

A Facebook friend recently invited me to join in a 'book jacket challenge.' The idea was to post 10 different book covers over 10 successive days without any other comment or explanation. I think the invitation was to share books that have been influential in my life. I quickly thought of *Robin Hood*, which I read in about 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> grade and kept as a cherished possession well into adulthood; right up until one of our dogs ate the book to protest our absence from home one evening. I also thought of *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *Watership Down*, books I'd read in junior high.

I then thought of an influential non-fiction book which I read when our oldest son was just 18-months old: *Raising Self-Reliant Children in a Self-Indulgent World*. This book was part of a parenting program called "Developing Capable People", DCP for short. (About 22 years ago one of the author's led a 'trainer of trainers' workshop on DCP here at St. Paul's. I know this because my wife attended it while we were up at the La Jolla UMC.)

As I said, I enrolled in "Developing Capable People" when my son was 18-months old, as I was feeling that my parenting skills could use some improvement. It seems a little silly now, but one of the issues was that my son kept opening the refrigerator door, even after repeated warnings not to. Based on my own childhood experiences of excessive corporal punishment, I wanted to see if I could learn other parenting and discipline strategies.

DCP focused on the idea that the primary goal of parenting was to parent in such a way that a child becomes a capable adult. The idea of parenting an 18-month-old with his adulthood in mind was a huge mind-bender for me, but according to the DCP model, children become capable adults when a parent helps foster 3 key self-perceptions (and 4-skills) in their children. I'm only going to focus on the 3 perceptions: #1) A perception of personal capability, meaning a child learns, "I am capable." #2) A perception of personal significance. So, a child learns, "Who I am is important." And, #3) a perception of personal influence, meaning a child learns, "My actions and choices shape my life."

After the first class, I went home and rearranged the refrigerator with the idea that I'd ask my son to help prepare our next fine dining experience. I put the hot dogs, the buns, and the ketchup on a shelf he could reach. I also placed a full gallon of milk, which was too heavy for him, on that same shelf.

When I asked my son to get the ketchup from the refrigerator, he eyed me with suspicion. Instead of telling him to not to open the refrigerator door, I was inviting him to do the opposite!

As he retrieved each item for our meal, he was learning that he was **capable** of using the refrigerator appropriately. He learned that he could make a **significant** contribution to our family dinner, by partnering in its preparation. And, here's what was really cool. When I asked him to get the gallon of milk, he realized the container was too heavy, so he asked for my help; which meant he had **influence** to address the challenge he was encountering. After dinner, after he helped put away all that we'd used, he was beaming with delight. In my effort to parent in a way that would bless my son, I was the one blessed.

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Today, as you may've read in our St. Paul's e-mail blast, we are beginning a series called, "The Rhythm of Life". Our focus this morning is childhood, and over the next few Sundays we'll look at the stages of adolescence, adulthood, and senior adulthood. My goal is to help us reflect on some of the challenges we face at each phase of life, and to see how scripture provides insights to help us navigate life at every stage.

This series is rooted in who we claim to be as a church. Our St. Paul's mission states: "We are a congregation whose hearts, minds, and doors are open to every generation in all stages of their spiritual life. Our mission is to love God, love others, and grow God's kingdom as all ages journey together in Christ-Centered worship, fellowship, and service." This morning, as we focus on childhood, we'll consider how God invites us, as parents, grandparents – and as a church – to help children flourish.

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Our first scripture recounts how a child, David, the youngest son of Jesse, was anointed to be Israel's future king. If we read the story beginning with v. 1 of 1 Samuel 16, it becomes clear that David's father, Jesse, does not even consider the possibility that God would anoint his youngest child, as an instrument of God's purposes. Jesse didn't even bring him to this meeting with Samuel!

As Jesse's seven older sons are paraded before Samuel, the priest who is to anoint one of them as Israel's king, both Jesse and Samuel are surprised that none of them are the one God intends. In a

beautiful verse, 1 Samuel 16:7, God tells Samuel, “the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.” It is then that we read that Jesse’s youngest son, David, is out tending to the sheep. When Jesse summons David, and he appears before Samuel, Samuel hears God say, “Rise and anoint him; for this is the one.”

Reflecting on this, the Rev. John Claypool identifies two overlapping growth challenges children must go through. The first is gaining a sense of personal worth, and the second is realizing the gifts they have within them; their God-given gifts to make a difference for God in our world.

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But I’m getting a little ahead of myself, so let’s hear our 2<sup>nd</sup> scripture reading from Mark 9:30-37. [Play clip.] Now, it may not be clear how all the verses in this reading are related. In fact, most Bibles separate them into two chunks, so we miss how they’re related! As we heard in vv. 30-32, Jesus is teaching his disciples that he’s going to be killed. And his disciples respond how? Well, first by saying nothing, and then by arguing about which of them is ‘the greatest.’ When Jesus asks, in v. 33, “What were you talking about?” the disciples are at a loss for words. And the reason for their reluctance to speak more sinister than we suspect.

You see, the disciples actually believe that Jesus is the Messiah who will restore Israel by a violent conquest. That is why they’ve begun to follow him. If Jesus succeeds, and becomes ruler of Israel, but then is killed, it would be the ‘greatest’ disciple who would be next in line to succeed Jesus. What the disciples are actually doing, is scheming over which of them will take over after Jesus is killed! (Have any of you ever heard this passage taught in this way? Please keep that in mind any time you feel absolutely confident you know what scripture is teaching.) But Jesus, as we read the passage, then goes onto demolish their ‘adult-ish’ scheming: “Whoever wants to be most important [whoever wants to take my place] must take the last place.” Jesus then embraces a child and says, “Whoever welcomes a child in my name welcomes me.”

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And here is something else we must consider if we are to comprehend what Jesus is teaching in this passage. In the ancient world, infants were often abandoned when their parent could not feed them. It was a post-natal method of birth control. If these

abandoned babies had any chance of survival, it could only happen if someone took them in. In an ‘adoption like’ ritual, a father would pick up an abandoned child and claim it as his own.

According to one NT scholar, when Jesus embraces a child in this passage, those present would recognize what Jesus was doing as ‘symbolic of adoption’! Further it is an act which demonstrates Jesus’ connection and relationship to the God of scripture, who has a special concern for the poor, the powerless, the outcast, and the abandoned.

When Samuel anoints David, a child, as Israel’s future King, and when Jesus, our Christ, embraces a child to teach his power-hungry, status-seeking, and ladder-climbing, disciples, “whoever wants to be first, must be last of all and servant of all”; both of these moments stress the importance of helping children gain a sense of their personal worth, and of our role in helping children realize the God-given gifts they have within them.

Séveral years ago, I ran across Ann Weems poem, *Greenless Child*. It is a poem that made my heart ache, but also it serves as a reminder to me about how much children need to be embraced with an affirmation of their personal worth and their God-given gifts:

*I watch her go uncelebrated into the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade,  
A greenless child,  
Gray among the orange and yellow,  
Attached too much to the corners and to other  
peoples sunshine.  
She colors the rainbow brown  
And leaves balloons unopened in their packages.*

*Oh, who will touch this greenless child?  
Who will plant alleluias in her heart  
And send her dancing into all the colors of God?*

*Or will she be left like an unwrapped package on  
the kitchen table – Too dull for anyone to take the  
trouble? Does God think [that] we’re her keeper?*

Scripture tells us, doesn’t it, the answer to that last question: “Does God think we’re her keeper?” And friends, the role of parents, adults, and the church is not simply to educate, discipline, entertain, or provide wholesome activities for our children, while we wait for them to grow into adulthood. Our mission is to embrace them, to anoint them, to plant alleluias in their hearts and send them dancing into all the colors of God. Amen.