

“Children”

A Sermon preached at Centenary United Church

By Rev. Dr. Ian Sloan

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Not all of us are mothers, but every one of us is, I suspect, a child of a mother.

In the context of our positive space and affirming ministry, however, answers to the questions “who exactly counts as a mother and how?” will bend our minds a little bit, if not a lot. We are definitely not in “straight” space asking these questions – reminds me of a tee-shirt I saw on someone once, “I can’t think straight.” In the needed and helpful movement toward the ‘degenderization” of parenthood, Centenary is going to be a place that tries to unveil, or scrub off the dirt, that obscures healthy human sexuality and family life. To do this, there are times when this is not going to seem to be a ‘safe” place for most people. It would be an illusion, in other words, that the LGBT-Q community would find a safe haven here, and nobody else does.

Or vice versa.

Or, we have to rethink what we mean by “safety” if we think, allies or LGBT-Q, that we’re in actuality safe space for everyone.

One characteristic of safe space is transparency. That means everyone knows what is going on.

So, just to get started down this road, we might recall to mind that the two disciples on the way to Emmaus experienced a mind-bending experience when the risen Jesus joined them on the road. At first the disciples did not recognize him -- only when he broke the bread did they.

So consider, since, when two men bring up a child, there isn’t a “mom,” or, if there is a “mom” known to the child, “mom” is not “mom” in the way that a child of a heterosexual couple would construct “momdom.”

These new “norms” for parenthood and childhood are so demanding on everyone’s construction of self in society that we do need more than law to make the transition to something other than the notion of family which, frankly, pretty much all of us over the age of 30 grew up with. For those of us over 30 when it comes to the definition of who constitutes, and more importantly, who gets to constitute, a family: a family is some variation of a mom, a dad, and kids.

To enter this mind-bending space, where our understanding and our actions are transformed, we need gospel.

Well, in fact, gospel is mind-bending space.

So let’s start from a statement that should be obvious and not contentious.

If you are a mom, you are mom because you have had children, or have children now.

On this mother’s day, then, let’s talk about children.

We have some interesting changes to make with children as a congregation at this point in our life.

After the service last Sunday the congregation gathered in a meeting to work toward defining goals for the transition that we are in. Exciting ideas came forward – from extending our ministry into service provision to extending our ministry into a relationship with a for-profit business. The LGBT-Q affirming ministry was lifted up as an important point of departure as we take the time together in the next year to define who we are and what we discern God is calling us to do together. It was a meeting that was unlike any meeting of a congregation that I have attended. It was as if we entered into a space where there was a bend in time and we were looking up close and getting a glimpse of what we will be a few years from now.

We were galvanized by that discussion, which we held in the lounge of the Globe youth centre downstairs.

For many people children are precious, and precious objects. When children become youth, however, our culture tends to objectify and commodify them. In mainstream Canadian culture youth are seen as a commodity: shoes, soda, music, clothes, sports, movies, cars, and even lifestyles are marketed using the ideal of Youth as a selling point. Just as our mainstream culture falls regularly to the temptation that a “perfect woman” is achievable, so we are at risk of the temptation to believe that “perfect youth” is as well. In other words, people’s identities are constructed by this sense that with only by adding this or that thing to our lives that make us part of “youthful culture”, we will achieve something that we are missing. Some businesses will make a considerable amount of money taking advantage of this social construction.

To break the stereotype and act against the oppression of it all, with and for youth, we are called to revisit our relationship as adults with youth. When we break that stereotype – or rather, when working with youth we altogether construct new social identities that take into account and deliver what we really need for moms and dads and children and all other sorts of social relations – we are into that mind-bending space.

It’s that mind-bending space that the youth of our day are in already, and, as the old fixed norms of gender-based families falls to the side, have to engage in building new identities out of the old ones that will work for them as they grow up.

Against the mainstream notion of perfect youth, consider all the identities that youth have to negotiate: any one youth may have any number of the following identities: as youth from distinct cultures, as a disengaged youth, a youth women, a migrant youth, LGBT-Q youth, elementary school youth, middle school youth, high school youth, alternative school youth, out of school youth, youth from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, incarcerated youth, homeless youth, foster youth, diverse learners I bring this all before you because I want us as an affirming congregation of the LGBT-Q community to see exactly what the possibilities and indeed responsibilities are for us in considering what to do with the youth centre that SISO abandoned as it went bankrupt.

With this youth centre, we have a real opportunity to work with youth in a shared decision-making relationship by which they engage and shape the relationships they have through our willingness to be in a participatory relationship ourselves with them.

This is an opportunity to make real advances in our understanding of family and the way we live family.

Next Sunday we will have as a guest speaker a young adult who came to Canada, alone, as a refugee from Liberia in west Africa. He was a youth when he arrived. Leo Johnson has been working with others since then to develop this new way of working with youth as he himself has worked through the many complex issues that anyone new to Canada has to work through, made more intense by being a youth at the time he arrived, and by being a youth without any family with him when he did. He will be talking to us about how the Globe Youth Centre came to be – he was part of its planning – and he will say to us how he believes a new youth centre that is for all youth, not only newcomers, based on the principles of shared decision-making and youth led decision making will be of benefit to our community.

We have some mind-bending opportunities ahead of us as we consider our leadership role in helping Hamilton to become a community with a much healthier understanding of sexuality, gender identity and family. I can only imagine that we will embrace Leo, and listen carefully to all that he has to say to us.

"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." - Margaret Mead

End with poem/prayer by Bernard Thorogood, "Children."

There was a weeping on the hillsides and wailing in the streets
in David's town of Bethlehem.

A king and his army had slaughtered the babies
out of fear and suspicion and love of power.

There is weeping in the forests and wailing in the camps
across this world of hunger.

Ten thousand children suffer daily
through savagery and neglect and greed.

There is sorrow in the city and shame in the slum

where children are taken into slavery.
Tourists pay their money and innocence is sold
as sex becomes a market trade.

Our Lord hears the cry;
he weeps for the children;
he gathers them in his arms
and calls to us,
Were you at Bethlehem too?

We pray, let our thoughts and our work,
our church, our homes and our nation
bring security and health and laughter,
for the children of your world.

Bernard thorogood, "Children," *Wisdom is Calling: An Anthology of Hope:
an Agenda for Change*, United Church Publishing House: Toronto, 1999