

The Question

I've been thinking a lot about children lately and what they need. Partly because we recently visited our grandchildren. And partly because we are planning to do Sunday school this fall. (That starts two Sundays from now).

And one of the questions I think is important is: Why? What can our church provide for children that isn't readily available elsewhere? It's an important question, because if we are going to restore this part of our congregational life, we need to have a good sense of why we are doing it. The reality is that we are a small congregation that can't do everything, so we have to choose carefully.

This is one of the reasons why I've been interested in watching movies like Barbie and a new Spiderman movie, that we went to see with my twelve year old granddaughter in Seattle, who really wanted to see it. She has a rich and impressionable imagination. So, I was curious to see what the movie was providing that she was so eager to experience.

Movies: Sugar Coated Opioids

What I discovered is something I already knew, that a lot of children's movies are also playing a parenting role. And I guess that is inevitable, since movies need a storyline with some kind of moral message, otherwise there would be no story. And some movies have messages that are good for children and some bad, depending on how you see the world.

It seems to me that some good values are being reinforced, often values that are rooted in religion; although movies rarely seem to connect these values with the religious traditions in which they originate. Sort of like how the Lion King is built around the "circle of life." Little Simba the lion cub and his sister have to find a way to grow up. And they struggle to escape from the bitter old lion Scar, who represents the dark side.

The Lion King is a very religion-oriented movie in a half hidden way. It contains a mix of popular religious ideas drawn from different traditions. I think there are a lot of good things about that movie.

But what troubles me is that a lot of the movies today are so overpowering. They may not seem that way on a television or smart

phone screen. But on the big screen it becomes very clear. Movies today are being made with a combination of technological sophistication, artistry and music that is so breathtaking, and overpowering that any message that is delivered, regardless of whether it is good or bad is going to be highly persuasive to any impressionable child's mind.

The movies will live in their heads for a long time in a way that it is hard to see any parent's "little talks" competing with. Maybe I'm exaggerating, but going to an animated children's movie today is like taking some kind of sensory "heroin."

Sitting in the movie theater in Seattle, we were reduced to wide-eyed spectators, eating up what was coming at us off the screen. It wasn't a two-way conversation with the movie. It was all one-way and the movie screen was in full control.

That worries me, because my sense is that whoever is responsible for the content, seems to be a lot less advanced morally and spiritually, than technologically. Most of these movies are telling us stories about life in a way that leaves a giant blind spot when it comes to cultivating any kind of vocabulary for talking and thinking about God. And they

have a lot of power to shove their views down the throat of my impressionable 12 year old granddaughter.

One of the things I have realized about movies in general is that while they can help us in important ways and teach us a lot, they don't do a good job of replacing our more traditional ways of learning, like reading books and learning through face to face conversations and experiences.

Those traditional ways of learning may seem much more slow and ordinary and far less thrilling, but they also give you more time and space to think for yourself. Movies are too fast and leave too little to the imagination. And because of this, I am actually relieved that most movies don't try to teach us religion.

Way back when it came out, I went to see the Mel Gibson movie "The Passion of Christ" (not a movie for children). It is a movie that focuses on Jesus's crucifixion. And it draws the crucifixion out in a way designed to shock and sicken us so that we will identify with Jesus and reject the violence that caused his death.

The movie makes an important point. But as a representation of Christianity, its excessive focus on his death, is misleading. I came out of the theater thinking how preposterous it is to imagine that any two

hour movie can possibly do justice to a story as layered with meaning and richly nuanced as the story of Jesus. And the answer, in my opinion, is that it can't. You have to be exposed to all the parts of the story over time in order to begin to understand the treasure that we have in the story of Jesus.

Relying on movies and videos is a good way to pick up information quickly in this busy world. But, in my view, quick fixes of any kind are completely inadequate when it comes to establishing a moral and spiritual foundation for living.

Our Touchstone and Practice

And this brings me to the point I want to make. Establishing a solid moral and spiritual foundation requires a sustained effort. It requires time set apart to engage in a regular spiritual practice. And ideally, that foundation should be chosen by good parents and reinforced by a supportive and caring community of all ages.

In some ways, I think that establishing this foundation is like learning to play an instrument. You have to stick with it and keep repeating the fundamentals, with the understanding that the people who end up

playing beautifully are also people who practice regularly and know their instrument.

Our instrument is the human heart. And the art we practice is loving. And we are more able to love when we spend time regularly learning how our hearts work and practicing under the instruction of our maestro, Jesus who teaches us about how our own hearts can channel the love of God.

I don't actually play an instrument, but I do understand enough about the arts in general to know that, to play an instrument well, you have to make it into a way of expressing something you yourself understand and believe in from the bottom of your heart. Otherwise, the music will seem parroted or simply copied. And playing it will be like putting on a façade.

This is why, in this morning's Gospel, Jesus asks Peter and the other disciples. "Who do you say that I am?" He asks this because loving as Jesus loves is not something that can be parroted or copied. Jesus is not interested in hearing us parrot what everybody else says or thinks about him or about why we should serve him. He is pushing us, instead to search and practice until we have our own answers.

Because, love is not love until it is an expression of what we truly believe we are here for. And only when God's love and our love begin to be one, do we begin to have a reliable foundation and spiritual center that is our own.

And so, each week we wander and get somewhat lost and each week we return, seeking to be touched anew by the one in whom our foundation and spiritual center lies.

The Church as a Beating Heart

As I understand it, the church and its worship should work like a "beating heart". You know how blood goes around the body in a circle and comes back to the heart to be reoxygenated? Well, I think that people are like blood cells and when we come to church, our supply of spiritual oxygen has been depleted by the demands of the world. And so, in worship, we are taken into God's heart and reoxygenated and pumped back out into the world to reoxygenate the entire body. And each week, this is repeated in a regular rhythm.

Over and over again, we gather to practice the things that reconnect us with the source of our spiritual oxygen. Cell phones are silenced, technological distractions and all other concerns are set aside, and we

open our hearts to God in prayer and to each other in fellowship. We sing songs of praise, we hear the words of scripture, we offer up a portion of what we have, we gather to eat and drink with our Lord and to be reconciled with each other, and we ask for forgiveness. We touch on as many essential points in our spiritual foundation as we can. And we need to do this because, like all people, we are forgetful and easily distracted and we need our practice, to reconnect us with the one who provides us with our spiritual oxygen.

And so, I think that this is one of the valuable things that we are designed to provide that makes offering Sunday School to children a valuable thing to do. We are a community of spiritual practice, centered on sharing our lives with each other in the Spirit of God's love. And we can do our part to start children on a journey that can provide them with the secure foundation they will need in order to find their way in this turbulent world.