

Reforming Children's Sermons

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Recognizing a Need for Reformation

The pastor smiled as the children came forward for the children's sermon. Some were carried forward by a parent. He sat down next to a lamp he had placed on the chancel before worship. He told the children that soon he was going to read a passage from the Bible that said how each of us is the light of the world. "We are like this lamp," he said, inviting the children to share how and when they use lights in their home. "Now," he said pushing the switch, "let's turn on the light." But no light. "Oh, no," he said. "What's wrong?" One clever child pointed out that the lamp wasn't plugged into the outlet. The pastor plugged in the electrical cord. "Let's try it again," he said, "because God wants us to be the light of the world." It worked. Next, the pastor came to the point of the children's sermon, explaining how if we are the lamp, Jesus is our electrical cord, and we can only shine when we are plugged into God's power. Prayer was offered. The children shuffled off while the second hymn was sung.

The flaw became obvious during coffee hour when a mommy mentioned to the pastor that they had been trying to teach their children not to stick their fingers into electrical sockets.

For over a decade trained Christian Educators have realized the inadequacy of object lessons for teaching scripture and nurturing faith. They have voiced how a more evocative and less didactic model best meets the needs and experiences of today's children. Is it time for the pastors and church committees to catch up? To listen?

Questions:

1. Do pastors prepare their messages for the children with equal diligence as they do the message for the adults?
2. Are we using the children to talk to the adults or for the 'cuteness quotient' rather than genuinely including them in the worship experience? Entertaining messages are fine, using them as entertainment is not.
3. Does the children's message help the children appreciate the scripture lessons?
4. How does the message to the children proclaim the Word of God?

5. How often are we asking a stock question expecting to get a stock answer, such as: "God is love." What does this mean anyway? So what?

Going in a New Direction

Object lessons have their place in any Pastor's toolbox, but best ignored when it comes time for the Children's Message. Object lessons fall short when used with young children for several reasons. Young children do not understand metaphor because they are concrete thinkers. Using object lessons for young children runs the risk of turning the abstract concept into the concrete rather than the concrete into the abstract (love becomes a thing -- a Valentine heart, for example -- rather than an action). Young children have not developed the operation of class intersection; that is, understanding that things can belong to two classes at the same time. My father is my father; He cannot be my grandfather's son let alone a child of God. How can a circle be eternity when it is a circle? Irony, paradox, similes, metaphor are lost on them. How lovely their innocence.

Young children have limited background knowledge of some objects used in these lessons, such as using a boat's life-preserver to symbolize how Jesus is our life-saver, a sliced apple and its seeds representing the trinity, the candy cane as shepherd's crook, a dirty or broken mirror cannot reflect perfectly the image of God. Saying that a Bible is like a map means nothing to you if you cannot read a map or never have been lost and used a map to find your way.

If the child has negative background experiences with the objects used, the analogy harms: I've been told to keep my fingers out of electrical outlets so why would I want to plug into God's outlet? These misconceptions trap a young believer in a distorted understanding of faith which needs to be corrected, re-taught, and re-explained at Confirmation or adult Bible study (if the student by then is willing and present to be corrected).

Object lessons fail younger children because the lessons demand logic and abstract thinking, making object lessons beyond the leap of their comprehension. Too often the speaker talks to the children or at the children and fails to enter into and speak from their world where magic and reality merge, where faith is formed by being loved by persons they can trust, where they cannot perceive the world from a perspective other than their own, where they accept what they are told, where Santa is real, or when asked where is God they point toward the preacher garbed investments.

Grove Presbyterian Church, also convinced that it remains unhelpful to tell the children the point of the message, closing off and stifling their interpretation by declaring the moral of the story either directly or in the guise of the closing prayer, was challenged to rethink how they offered their Children's Message. They even struggled to figure out (and still struggle) how best to name this time in the bulletin, believing all the names they tried were inadequate: Children's Sermon, Message to Young People, Children's Story, Children's Talk.

Questions:

1. How old are the children who participate?
2. Is the children's message age appropriate given their cognitive level?
3. Is the children's message age appropriate given the stage of their identity formation?
4. Is the children's message age appropriate given their faith development level?
5. How many minutes is too long for a children's message given their attention span?
6. How does the message evoke their thinking about how to interpret the meaning of the scripture and message?
7. How does the message emphasize caring relationships and foster trust?

Children's Messages Reformed

Grove Presbyterian Church dispensed with object lessons and offered the children a variety of other ways to engage them in worship and receive the proclamation of the Word. Its position in the service of Worship was set to introduce the reading of Scripture.

To foster an authentic and intimate approach, it was decided to avoid using a microphone. Microphones suggest the speaker is addressing a larger audience. When speaking with children, you must speak directly to them and at their eye level. Unhelpful also is to showcase them by having them sit on the chancel steps and be exhibited to the congregation. Best is to sit together, to be together. It is their special time.

A team approach was implemented bringing to the children a variety of faces, styles, and ways of offering the children's messages.

These newer ways include guiding the children in acting out the scripture passage, especially if it were a parable.

Other helpful messages include letting the little ones learn from experience and their bodies: finger prayers, prayer and praise movements, songs sung. The Grove Congregation believes it vital to integrate the children fully into worship by them playing instruments or dancing, by celebrating their achievements at school and Sunday school, by them building the crèche during Advent bringing the figurines forward each Sunday, by handing out palms on Palm Sunday, by being involved in the baptism of infants and described as future friends of the baby, by gathering in different areas of the sanctuary to talk about the various elements of worship, and by being valued worship leaders.

Above all, story-telling is emphasized. Stories would be told ranging from Aesop to Greek Mythology, from folk tales from around the world to those popular illustrations and images pastors often pull from their grab-bag for their adult sermons.

Stories, whether told, read or acted out, offer a better vehicle for sharing God's Word to the littlest believers because stories are playfully multileveled. They can be understood at the cognitive and faith level of the listeners rather than the teller. Yes, there still is imagery but the listener makes the connections rather than the presenter. The listeners create their own "object lesson" based on individual level of faith, spiritually, cognitively, emotionally, linguistically, as well as their social development. Stories are best when concluded with thought provoking questions encouraging the hearer to think about it in terms of faith and God's Word, starting with: "I wonder..." "What if..." "What do you think..."

Often a children's book that has a message that comports with faith and the Bible is read, such as "Yonder," "The Gift of Nothing," or Dr. Seuss' "Zaks" and "Yertle the Turtle," A.A. Milne's poetry, or such books as "Nana Upstairs & Nana Downstairs" or "Water Bugs and Dragonflies" to help the children respond to a death in church or family

The pastor's Advent reading of "How the Grinch Stole Christmas" became a beloved tradition, so too a reading of "The Littlest Angel" whenever Christmas Day fell on a Sunday.

Said two parents: "They enjoy this time because they are involved and share;" "Teams rotating through freshens it up, breaks up the routine, and kids respond to the different faces."

A father of two rambunctious boys described how these changes are a "dramatic improvement over just reading a book, how they retain the lesson, they like sharing the story, even listening to the sermon, it also helps (because they are boys) if there are good guys and bad guys-- when it's time to greet, they are quick to go up front."

The church also has noticed how more parents are keeping their younger children in the service rather than taking them out for child care. Also, there were summers when there were no children at all, but of recently there has not been one Sunday where the church skipped the children's sermon for lack of children.

The children's message deserves to be rethought and reformed so that young children are respected and valued as true worshipers. Let the children be children. Their innocence should be honored.

1. How can you engage the children in the closing prayer of the message? Do you invite them to share echo prayers?
2. Believing everyone is a learner, will you avoid telling them the meaning of the message and invite them with guided questions to ponder the meaning of the message, questions that their parents can use later when talking with their children about the worship service?