

Let the Children Come

Faith Matters column by Rev. Sherry Karasik, © NJ Herald, March 7, 2008

Children scurry around the sanctuary of Christ Episcopal Church, in Budd Lake, before the “All God’s Children” worship service. A beautiful 10-year-old girl named Elizabeth, tall and light on her feet, fingers a few keys on the piano. She’s autistic and mute, says her father, Ray Bonker, from Byram. Two of his three children suffer with autism.

“All God’s Children” is a non-denominational Christian service for all children – those who are disabled, particularly those with autism and Attention Deficit Disorder, Down’s Syndrome, and all those who aren’t – all ages,

young and old, come together to sing, pray, learn of Jesus, partake in communion, and parade around the sanctuary. Sitting still is not required, dancing around is preferred; participation is optional. Catering to short attention spans, the focus of the service is one of celebrating God’s love and joy for all his children even as it follows a traditional kid-friendly order of worship.

“I felt called to minister to these children after I read a paper that one out of every 150 children is diagnosed with autism. This ministry has created a lot of lay ministers – it takes a lot of people to do this service; we need a lot of hands,” says the Rev. Darlene Tittle, who has served this congregation for 3 ½ years.

Hands – to hold, to guide, to pray, to lead with, and to catch some shed tears. On average about 12 to 15 disabled children and their

siblings attend the service that is held the first and third Sunday of every month. On this Sunday, a number are home sick with the flu, but all together about 30 people gather as a living witness of love and care for children who are often invisible to others. Their parents also find comfort in the fellowship they engage in with other parents during the worship service and after, when they join together for refreshments while the children are entertained with a video.

Planting Mustard Seeds

For Bonker, the service is a way of planting mustard seeds in an unseen field – a child’s mind. “Living with autism is like living with a bomb that is always going off,” he said. He’s spent the last 10 years being “Mr. Mom,” drawing what he calls the “short straw” when he and his wife made the decision that one parent had to stay home. He left Wall

Street and a career as a computer scientist to “engage in a war, in the struggle, to sustain hope and energy to recover your child, to break the shell imposed upon them.”

But these mustard seeds are bearing fruit – not long ago his daughter Elizabeth, who is nonverbal, wrote a poem on the computer, a poem about what it’s like to be “caged” by autism, and a poem about God.

“Me”

I sometimes fear
That people cannot understand
That I hear
And I know
That they don’t believe I go
To every extreme
To try to express
My need to talk.
If only they could walk

In my shoes
They would share my news:
I am in here
And trying to speak everyday
In some kind of way

“God Poem”

It does not matter who you are
It does not matter if you stray far
God is always there for you
In spite of what you may do
His love is stronger than anyone
can know
You just have to know to go
To God.

Approaching “healing” through every means – medically, physically and now spiritually – Bonker said, “These children need to hear God’s Word as much as everyone else. Inside the cocoon, inside their frozen body,

they are the same as everyone else. They are welcome in the Kingdom of Heaven. They need to know God loves them.”

The service begins with a parade of clergy, lay people and children waving wooden crosses, singing a simple chorus. For a short time they will face the communion table where the sacraments await their later partaking, and there will be time for sprawling out on Persian rugs and pillows for the lesson and prayer.

Richard Tittle, the pastor’s husband, also a missionary, gives a short message about how Jesus loved and healed children during his earthly ministry, and wants to heal children today as he did a long time ago. After the lesson, adults reach out their hands and rest them or place them near the children, praying that God will heal their minds and bodies.

Before the service is over, the children are served communion,

or they serve themselves. One girl downs four thimble-size communion cups before she is satisfied with the sacraments.

Moved by the Spirit

Rev. Tittle says that the service came about as a gift from God, and through a series of events the congregation felt it was time to design a service where children were free to be children.

“The Spirit moved us. Eighty percent of the congregation participates in the service, and it is an outreach that is bringing others into the church,” she said.

Kim Waldele, of Blainstown, is the mother of three children. Her oldest, 9-year-old Gabby, suffers from autism and Cerebral Palsy, and is multiply disabled. “This is a wonderful approach to include families with a disabled family member. All people and those with disabilities have a spiritual nature that needs to be developed.

It’s time for churches to reach out to families. People who don’t have a disability or who aren’t familiar with those who suffer disabilities are unaware, and ignorant of what they say and do to those who are disabled.”

She confesses she was such a person before her own foray into the world of the disabled, yet she says it has made her life so much fuller, so much richer. Everything is spiritual, she adds, and no matter what “evil” is in the world, God can turn it to good.

Christians are missing out on ministry and sharing the gospel of Christ with these children, she adds. “If you look at Christ’s life, you see he ministered first to the physical needs, then the spiritual needs of others.” She believes that other children need to be exposed to children with disabilities so that they won’t be afraid, so they can understand – in school, in church, everywhere.

“We experience the presence of God. God touches people. We experience and expect healing for us, and for the children,” says Rev. Tittle.



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