

**Pastoral Care of the Preschool at  
Sts. Peter and Paul Lutheran Church  
for the Preschool Advisory Group of the Congregation  
from Dennis Lauritsen, pastor  
April 26<sup>th</sup>, 2010**

*Jesus also said, 'The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come (Mark 4:26–29).*

In his First Letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul uses words similar to these from Jesus when he speaks about the nature of ministry in his opening words to the congregations in Corinth, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth" (1 Corinthians 3:6-7). The agrarian and pastoral imagery that is used throughout the Scriptures vividly portrays the roles which have been bestowed upon us through baptism in the oftentimes hidden, mysterious growth of the Kingdom of God. According to Jesus and the apostolic witnesses, ours is clearly to scatter the seed on the ground, as farmers do this time of year, and to tend the crop throughout its season of growth; but finally it is only the Creator who has the power to give the growth such that will produce an abundant harvest. How God does this, we do not know; in fact, it appears that God accomplishes this harvest quite apart from much of anything we can do other than to plant and to water the seed of His Word.

One of the predominant characteristics of Jesus' parables about the nature of the Kingdom of God is how this dominion grows quietly, even secretly, often in hidden ways that are not visible or discernable to human beings. Thus, whether the farmer is conscious or unconscious, the seed that has been scattered will automatically take root and grow. As this teaching about the nature of the rule of God suggests, most of our participation in this realm and our perception of its growth is very much hidden from our ability to evaluate. I have learned rather painstakingly over the years that ministry, unlike the majority of vocations in our society, has very little to show for it, practically no tangibility in the way of results. You simply cannot point and say, "Okay, that job is finished, and take a look at the results. Didn't I do a nice job negotiating that contract, or cleaning the bathroom, or filling that tooth, or making that soufflé?" As one of my preaching professors used to say, "Preaching is not like cultivating a cornfield when you can look back and see what you have done. You can never really be certain that you have accomplished anything because you cannot grasp the consequences that your ministry has in people's lives." Most of the time in ministry, we do not have the opportunity to witness the harvest from the seeds that were sown. Others, often of future generations, will reap what we have planted. Each of our lives, to offer another metaphor, is like a pebble that, when dropped upon the surface of the water, sends ripples from its center to eternity.

I think these images are apt especially as we reflect upon ministry among families and children of our parish.<sup>1</sup> Most of "who we have been" and "what we have done," namely, the *impact* of the preschool program on the surrounding communities, is not accessible for an objective, empirical evaluation. The "impact," if you will, is now in the process of germinating and growing in the hearts and lives of those children and families who have received this ministry; and I doubt that even they could fully express how their lives have been enriched and changed by their participation in this program. Years from now, who knows what will be said about the offerings of this congregation for the sake of Jesus' gospel, the well-being of others, and the welcoming of children as Jesus welcomed them. What I know is this, when I meet some of these former preschoolers in their schools and neighborhoods, some of them now juniors and seniors in high school, they and their families remember with great gratitude their experience at Sts. Peter and Paul preschool and church, and they have commended the program to many others in our communities. How has the ministry of the preschool affected their lives? Well, perhaps they and their parents could best answer that question. For now, we must trust that the

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<sup>1</sup> When I use the word "parish," I am referring to the geographic region in which our congregation is located, including the surrounding communities of the inner ring of the west suburban area rather than the identity of the congregation itself. My practice of ministry occurs "at a congregation" and "to a parish," inclusive of ministry well beyond those who are on the official roster of baptized members at Sts. Peter and Paul.

seeds which have been planted, and are now growing by God's miraculous power, will come to a fruitful harvest. As another of Jesus' parables teaches, ours is to continue to scatter the seed with reckless abandon, and to have faith that, in so doing, there will be growth.

I think we can say with confidence that the preschool program has accomplished, to greater and lesser degrees, the following:

- Solid, comprehensive educational preparation for grade school.
- A caring context for the development of social skills and nurture of relationships.
- An introduction to the person of Jesus Christ, the community of his church, the offering of prayer, and a pastor of a congregation.
- The opportunity for parents to develop a network of support for each other in their roles as mothers and fathers, to relate socially with other families and extended families, and for their children to develop lasting friendships that often carry into grade school and beyond.
- Access to pastoral care and the life of a congregation. As you will see below, many households have registered their membership with the congregation, brought their children to baptism, received pastoral ministry, and offered gifts of time, talent and treasure for the life of the church in its expression at Sts. Peter and Paul.
- Through the preschool and pastor, some households may have strengthened their relationships to a home congregation or may have been moved to become active participants of another church.

I trust that there is an abundant harvest coming as a result of the sometimes halting, sometimes excelling ministry of our congregation through its preschool program. Whatever we have offered of ourselves through this ministry, I believe we have been given in return even more abundantly as a congregation and pastor. "Give, and it will be given to you," Jesus says, "A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back" (Luke 6:38). One of the questions for us is this: How can we offer more of the good measure to more families in our communities? And what is it that we need to be offering others in this time and place? And how can members of our congregation be more directly involved in these types of ministries?

It is just this way with Jesus. He says to us again and again in so many words, "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it" (Mark 8:35). For people who have answered the call to follow the "man for others," the question is never how will something benefit us, but how have we benefitted others? The questions related to what we are getting out of following Jesus or whether or not we have received our moneys worth from discipleship, are questions that are neither befitting nor worthy of followers of the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for us. How have we offered our lives as a "living sacrifice" of praise (Romans 12:1) to the glory of God and in service to others? And how is the Holy Spirit calling us to offer our lives as a sacrifice of praise in the present? Always in new and different ways, I think, as the context for ministry evolves. I do not think the question is whether or not there is a ministry to families and children in our communities, but rather, what is the shape of that ministry? As I engage in self-examination and discernment of the Holy Spirit's call to ministry, there is no doubt in my mind that the pastoral ministry of the congregation needs to offer more to the ministries that reach toward families; however, there are limits to what one pastor can do.

The baptismal vows which we affirm at Confirmation ought to set the course for us: "You have made public profession of your faith. Do you intend to continue in the covenant God made with you in Holy Baptism: to live among God's faithful people, to hear his Word and share in his supper, to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed, to serve all people, following the example of our Lord Jesus, and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth?"

In the practice of pastoral ministry, as I have come to know it, the families of our preschool are "members" of my parish, and I, in various ways and levels of involvement, have tried to provide pastoral care to each of

these families along the way. I regard them as households of the congregation at which I serve whether or not their baptisms are registered with Sts. Peter and Paul. And I consider it a great privilege, and an even greater joy, to have the opportunity to spend time with the children, their parents, and extended families, especially their grandparents and neighbors. . . .

. . . The preschool, in my opinion, has been one of the most effective channels of witness and service to our geographic parish, and I believe the blessing given and received are beyond our ability to either comprehend or imagine. One of my nagging regrets is that I have not been able to offer more time and presence to this ministry which, I believe, would create a more distinctly Christian ministry of faith formation and consequently serve to increase enrollment and growth of numerical membership of the congregation. The financial solvency of the program is crucial and fully deserves our honest appraisal and evaluation, which is the reason I offered the suggestion at our annual meeting earlier this year for the convening of this advisory group. But I hope this financial situation will not overshadow our best efforts to enhance this program or design another one that will increase the offerings of ministry which we have been making for the past twelve to thirteen years in the name of "the man for others." I pray that we will continue, in some manner or another, to plant and water seeds that God will bring to fruition in His own time.

*Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave (Philippians 2:3-6).*