

**First Presbyterian Church
Southampton, New York
“A Children’s Message”**

**Jeremiah 1:4 – 10
Mark 10:13 – 16**

January 17, 2016

Well, by now, most of you are aware of the fact that I’m a pretty big baseball fan. And, in particular, an Angels fan... as in the California Angels, or Los Angeles Angels, or Los Angeles Angels of Anaheim, or whatever the heck they’re calling them now. You know who I mean... *the Angels!* And this morning, I want to talk a little bit about my Angel fan-ness... but not the fact that I *am* an Angel fan; no, I want to talk about how I *came to be* an Angel fan. How did it happen that I became a diehard, dyed-in-the-wool, totally committed, fan-atical, fan... of the Angels?

Well, I’ll tell you how it happened; and I want you to listen carefully. Because, believe it or not, the story of my becoming an Angel fan has something very important to say about the life and ministry of our church family.

Now, obviously, I wasn’t “born” an Angel fan. My first words weren’t “play ball!” My first toddling Christmas lists for Santa weren’t loaded with requests for autographed bats, and photos of players on the team. No, I *became* a fan, over time... over a period of many years, in fact. And the most important thing that happened during that time of becoming a fan, when I was just learning about the sport of baseball, and long before I knew much of anything about the Angels... was that my parents piled me in the car, and took me to some games.

Sometimes my Dad’s customers gave us great tickets, and we actually got to sit next to the radio announcers in the press box... and sometimes it was just my Mom and me sitting in the cheap-seat, nosebleed section of the upper deck. But the point is that I was *there*. *We* were there... together. And while we were there, some amazing things happened.

Like, for example, I experienced the excitement of actually being at the game... that sense of thrilling awe that hits you as you walk out of the tunnel, and see the field, and the players shagging fly balls, and the stands filling up with people. Even today that experience still gives me a thrill. I heard the stadium organist, a guy named Shay Torrent, playing jaunty tunes... I heard the public address announcer introducing the lineups... I smelled popcorn, and beer, and peanuts. I stuffed my face with hotdogs... and then for dessert, there was ice cream; in a little plastic Angels helmet. We got programs... and I learned how to keep score. In fact, in the early days of our relationship, I taught Sylvia how to keep score at the ball game. How’s that for a hot date, ladies? Eat your hearts out!

My parents and I cheered for the team; we booed the umps; we sang “Take Me Out to the Ball Game” during the seventh inning stretch. And I learned that the Angels’ leftfielder was named Rick, same as me! Rick Reichardt. And when Rick Reichardt smashed a homerun in the eighth inning, the whole place exploded with a thunderous roar! I’d never experienced anything like it. Later, my Mom signed me up for the Junior Angels Club... which meant that we attended even more games together; I started collecting Angel baseball cards... in fact, as I told you awhile back,

I even tried to cover my entire bedroom wall with Rick Reichardt cards; I started wearing an Angel ball cap to school, and Angel T-shirts, and an Angel jacket.

By the time I was in college, my friends and I went to nearly every home game the Angels played... always sitting in the cheapest seats we could get. We'd hit Taco Bell on our way to the stadium, and get there two hours early to watch batting practice. Sitting in the bleachers, eating tacos, and watching batting practice. Okay, so I didn't have much of a life! But what I *did* have was a passionate, dedicated, lifelong love for the Angels. Which still exists to this very moment... even though I live 3,000 miles away, and only get to a game every fifteen or twenty years. ***I am an Angel fan!***

Now, what does all this have to do with the life and ministry of our church family? Well, it has to do with the fact that our appreciation and understanding of what goes on each week in this sanctuary is instilled in us, and grown in us... in pretty much the same way. Or, to put it another way, church becomes *home* for us; and church becomes *meaningful* for us; and church begins to *make sense* to us; much like the Angels, or the Yankees, or the Giants, or Knicks become *our* team... *my* team... an important part of *who* and *what* I am.

Just as you don't become a Yankee fan by taking classes on Yankee history, but by going to Yankee games; you don't find a home in Sunday worship by reading books about Christian liturgy, but by *being here*, among the living, breathing, worshiping community. Just as you don't develop a love for attending Giants games by hearing other people talk about *their* experience, but by going *yourself* and personally experiencing all the sights, and sounds, and smells, and thrills of the game; you don't discover a love for church, and find peace and meaning here by listening to somebody else discuss it over lunch, you discover it by living it, and experiencing it, and opening your own heart to it. All of which is simply to say that, if we want church to be life-giving, and heart-changing, and faith-strengthening, and soul-centering... then there is absolutely no substitute for *being here*.

And, here's the key thing that I want to make sure we all hear and understand: this whole process in which the church becomes my spiritual home, the place where I belong and where I discover what it means to be a person of faith... this whole process begins when we are very, very *young*! And by young, I mean, like, from birth! That was the conviction of the ancient Israelites; that was the belief of the first apostolic Christian community; that's been the judgment of the people of God since time immemorial. We begin the process of finding our home in worship, right from the day we are born.

Which, by the way, is the main reason why we in the Reformed theological tradition baptize babies and young children. We believe that those kids are, by virtue of the faith of their parents, already part of the covenant community of God that meets in this sanctuary on Sunday mornings. They may not become "official" active members of the church until they're Confirmed many years later; but they are, from the moment they make their appearance on planet earth, part of this family of faith... part of this worshiping congregation. The Book of Order calls them "Baptized Members;" but we just call them "part of the family."

Which is great; but, as we know, in our modern age, in which we've learned to place so much value on our minds, and to pay much less attention to our hearts... this idea is sometimes called into question. And some churches, and some church members, come to believe that "worship" or "church" is primarily an academic exercise; and that "going to church" isn't going to mean anything to a person until he or she can get their intellect around it. And it's just taken

for granted that we're not going to get anything out of church, or make much sense out of what goes on in church, until we can "get it" up here.

And so, consequently, over the years I've heard many parents say something like, *"Well, when my kids are old enough to understand the sermon and everything else that goes on in church, then I'll make them come. But until then, they're not going to get anything out of it anyway, so why go through the hassle of having them sit with us the whole service?"*

Well, it's true that there is an intellectual dimension to our worship; and certainly we try our best to understand sermons, and prayers, and biblical readings. And, yes, it can be an adventure having to deal with a fidgety child for sixty minutes. But the fact of the matter is that many of the most important things that we get from "church" don't have anything to do with our head and our intellect; they have to do with our heart and our feelings. Or to put it another way, church isn't just about what we learn and understand; it's also about what we experience and feel.

And those experiences, and those feelings, and those perceptions are being generated and filed away long before we can even begin to make any sense out of it all... even when we are really young. It is absolutely true to say that we *absorb* the experience of worship... way before we're able to understand it, or explain it. We get it "in here," years before we start to get it "up here." Think for a moment about your own life, your own Christian upbringing. I know that some of you may have come to the faith in later years, after you were already grown up... but for those of you who were raised in the church, what are your earliest church memories?

Well, for me, my own earliest memories are of being with my Mom and my Grandmother; and falling asleep across my Mom's lap, as the sermon droned on (remember, I grew up a Baptist and we had long sermons!); I remember the weekly children's sermon... not the specific content of any of them, just that we had them and I was included; I remember the awesome communion bread that my Mom made from scratch; and the old gospel hymns that we sang every week; and the pastor always saying, "Let's sing one more verse, because I know that someone out there wants to give their life to Jesus!"

Mostly I remember feeling loved, and valued, and cared for. People knew my name; people were happy to see me; I kept hearing that God cared for me; I came to see that the church was one of the most important things in my life. I didn't understand it all, but I knew that it all mattered; and I knew that that church, Hillside Baptist Church, was *my* church... *my* spiritual home. And I'll bet that many of you have very similar memories.

Now, if everything I've just said is generally true and accurate, and I believe very strongly that it is... what difference does it make to you, and me, and our church family? Well, the difference that it makes is that we should be doing all that we can to make sure that our children are here, with us, in worship; and that, once here, they know that they are loved, and welcomed, and valued just for being who they are.

And, relax, because I know that, to a certain extent, we're already doing that. Certainly we love seeing our children and youth here in church with us; and we do a weekly children's sermon, in part to let the kids know that worship is for them, too; and we have a children's choir, and youth acolytes, and "busy boxes" for the younger kids, and sometimes the kids lead worship, and share their musical gifts with us, and so on. And, of course, we also have a Youth Sunday service every year... which, by the way, is coming up on February 7, and I hope that *all* of you will be here to show your support for our young people.

And we have “family church Sundays...” like today, which are Sundays on which we dispense with Sunday school, and encourage parents and their kids to sit together, and share together, the whole worship service. “Family church Sundays” are really important because, as we know, sometime in the past we decided to have Sunday school and worship at the same time. And so the kids are here with us for a small part of the worship service... and then they troop off to Sunday school, along with their teachers for the rest of the morning.

In all honesty, as a pastor, I have to say that I think it’s a bad idea to have Sunday school and church at the same time; but, it is what it is... so “family church Sundays” are our attempt at a compromise, so that our kids get at least *some* exposure to all of the wonderful things that go on during a whole worship service. And the kids also learn how to “be here” for the whole service, in a way that’s going to make the experience meaningful and nourishing for them. And that simply can’t happen when the kids aren’t here.

Now, some people say that “family church Sundays” don’t work, because, when there’s no Sunday school, parents sometimes just stay home with their kids... and none of them come to church. Well, that does happen sometimes... and that’s not good, either. But that’s *not* a reason to scrap “family church Sundays...” it simply means that we, all of us, need to encourage our parents to take advantage of every opportunity that comes along to be in church with their kids. It’s vital; it’s important; it matters... to the kids and to the parents. But, it’s a work in progress, and it takes years to change the culture of who goes to church, and when they go to church, and so on. But we don’t give up! We keep on keepin’ on, and we celebrate every small victory as it comes.

I want to end this morning by very quickly running through a short list of suggestions of how we can improve our children’s experience of Sunday morning worship. And, first and foremost, we need to make sure that that our children feel welcome when they come to church. We already do a pretty good job with this... but we just need to make sure that we don’t take it for granted, and really go out of our way to let our young people know that they *belong* here, and that we’re glad that they *are* here. And so, we should tell our young people that we’re happy to see them here; we should learn their names, and call them by name; we should be supportive of them when they’re performing some leadership role in the worship service; we should make allowances for their youthfulness, and accommodate them as much as we can.

Second, kids are going to be kids... and part of being a kid is being antsy, squirmy, noisy, and generally disruptive. It’s part of life, and there’s not much that anybody can do about it... and you and I were all the same darn way when we were kids! But, that said, it’s still important for us to keep two things in mind: one, we accept the fact that parents, and I mean all of us who are parents, need to work with our children to help them to handle being in church for an hour without driving everyone around them crazy. It’s an ongoing struggle, and we just have to take it seriously and do the best we can.

But the second thing is that, for those of us who don’t have young kids with us... we need to exercise a great degree of patience, forbearance, grace, and love on behalf of the kids and parents who are here in our midst. Even the most attentive parents and the best-behaved kids are going to have moments when whispering, crinkling papers, and cell phone video games are going to cause a distraction. When that happens, let’s try to refrain from frowns, and scowls, and unkind remarks... and instead, offer a word of understanding encouragement to the kids and parents alike; to say, “Don’t worry, hang in there... my kids were the same way when they were little!” can go a long way toward helping parents and kids feel welcome, even when the morning’s been kind of

rough. And we can all work at trying not to let distractions get to us. I've been doing this for nearly 30 years... and I've heard every possible noise, beep, alarm, bell, whistle, laugh, whisper, and cry that you could possibly imagine. It just doesn't bother me anymore.

Hey, if someone's screaming at the top of their lungs, that's different... that's one of the reasons why we have a nursery. But for the smaller stuff, we can all just try to let it bug us a little less. And life, and church, and worship will still go on. In the immortal words of Confirmand, Lauren Heaney... "We're kids! That's what kids do!"

May God bless our young people; and our older people; and our whole church family... as we seek to love Him, and serve Him, and worship Him together!

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen!