

Introducing Children to Worship

BY DEBRA DEAN MURPHY

We don't introduce children to worship to make them good but rather that they will know who they are. We trust that worship which is attentive to the gospel's grand story will transform their lives (and ours), will feed their imaginations not their egos, and will help them (and us) learn to order our lives by the gift of God's time.

Popular opinion about children in worship usually tends toward one of two extremes: children are naturally spontaneous, vulnerable, and filled with wonder, and thus are often better disposed to worship than are adults; *or* church does not come naturally to children and so training for worship, ideally undertaken outside of the worshipping assembly, is a must. As with most starkly opposed observations the truth lies somewhere in between. I will chart a middle path, one which assumes that children bring good instincts and often profound insights to the practice of Christian worship, but that preparation for their participation – and ongoing catechesis as they mature in it – are essential. As will become evident, though, I part company with those who believe that a certain level of training is necessary before children can meaningfully participate in the Sunday service.

It will also be important to say some things about worship generally, since what we mean by that word has everything to do with what we believe we are introducing children to. Only when we are clear on the nature and purpose of worship can we say something useful about what it means to initiate and habituate children into the practices, the discipline, and the joy of Christian worship. To do this, I'd like to use the following terms as markers or guides for our discussion: *story, imagination, and time.*

Each of them has something important to communicate about worship, and each is also a term associated in various ways with children or childhood. For example, I will note that worship which follows the church year is shaped by an alternative ordering of time — one that is counter to the secular calendar and to the Hallmark holiday schedule — and which forms the identity, habits, and dispositions of worshipers and congregations *over time*. And even though they often appear resistant to time-bound practices and rituals, children also negotiate the world through a series of time-related activities (story time, nap time, supper time, bed time) that help to order their understanding of who they are and how the world works. In exploring these connections, I hope to illuminate the practices of the Church's worship in ways that might be enriching for the work of initiating children into the Christian life and for sustaining their interest and involvement as they grow into mature followers of Christ.

TELL ME A STORY

Christian worship is, in a most basic sense, the enactment of a story. In acts of praise and thanksgiving — prayer, song, sermon, sacrament — we tell and tell again the grand cosmic narrative of God's redeeming activity in the world: the story of how God's overflowing love created the world and all that is; how a people (Israel) were called into covenantal relationship with God; how God was made known in the person of Jesus, mending the breach created by human waywardness and infidelity; how God birthed the Church as a sign, servant, and foretaste of the reign of *shalom* intended for all of creation; and how, in God's time, that reign will be realized, utterly and joyfully. In telling this story in worship, we do certain things: we baptize, which is a way of incorporating persons (and their stories) into this cosmic drama. We eat a simple meal together, in which consuming bread and wine makes possible the transformation of a people into sharers in the divine life and bearers of God's mercy and justice. As we enact this drama week to week, year to year, we realize that this story takes practice, for there are other stories and storytellers seeking to incorporate us into *their* narratives, insisting that *their* plotlines are definitive for our own identity and self-understanding.

In the current ecclesial climate, however, *story* is not a term or category exerting serious influence in most congregational discussions about worship. Instead, as we find ourselves at least a decade into what have bleakly been dubbed the "worship wars," *style* not *story* is the evaluative category of choice. Style-driven worship is planned, promoted, and produced with a straightforward question in mind (whether or not it is articulated this straightforwardly): What is the basic worship *preference* of today's discriminating congregant-consumer? Quiet, contemplative worship? "Rock and roll church"? Hymnody, liturgy, vestments, and choral singing? A mixing and matching of all of the above? Accommodating these wide-ranging prefer-

ences seems not only reasonable but faithful, as many worship leaders understand their primary task to be that of “meeting people where they are.” But a preoccupation with style and preference puts the wrong subject at the center of the discussion (and indeed of worship itself), for the proper question to ask when planning and executing worship is not “What do people like?” but “What is God doing?” *Style* customizes worship and compartmentalizes worshippers.

Story does something else.

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Good stories, as children know, evoke compelling worlds. They draw us in, invite us to linger, make it hard for us to leave. The Church’s story, Christians believe, does even more: it tells us who (and whose) we are. Thus the Bible’s rightful home—the place where it becomes the Church’s normative rule

for faith and practice—is worship, for that is where the depth and breadth of Scripture, its complexity and ambiguity, its world-making and life-changing power, unfolds over time, drawing us into its story-world, bidding us to linger in it, to take it on as our own habit of being in the world. This occurs in profound ways when, say, a deep saturation in the Lenten scriptures (preached, prayed, and sung every year in worship) educates our desires, helping us to resist the temptation to power (or status or comfort) and to embrace the cross and suffering for Jesus’ sake as the way of discipleship. And it occurs in simple (but perhaps no less profound) ways when a three-year-old parades around the house for weeks after Palm Sunday shouting “Hosanna! Hosanna!” using any object at hand as a make-shift palm branch. With attentive guidance, her parents can help her claim this gesture of praise and adoration as constitutive of her Christian identity, even as they help her to grow into a more mature understanding of the story’s thornier context and questions.

Children need to hear the Bible’s stories in worship—not because they will understand them better there, but because that is where the stories do their formative work, shaping a *people* week after week, season after season, year after year, for work and witness in the world. When we use the Bible’s stories to impart pious moralisms to children (“be good,” “be helpful,” “be nice to your brother”) we minimize Scripture’s real purpose and power, and we fail to teach our children that they, along with us, are called to enter its narrative world and to be shaped by God’s desire for communion with all of creation. In worship—in the hearing of the Word, the preaching of it, and

the performance of it through gestures, postures, and holy sign-acts—children and the rest of us enter that world and have the hope of being transformed by its vision. Yet all of this is moot if we are more concerned with style and personal preference than with the story. And if we are, our children will learn to be, too.

USE YOUR IMAGINATION

In his book *Wishful Thinking*, Frederick Buechner says this about the Lord's Supper:

It is make-believe. You make believe that the one who breaks the bread and blesses the wine is not the plump parson who smells of Williams' Aqua Velva but Jesus of Nazareth. You make believe that the tasteless wafer and cheap port are his flesh and blood. You make believe that by swallowing them you are swallowing his life into your life and that there is nothing in earth or heaven more important for you to do than this.¹

For those who look upon worship with great seriousness, Buechner's description may seem a little impertinent. The solemnity with which generations of Christians have come to regard the Eucharist makes it difficult to approach the holy meal (literally and figuratively) with much humor or light-heartedness. But Buechner's playful depiction is on target, I think, for in the Eucharist, as in worship generally, we see and describe things differently. We imagine a different world. *Imagination* understood this way does not refer to the imaginary—to subjective flights of fancy or whimsical dreaming—but to a community's practice of construing reality according to a particular vision, in full awareness of other options, other visions, other ways of seeing.² *Imagination* names the capacity of a people who in their worship together perform and give life to a story that subsumes all other stories. And so we might say that Christian worship is neither about preparing us for life in the "real world" nor for giving us refuge from it for a little while; instead, worship is, as Jacques Maritain once said of poetry, "the 'recomposition' of a world more real than the reality offered to the senses."³

In the Eucharist we enact an alternative set of practices and patterns for living, and imagine a different way of being in the world and in relationship with others. Where the so-called real world prizes autonomy and independence, Christians at the Lord's Table practice mutuality and dependence on God and one another. Against a culture shaped by the alienating forces of consumer capitalism, the Eucharist forms a community constituted by forgiveness, reconciliation, and a radical sharing of the goods that make our life possible. In the context of an economic system based on scarcity and lack and a political system driven by suspicion, distrust, and the will-to-power, eucharistically shaped Christians imagine and practice an economics of abundance and a politics of peace.

Children, we know, have a great capacity for imaginative engagement with the world around them. As already noted, children readily enter the world created by a good story (and they usually know a good story from a not-so-good one). When we communicate with confidence and conviction that Christian worship invites us to inhabit this world of God's extravagant grace and goodness, most children will be eager for the adventure and challenge of living in such a world. And because most children are keen observers of what goes on around them, appropriate, ongoing catechesis at church and at home will help them discern the disconnect between what occurs in worship and the workings of the world around them. As they mature, they will need continued guidance as they reflect on the implications of this disconnect for the Church's witness and for their own efforts at faithful living.

And since repetition is the key to effective pedagogy, we must regularly communicate to children (and their parents) that they are integral to the whole worshiping body gathered weekly to imagine and practice God's world into being, and that their presence and participation are not merely tolerated but happily anticipated. When we "dismiss" children from the worshiping body (say, for "children's church"), no matter how well-intentioned our efforts at teaching them *about* worship, we convey to them and to all others present that dividing the worshiping body is an acceptable norm. More importantly, we rob children of the gift of being formed by the regular habit, discipline, and joy of corporate worship – which is really how they learn it and learn to love it in the first place.

All of this, of course, takes work. It takes patience, preparation, flexibility, much good humor, and a great deal of creativity and resourcefulness. It requires that those in positions of leadership possess a deep theology of worship and the necessary skill to impart it persuasively and consistently and graciously to adults and to children. It recognizes that for adults in the pews, worship may be less serene than they would wish since children can be noisy and demanding. (It may mean, in fact, that the adults in a congregation, more than the children, will need to be "introduced to worship.")

But it is also important to insist that worship should not cater to children, since to do so is to give in to the pressures of accommodating style and preference and the temptation to appeal to a target audience. Rather, worship that seeks above all else to enact God's story of redemption and to imagine God's politics of peace invites and expects the participation of the whole household of faith – young and old, rich and poor, the able and the infirm – with the understanding that, in regard to young children especially, there are privileges reserved for their maturity, and mysteries and riches of the worshiping life that reveal themselves as rewards for years of practice and perseverance. Children should never be the center of attention in worship (God alone is the object of our devotion) but as children learn about worship by regularly participating in it, we hope and trust that they will come to reap those rewards.

WHAT TIME IS IT?

If all of this takes work, it also takes time. In worship, thankfully, we are given the gift of time—the opportunity to be formed as God’s holy people over the course of our lives. The gift of time reminds us that the end of worship—its goal or *telos*—is not entertainment or even personal edification, but a life transformed by the habit of praise and thanksgiving. In his novel, *Jayber Crow*, Wendell Berry’s title character recalls this exchange with a wise old Bible professor:

“You have been given questions to which you cannot be given answers. You will have to live them out—perhaps a little at a time.”

“And how long is that going to take?”

“I don’t know. As long as you live, perhaps.”

“That could be a long time.”

“I will tell you a further mystery,” he said. “It may take longer.”⁴

In undertaking the task of introducing children to worship we recognize this gift of time: that we don’t have to do it all at once or say it all at once—indeed we cannot; and that if we ensure our children’s regular presence in the worshiping assembly, and couple that commitment with substantive catechesis, the Spirit will do its transforming work with the passage of time.

We can also communicate to children the ways in which, as worshipers of God, our personal and corporate lives are ordered by a different sense of time. Whether our children have been baptized or are looking forward to it in the future, we can help them come to understand that in baptism we join the communion of saints through time—past, present, and future—and that the saints live in God’s

time, time redeemed by the saving work of Jesus Christ and measured by the rhythm of feasts and fasts that orders the Church’s common worship. We can make the most of our children’s natural curiosity about time (their desire to learn how to tell time, for instance) by teaching them that Christians mark the

passage of time differently through the liturgical calendar. (Frequently referring to an actual liturgical calendar at home, positioned prominently alongside the secular calendar that marks family birthdays and soccer games, is a tangible way to help children learn what it means for the Church to inhabit time in counter-cultural ways). When we habitually (though not slavishly) follow the church year in worship, children, like the rest of us,

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come to realize that resistance is often called for. The season of Advent, as we know, takes place as Christians find themselves besieged by the consumer culture's frenzied Christmas countdown. Yet the scriptures of Advent and the season's historic themes and practices encourage not revelry and guilt-ridden overspending, but a keen alertness to the multiple comings of

Christ in our lives. In the "time" of Advent we enact our opposition to the wider world's rush to frivolity that would have us deny the call to prepare for the joy of Christmas with waiting and watchfulness. Practicing this resistance with our children is an enormous challenge, but the hope for success begins as we worship regularly with them, and as the whole worship-

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ing body imagines faithful ways to witness to God's story in God's time.

CONCLUSION

Introducing children to worship is an act of faithfulness on the part of the adults who nurture and care for them. It is an act of welcome surrender in which we trust that the God who claims them in baptism and the Church that nurtures them through the pilgrimage from birth to death will form their character and transform their desires, that they might grow in grace and in the knowledge of Jesus Christ. This faithful surrendering often brings with it the sobering realization that we who seek to have the lives of children formed and transformed by participation in corporate worship may ourselves need to be converted; we may need to have our own vision and understanding of worship sharpened, tested, and transformed. I have suggested that style-driven worship presents the danger of training children to be consumers of worship "experiences," rather than deep adorers of God who, over time, develop an awareness and appreciation of historic Christian worship even as they recognize the dynamism and flexibility inherent in tradition.

And, finally, we engage in this act of introducing children to worship—and overseeing their ongoing participation in it—not in an effort to make them good but that they will know who they are. And we do this with the hope that worship that is attentive to the gospel's grand story will do its transforming work in their lives (and ours), will feed their imaginations not their egos, and will help them (and us) learn to order our lives by the gift of God's time.

NOTES

1 Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC*, revised and expanded (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 63.

2 Garrett Green, *Imagining God: Theology and the Religious Imagination* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), 140.

3 Jacques Maritain, quoted in Rowan Williams, "Poetic and Religious Imagination," *Theology*, 80 (May 1977), 179.

4 Wendell Berry, *Jayber Crow* (Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 2000), 54.

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