed in our own baptism to be children of God. Then, as Jesus calls us to do, we teach them and we practice with them (emphasis on *practice*) all that God expects of us.

Why in the world would we not want to make a big deal of this? Why not have a parade. Heck, why not throw a party?

Is there a greater gift we can receive? Is there a greater gift we can give than to be this cloud of witnesses?

To God be the glory. Amen.