



## From the Pulpit: August 25, 2024

Twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time—Back to School Blessing

The Reverend Christine V. Hides

Mark 10:13–16

*Poetry Church—The Path to Kindness, IV: That Day You Were Absent from Fourth Grade*

During August Pastor Katie and I have been experimenting with poetry in church to discover what words of prose might help us to see in a new way. Our poem for this Back to School Sunday wonders “What You Missed That Day You Were Absent from Fourth Grade”

*What You Missed That Day You Were Absent from Fourth Grade*  
Brad Aaron Modlin

*Mrs. Nelson explained how to stand still and listen to the wind, how to find meaning in pumping gas, how peeling potatoes can be a form of prayer. She took questions on how not to feel lost in the dark. After lunch she distributed worksheets that covered ways to remember your grandfather’s voice. Then the class discussed falling asleep without feeling you had forgotten to do something else—something important—and how to believe the house you wake in is your home. This prompted Mrs. Nelson to draw a chalkboard diagram detailing how to chant the Psalms during cigarette breaks, and how not to squirm for sound when your own thoughts are all you hear; also, that you have enough. The English lesson was that I am is a complete sentence. And just before the afternoon bell, she made the math equation look easy. The one that proves that hundreds of questions, and feeling cold, and all those nights spent looking for whatever it was you lost, and one person add up to something.*

“I am’ is a full sentence”

syllabus, and not taking things personally could be incorporated into a fine arts lesson.

There are always things we have to learn a different way. Brad Modlin’s poem imagines that our 4th grade teacher, Mrs. Nelson did teach those lessons, but it happened to be the day we were out with the sniffles, or on that Friday we went to visit our cousins.

Wouldn’t it be lovely to have someone teach us how to pray by peeling potatoes? Or to know how to make chores, like pumping the gas or cleaning our rooms, feel important? Can we imagine how things would be different if before middle school we learned that “I am” is a full sentence?

“I am...”by itself feels unfinished. Our minds are trained to fill in the blank. I am a sophomore.

I am a parent.

I am an attorney.

Or maybe, I am an oldest child.

I am hungry. I am good at soccer.

When “I am” by itself is a full sentence, it can mean: I am important. I matter. “I am” echoes in the ancient story in Exodus where Moses asks God’s name.

You matter, simply because God thought the world needed one of you.

I know some people who are 23 and 43 and 51 and 79 who still need to hear this. Poetry helps.

One of you told me about your favorite poem, one that also finishes the sentence “I am...”

This week I asked people what they should have learned in school but didn’t, which is a great ice-breaker question if you are ever in need of one. They answered that perhaps kindness could be covered in history class, and taxes could be on the trigonometry

Jack Pretlusky writes:

“Oh, Mother, I am blue today,  
I don’t know why or how.  
There’s never been another child  
as blue as I am now.”  
“I see you’re blue,” my mother said,  
“and this is what I think—  
if you would rather not be blue,  
don’t bathe again in ink.”<sup>1</sup>

Here’s a dad-joke-style introduction to idioms paired with a practical lesson “be careful with the markers!”

Perhaps you too remember phrases from your favorite childhood poetry book full of nursery rhymes and silly prose. This is mine. Before it was mine, it was my mother’s. And when I had children I read it to them. Modlin’s line, “how to believe the house you wake in is your home” unlocked the neural pathways where this rhyme from childhood is stored.

Oh Johnny Fife and Johnny’s wife  
to save their toes and heels,  
they built themselves a little house  
that ran on Rolling Wheels.  
they hung their parrot at the door  
upon a painted ring,  
and round and round the world they went,  
and never missed a thing;

...  
oh Johnny Fife and Johnny’s wife,  
they took their brush and comb,  
and round and round the world they went  
and also stayed at home.

—Mildred Plew Meigs

I’ve both called many places home in my life and spent nights searching for homes that felt lost to me. If you hear I’ve bought a little travel trailer for my empty nesting, you can be sure that Johny Fife and his wife played a part in that decision to travel the world and always be home.

Modlin ends with a complicated equation that Mrs. Nelson’s makes easy “The one that proves that hundreds of questions, and feeling cold, and all those nights spent looking for whatever it was you lost, and one person add up to something.”

How do we learn that our curiosities and questions and best laid plans that veer off course add up to something? Where do we learn that we, one person among 8 billion, matter? I spoke with Susie Kiphardt the other

day. Susie was the leader of the Children’s Ministry here at Kenilworth Union Church for many years. Her faithful fingerprints are still found on our curriculum and ministry today. On the phone she reminded me that story, poetry, and song help people learn. “Stories get inside you” she said “And songs go even deeper. You can carry poetry and metaphor your whole life through.”

“God thought  
the world  
needed one  
of you.”

Poems and songs remain a part of our children’s chapel because we know these words stick with us. Words like “Jesus loves me, this I know,” which make up the first line of one of the first songs we sing each week. This song was originally a poem written by Anna B. Warner for her sister’s novel, becoming popular only after it was set to music. Her original verses lean heavily into the violent events of the cross and so others. Over the years people have written their own lines, like the ones we sang today. Despite a multitude of adaptations, the chorus endures, “Yes, Jesus loves me.” When the famous theologian Karl Barth was asked to summarize his voluminous theology he quoted Warner “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.”<sup>2</sup> This from the man who wrote one of the longest systematic theologies ever written, *Church Dogmatics*, which contains more than 9,000 pages.

“Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.” You’ve likely also heard today’s scripture from Mark chapter 10 or at least seen the window outside of Doogie’s office.

<sup>1</sup>From *A Pizza the Size of the Sun*, by Jack Pretlusky.

<sup>2</sup><https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/articles/history-of-hymns-jesus-loves-me>.

*The people brought children to Jesus, hoping he might touch them. The disciples shooed them off. But Jesus was irate and let them know it: “Don’t push these children away. Don’t ever get between them and me. These children are at the very center of life in the kingdom. Mark this: Unless you accept God’s kingdom in the simplicity of a child, you’ll never get in.” Then, gathering the children up in his arms, he laid his hands of blessing on them.*

In the time and place Jesus lived, children had no power or status.<sup>3</sup> So it isn’t surprising that the disciples turned them away, they had important adult work to do. What is surprising is that Jesus pays attention to the children. Jesus paid attention to all kinds of people who society deemed unimportant or unworthy. Jesus puts children right in the middle of the story of God’s unfolding kingdom. Not someday when they get older or pass a test. Present tense: “Children are at the center.”

The disciples learn an important lesson about how followers of Jesus are meant to include those on the margins. The children then and those who hear this story 2,000 years later learn that in a world where children are hushed and left out and overlooked, they matter to Jesus.

As we begin the school year, adults who care for children are mindful of the stressors in our community. Sometimes it feels as though there is never enough time to do what feels required for our children’s success. It is easy to overfill our days with practice, test prep, enrichments, and carpool.

Jennifer Breheny Wallace knows about these kinds of pressures. She is a parent of adolescents and a journalist who writes about modern family life. She wanted to understand what is fueling the mental health crisis and what could be done about it. She partnered with Harvard on a research survey and interviewed a

“Children are  
at the center.”

number of parents in communities like ours. Her antidote to the challenges children and youth face can be summed up in the two words found on our Back to School Blessing stickers today, “You matter.”

In *Never Enough: When Achievement Culture Becomes Toxic*, Wallace reminds us that “mattering” means feeling valued for who you are, not for the grades

you receive, the likes on social media or the trophies on your shelf. There are at least seven ingredients to feeling like you matter including being noticed, depended on, cared about, and made to feel special as

your true self.<sup>4</sup> I see some nodding heads—I imagine we all agree with this. But somehow Wallace discovered, the message isn’t always getting through to young people, or their parents who also long to feel as though they matter.

So Kenilworth Union Church, as we bless this new school year, I am asking you to help me with Wallace’s suggestions for communities: Let’s continue to be trusted adults for the youth in our church and villages. Let’s welcome them here as Jesus would. Let’s listen to and respect them. Let’s mentor and support them. When we see them contributing to our church with their presence or as ushers or Sunday school helpers—let’s respond with gratitude.

If we offer this message each time we gather, no child will grow up feeling as though they were absent that day the church taught the lesson “You are made in God’s image. You matter to Jesus who welcomes children and everyone. You, each and every one of you, matters to this church community.”

<sup>3</sup>See “The Least and the Greatest: Children in the New Testament” by Judith M Gundry-Volf in *The Child in Christian Thought* edited by Marcia Bunge.

<sup>4</sup>Wallace, Jennifer Breheny. *Never Enough: When Achievement Culture Becomes Toxic—and What We Can Do About It* Portfolio/Penguin, 2023, 54.

**—Prayers of the People—**  
**The Reverend Dr. Katie Snipes Lancaster**

In the safe shelter of this sanctuary we lift our hearts to you O God, the one in whom we live and move and have our being. We give you thanks for this day, for sunshine and the heat, the summer warmth, and the green verdant earth. Awake to the fullness of life, we ask that you enlarge our vision, that you open us to what is here in our midst, that you stir to life something we might otherwise have missed. In our searching, sometimes we retreat from the daily rhythms of life, wondering if what we look for is still yet far off, and then we realize that what we seek had been there all along, found within, found at home, in that deep down place. Evoke that sense of home within us, O God. Slow us down. Give us the comfort of our true selves, person to person, meeting one another fully alive to this day.

Today our hearts are full as we celebrate the return to school. For the college students who walk across campus, meeting deadlines and finding their way to new extracurriculars. For the kindergartners, the day long and the crayons sharp, sparking creativity and friendship. For the fourth graders who know the comfort and rhythm of friendship, and who are finding the gift of personal achievement and internal motivation. We hold dear those who feel the challenge of conflict, pressure, and competition in a new way. For the sense of belonging that can feel tentative at the beginning of the year. For the blank slate of a fresh start and a new notebook. For the workload. For resilience. For mentors who can help hold focus when pressure mounts.

We turn to you O God, in response to the central questions of human life. In every kind of suffering, we bring our burdens to you. For financial hardship and the basic needs that must be met. For physical limitations after illness and injury. For the mental anguish that comes unbidden. For isolation and loneliness. For anxiety. For grief. God we ask that you hold it all. That you bear it with us. That you bear us up. Be our buoy. Let us find a way toward thriving. Let us find a way toward hope.

For the world in places of war, let there be a way toward peace. In places of change, let there be wise and grounded leadership. In places of conflict, let there be voices of hope who can find a way through, a way through for the most vulnerable, the least, the lost, and the lonely to whom Christ draws near.

God hear our prayer. And turn us toward your table of love. Bless bread and cup. Let your spirit pour forth. And hear us as we pray the prayer Jesus teaches us: Our Father.... Amen.

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