

Today I am going to make a case that we should do away with Sunday School. Today I am going to make the case that we should focus instead on ways to transform our worship experience into an experience where all ages are welcomed, engaged, educated, and lives of all ages are transformed. Hang with me on this one.

In the first scripture that Renee read from the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy, the Israelites had come to the end of their 40 years of wandering in the desert and they were preparing to enter the land that God had promised to their ancestors.

They are given what we call the “Shema” or the series of instructions which begin with the words, “Hear, O Israel.” “Shema” is the Hebrew word for “hear.” The Shema is important in Jewish prayers today. In the Deuteronomy passage, the Shema comes immediately after the recording of the 10 Commandments.

The second scripture we are about to read comes from the Old Testament as well. We are going to be reading from the book of Joshua. In this passage of Scripture, the Israelites have already come into the land that they were promised by God. In both of these passages the Israelites are given instructions about what they should value in this new land that they have been led to by God.

As we read this passage I invite you to pay attention to who is to receive these instructions. The recipients in this passage are the same ones who are the recipients in the first passage that we read.

### **Read Joshua 4:1-7**

In this passage from Joshua, the Israelites select new leaders and then these leaders are told to select 12 stones from the River Jordan. These 12 stones are to represent where they come from and how God has been faithful to them in their past. And who are the leaders told that they are to remind about the faithfulness of God? They are told that they need to teach this to the children.

In the first passage that we read from Deuteronomy today, the Israelites were reminded as they entered the Promised Land that they were to teach these commandments from God to their children, and their grandchildren, and their great grandchildren. In both of these passages it is very clear that it is the responsibility of the elders to teach the next generation and the generation after that and the generation after that.

So how do we teach one another the stories of our past and the reassurance of God in the future? For many of us it starts with Sunday School.

Back in the late 1700s, Christian parents taught their children about the Christian faith in the home. That was the way it was done. That is what our ancestors believed was a biblical model. In the late 1700s, Sunday Schools were never intended for Christian children from Christian homes. Sunday Schools were created as a mission outreach for uneducated, unsupervised, rural and inner city kids whose parents were too drunk on Sundays to look after them.

Let me read to you the following quote from the late 1700s: “Farmers and other inhabitants of the towns and villages complained that they received more injury to their property on the Sabbath than on all the other days of the week; this, in a great measure, originated from the lawless state of the younger class, who are allowed to run wild on that day, free from every restraints.”

The first Sunday Schools started with reading lessons from 10 am to noon. Then the students were taken to a two hour worship service. After worship they were taught for three more hours before they were sent home at 5 pm. Some in the church opposed Sunday Schools because they feared that they might interfere with the divine sanction of family religious education. Others opposed Sunday Schools because they considered it breaking of the laws of the Sabbath concerning work.

Churches like ours built educational wings in the 1950s to meet the demand of the births of World War II babies. That is why this educational building over here was built. And it served its purpose. Some of you were the teachers who put forth your time and effort to teach the children and youth about the faith and the biblical stories.

And all of you that did this did a great job. It was into this model of Sunday School that I was raised in the church and where I learned the stories that sustain me today. I am eternally grateful for all of those teachers who helped children like me grow in the faith. I look out and see the Jacksons and the Covingtons and know that ya'll were these teachers which carried on the faith and taught the next generations.

There was something else that happened at the same time that these educational wings were being built in the 1950s. The 1950s saw the advancement of television. Our culture changed from a culture based on reading printed material to one where we took in information given to us by others via video. We became more a culture where fewer and fewer people controlled more and more of the information that was passed on and absorbed by others. This was the model that was used in Sunday Schools.

Many of us have been molded by the television age where we are receivers of information. But this all changed in 2005. What happened in 2005? 2005 was the year that teenagers in the US and much of the world started spending more time on the internet than on television.

For my generation, the television generation, we set aside certain times of the week to watch certain programs. You knew when to watch Gunsmoke, or Happy Days, or Sanford and Son, or Dallas, or the Cosby Show, or Miami Vice. If you wanted to get the evening news you turned on Walter Cronkite or Tom Brokaw at 6:30 pm. The 11:00 news gave you the sports scores or you could wait for the newspaper the next morning.

Compare that to today. The internet has changed the way we function as a culture. If I want to watch a particular program I watch it on my schedule. Kids and youth share videos with one another that they have found following their own web surfing. Kids go off to different rooms to watch videos and play games. Even if they are in the same room kids and adults are being entertained through different devices.

And we in the church have bought into this cultural norm of separating children, youth, and adults by age groups. We create Sunday School classes by age groups. Preschoolers go here, elementary kids go here, middle schoolers go here, senior high go here, young adults go here, older adults go here.

Even the hip new churches follow this same pattern. In the big box churches that all look alike to me, they have children's worship, youth worship, and adult worship all happening at the same time.

Sunday School attendance has been going down dramatically over the past 30 years. Our Sunday School is no exception. Sunday School is being replaced with soccer games, family trips, and other entertainment. Sunday schools are competing with the culture and Sunday Schools are losing.

But the church on Sunday morning is the one place where all of the generations can come together to learn together, worship together, and grow together. Studies have shown that when children and youth worship with other generations they are more likely to continue to be involved in a worshipping community when they grow older. Christian Education is most effective when it is done in the home.

So what does this mean for Allison Creek? There are two images which stick with me that I observed about a month ago that I think gives us a model of what our future can look like. The first image I witnessed came from up in that balcony. I watched as Quinn Mosbacher's parents were involved with taking care of his two sisters. Quinn is 6 years old.

Quinn was not alone in the balcony that day. Quinn was sitting with Emily Wallace who is not related to Quinn. Emily is a couple of generations older than Quinn, right? I watched as Quinn was very comfortable sitting with Emily and it was clear that he was learning something very important about faith formation from this woman that looked like his grandmother.

The other image I have is what happened the last time that Lois Pederson did the children's message. Lois asked the children at the front if any of them had lied. On that day 7 year old Kathryn McCarter was listening in even though she chose to remain in her seat. And since her mom is back in the nursery as our nursery coordinator, Kathryn was sitting with David and Lorre Coone. I did not even know that those families knew each other.

When Lois asked her question about lying, Kathryn listened and then was incensed that no adults raised our hands. She assumed that Lois was asking all of us this question about lying and she was mad that not one of us was being honest about our own lying. And she let us know it too. Kathryn saw herself as a part of worship here as much as anyone else where kids and adults are all in this together.

It was these two images that I took with me to Colorado last week. I went to Colorado for a conference. This conference was all about how to create space in the church where all of the generations worship together and learn from one another. The bringing together of the "wonder of the child with the wisdom of the elder. The wonder of the child with the wisdom of the elder."

And I found myself thinking about the journey that we have been on here at Allison Creek and how this conference put into words what already has been happening here. We are a place where all are welcome and that includes all generations. But we have never really named it. Last week I felt that I was provided the language to describe what God has been about doing here.

So today I am going to invite us into an experiment. An experiment where we affirm that we are called to create worship that is inviting and engaging for all ages and where all ages learn together. Where we intentionally move away from a model of adult worship where kids are invited to sit through towards a model where all ages truly feel a part.

A model where we no longer offer age segregated Sunday School but where we learn about the faith together in worship. A model where Christian education is rooted once again in the home. Don't worry. If adults want to have classes and study groups that is great. Nothing will change concerning those classes and groups. And there are people here who are committed to expanding these opportunities.

Today we are having lunch after worship. Everyone is invited to stay. We are going to be invited to sit around tables and share ideas about how to make each part of worship more inviting and engaging for all ages. We are also going to be exposed to a simple and easy to follow model where we learn to teach ourselves and our families in the home about faith in God.

I found myself very excited when I was in Colorado. I found myself feeling so blessed to be a part of a congregation that is willing to experiment and take some chances and see what happens.

Let's gather some different generations together and begin to create together what God has already begun in us. AMEN.

+++++

-Melheim, Rich, *Let's Kill Sunday School (and Birth Cross+Gen Ministries)*, Faith Inkubators, Stillwater, MN, Vol. 1 & 2.

Given: October 16, 2016 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)