

**"Is It Well with the Child?"**  
**A Sermon by Louise Westfall**  
**Fairmount Presbyterian Church**  
**Cleveland Heights, Ohio**  
**15 October 2006**  
**Text: Mark 10:13-16**

Between October 23, 1916 and January 7, 1917, eighty five persons signed on as charter members of a new congregation, to be called The Fairmount Presbyterian Church of Cleveland Heights. But the year before the chartering of the new church, a group of women organized to provide Christian education for neighborhood children. Records carefully researched by our church archivist Fran Bayless indicate that weekly "Sunday School" was held beginning in 1915, with as many as 90 children in attendance. In fact, the nascent church was so committed to Christian Education that the first building erected was a Parish House to provide adequate classroom space—plans for a separate sanctuary were delayed for several years. The building was designed around the biblical verse "Is it well with the child?"—a question etched into the stone work still visible as you enter the church from the garth.

Is it well with the child? The question may be more relevant today than ever before. It seems harder to be a child—and harder to be a parent—than it used to be. The world seems more complex, the array of choices more confusing, the stakes higher, and the dangers more threatening than at any time in the past.

Our congregation's founding mothers believed that Christian education, faith-sharing from one generation to another, contributed to a young child's well-being, was a light for their paths, and helped them navigate the perilous shoals into adulthood. I wonder if we hold that conviction today. Does the church have anything distinctive to offer families—something they can't get anywhere else—something that will anchor their lives to that which is true and enduring?

Throughout biblical history, education for faith has been of primary importance. Along with the giving of the law to Israel came the command, over and over again, "Teach these to your children." When the risen Jesus commissioned his disciples to continue the work he had begun, he sent them into all the world, baptizing and

teaching. He showed special interest in and concern for children, bringing them into the center of his proclamation of the Kingdom of God. When others found them annoying and disruptive, Jesus welcomed and blessed them.

It seems to me that the church has a sacred responsibility for Christian education. Now I'm going to say explicitly that this education is not for the young alone. How can we pass along what we barely know or understand ourselves?

I heard about the family returning from church after their second child had been baptized. They became worried when they noticed their older child, a pre-schooler, crying softly in the back seat. They asked him what was the matter. He replied, "The pastor said he wanted us brought up in a Christian home, but I want to stay with you guys."

Let there be no disconnect between our homes and a Christian home. What we're talking about is life-long education—faith formation that never ends, because we continue to seek the way of Christ, to question, to ponder, to study, to learn, to know, to grow, our whole lives through. Here in the church we are in the business of learning to read—learning to read our culture through the lens of our faith. We do that every time we gather, every time we read the Bible and listen for God's Word, every time we dip into the waters of baptism, every time we recite the creeds and tell the stories and sit at table together—whether the communion table or a meeting table-- and invoke the name and Spirit of God. We are learning to become literate in the language and culture of our faith.

In many ways it is our "second language"—not really the one that comes to us most easily or comfortably. What comes much more easily is our native language of the larger American culture. We are out in it almost every moment of our lives—familiar with its speech, immersed in its values, saturated with its symbols, visions, and goals.

Presbyterians have always been part of a tradition that does not withdraw from the world or culture, or seek God in some holy place untouched by the rough and tumble of the marketplace. We're part of a tradition that compels us to be "out there"—in the marketplace, in the world of politics and economics, of education and science, of

art and industry. It compels us “out there” in the unshakeable conviction that God is out there—in the midst of its wackiness and its terror, and its incomprehensible eruptions of violence and ugliness, and its painful everyday ambiguities and uncertainties.

But it is not enough merely to affirm that God is “out there”—because it is also true the God’s presence in the culture is not neutral, not disinterested. God is “out there” at work to repair creation, to make all things new, to restore humanity and all that God has made into the way God intended at the beginning. There’s much in this culture that degrades and cheapens and diminishes life. We know this, and find it in our faces every time we read the paper, surf the net, or watch television. And precisely because we know this, so all the more do we need to know our faith—to get more fluent in our second language. Because we can read the cultural language of destruction and corruption, so all the more do we need to know the vocabulary of faith and hope, to become conversant in the language of compassion and forgiveness, to be able to read and recognize the symbols and signs of justice and righteousness. That’s why the church engages in Christian education; why we ask parents presenting their children for baptism to promise, by God’s grace, to live their faith and teach it to their children (and ask the congregation to promise to help them!); that’s why we strive for excellence in our children’s and youth programs, and offer the whole church Bible study, confirmation, small groups, classes and lectures, a music program, hands-on educational enterprises. To learn to read the language of hope for a day we can only dimly imagine, and which at times seems all too faint, but towards which we are invited by God.

[8:30] Will our children have faith? Will we? I don’t mean for that question to be rhetorical. At the later service, I’ve invited some parents of children to share their perspective on what distinctive things the church can provide. How can the church contribute to the well-being of children and families? In what ways do we support the challenging task of parenting? What do you think? [allow time for comment]

[11] Will our children have faith? Will we? I don’t mean for that question to be rhetorical. I’ve invited some parents of children to share their perspective on what distinctive things the church can provide. How can the church contribute to the well-being of

children and families? In what ways do we support the challenging task of parenting? Why do you parents make a commitment to raise your children in the nurture of the church? [ROB MOCK, JULIE LANGEN, OS MILLS speak]

Our church school program begins by providing loving infant care in a clean, colorful environment. Our children's ministry team delivers a "care package" to families after the birth of a child with parenting CDs and information about baptism. The first curriculum we use is called "Young Children and Worship" and employs storytelling and "godly play." "Doorways" -for elementary aged students through sixth grade - is based on a "workshop rotation" system utilizing the theory of multiple intelligences. It is highly experiential and....well, fun! Our educational programs require over 60 teachers, shepherds, and helpers each program year, and there is always a need for caring individuals who share a commitment to family faith formation. Is it well with the child? With Jesus as our teacher, the community of faith our classroom, and the Holy Spirit our tutor, may the answer to that question be a resounding yes as we learn to read together with grace and love.

TO THE GOD OF ALL GRACE, WHO CALLS US TO SHARE GOD'S  
ETERNAL GLORY IN UNION WITH CHRIST, BE THE POWER FOREVER!  
AMEN.

The Rev. Louise F. Westfall, D.Min., Pastor