

Diane Willkens: Shoes

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Shoes

Good morning.

I want to talk about Seekers as a community intentionally drawn to and inclusive of children. (I will use the words children, kids and youth interchangeably.)

For those of you who share with me a lot of passion around the kids, I hope that you'll hear my words as refreshing, recommitting and inviting of new ways to respond to the call I issue.

For those of you who may be thinking "Hey, Wait a minute. Are we doing kids again?? I thought we did the "kids" last week?" ... stay with me here. I need you to listen and respond, Seekers needs you, and the children of Seekers' community need you.

As a preface, I'd like to share with you a story of my childhood that feels very important for today.

When I was 15, the summer before my senior year in high school, my family moved from the town I had grown up in to a much larger town in another state. It was a very lonely time for me, even in the midst of a large family.

Shortly after our move, I had several chances to play golf with and get to know a friend of my parents, a wonderful man named Bill Cahill. He was a big guy maybe 6' 5, and a busy guy. He had his own family of eight, held an executive position at Corning, and was very active in his church. Yet, he found the time to talk to me and took the time to pay

special attention to me. To me.

I once asked him why he chose me...

He said it was because I was the pick of the litter. Well, with a litter of five sisters in my family, it was the first time anyone had singled me out as special.

I remember feeling very cared for, very connected (and a little gloating, privately, of course). Over the years, he talked to me about how things were going with me, asked what I thought, kept up with me. We looked forward to talking with each other when I came home for visits during college and law school. I was always the pick of the litter in his eyes.

Bill Cahill died 8 or nine years ago from an odd leukemia after knee replacement surgery. Fortunately, my folks called to tell me that he was very critical. I had a chance to call and talk with him in the hospital to let him know that he mattered to me. And, even in the midst of his own family gathered to be with him, I still felt our special communion of 15 years.

I often remember how it felt to be sought out and related to as a person. To have someone, not my parents or partner, think I was the pick of the litter. I have had Bill Cahill on my mind since I asked to preach today about Seekers children. And, I hold him in my heart.

This is a bit of where I come from to you this morning.

Of the four or five times I have volunteered to deliver the message, this time has been, by far, the hardest for me to prepare. Maybe it is because the other times I've either shared my journey with you, or invited you into a way of thinking about choice, like moving through gray into the color.

This time though it feels like more is at stake. This time I

am going to ask for something from each of you. And, I don't know what your answer will be.

So, I will practice what I've preached and jump into the color of the unknown.

Let me start with my askings first. I have three things to ask of you.

First, I ask that we all stand in the shoes of our children, try to see the world from their eyes, and imagine what the world might be like for them, what it might be like to be them.

Second, with that perspective, I ask and encourage each of us to involve ourselves personally with Seekers children. There are some traditional ways to do so, such as teaching Sunday School. But I really want to emphasize some other different and equally important ways of being there for and with our children in community.

Third, I ask you to jump into a richer community with the kids NOW. Each of the Seekers children are incredible gifts for all of us to receive and share. There is a lot of fun, tenderness, wisdom, energy and richness that comes from being with the children. They need and deserve each of us now. And we need and deserve each of them.

So, let's all close our eyes, count to ten, (one, two, three, four, . . .)

Ready or not, here we come:

First:

In order to talk about Seekers' children, I thought it might be especially helpful to put ourselves in their shoes for a time. You should each be holding a child's shoe. These are the shoes of our children.

Maybe, you remember what life was like for you when you last wore shoes the size you are holding. Maybe the shoe walks you back in time to a place or a time you remember –

- high school
- junior high
- first communion
- third grade
- kindergarten

Can you imagine the child standing in the shoe you are holding?

What does the world look like from her eyes?

Are his parents divorced? Does he live between two homes? What is that like? What is his favorite rock band?

Is she enjoying school? What is her favorite subject? What does she like most about Tuesday's?

Does he have many friends? What do they like to do together? How does he keep those pants from falling down? What hair color will he try tomorrow?

What are her favorite sports? Is she on varsity this year? Is she hoping to get a scholarship to college?

Imagine this child getting ready for Seekers this morning. Putting the shoes on, being driven to church, getting out of the car and walking up the steps to church.

What was it like for this child in the circle this morning?

Did they sit in the circle?

Or were they on the fringe, maybe on the stairs, or even further outside?

Who said hello to them by name when they came in?

Did anyone tell them that they'd missed them over the summer

and asked how school year was starting?

What does the rest of the morning hold as this child walks in these shoes.

What will happen in Sunday School that really speaks to the child whose shoes you stand in?

Afterward Sunday School, will anyone seek out and touch the soul of the child you hold?

Will anyone pick this child out of the litter?

Will this child leave Seekers with the same feeling of belonging and community that many of us adults take home each Sunday?

This shoe has a lot of stories to tell – it can talk, if we are willing to listen.

As we leave here today and go about our lives, I encourage us to stand in the shoes of the Seekers children whose paths we cross. Pause and see the world from their eyes. Then, relate to their vision. Let them receive you on their ground.

If you find some hesitation from the child standing in these shoes, hang in there. Keep focusing on seeing from their perspective and over time, sometimes a while, you will find yourself embraced in community with this child. And you will find that you each understand the walks you walk, and the talks you talk.

Nos. 2 and 3: This is a two-parter: I ask each of you for a commitment to the children and I ask that you commit now, or at least sooner.

Believe it or not, I'm not going to tell you that Brenda is passing the Sunday School sign up sheet. We have fewer children in Seekers than in years past, and because of their ages, we only have four classes, including Andrew and the

nursery. As a result, and because of the way the classes are being coordinated, only some of my asking is about Sunday School.

Concerning Sunday School, Kate and Molly are the coordinators for the two older classes. Please talk to either of them about your interest in being in community with the children in those classes. They need your help and your energy.

On the younger side, Andrew will be in an awkward place after Julia goes "down under" at the end of the month. Andrew will be between the three-year olds and the next class with Marion and Lauren, John, Michael, Tobin, Elizabeth and Jessica. Several people are trying to sort out what to do so that Andrew grows spiritually and in a way that encourages community for him also. Meanwhile, the three-year olds, namely Covey and Nathaniel, will start to have small lessons each week – they welcome your attentions.

With those mentions, Sunday School is underway this year.

So, I am not standing here asking you for Sunday School sign-ups. Which may make what I am about to say more challenging to respond to. Because there is no physical sign-up sheet, accountability and responsibility lies within.

You see, most of my asking is about a recommitment to community with the children which extends beyond and complements what happens in Sunday School. Sunday School is the starting, not the end, point.

We need your imagination, volunteer time, conscious involvement, and commitment to building a Seekers community which nurtures, listens to, and draws on its children.

What does that mean for your commitment if not Sunday School teaching?? As Miss Frizzle says on the Magic School Bus "**It's time to get messy, make mistakes**"! For those of you who don't know the Magic School Bus, it is a PBS cartoon about

experimenting, exploration, and discovery and science. And the rallying cry is "get messy, make mistakes"

As I describe my thoughts about what this commitment could mean and how it could be expressed, let me say that I feel some sense of urgency. I am afraid that without the minimal discipline of Sunday School sign-up for each of us, we risk letting this active commitment to the children and youth of our community slide. That is why I am asking each of you to jump in now.

Here we are then, at a cross-roads of imagination, energy, commitment, practicality and the Call of Seekers Church.

Let's start with the Seekers call. It says:

Seekers is committed to participation by persons of all ages. We see children, youth and adults of all ages as valuable and valued parts of our community, and desire their inclusion in our care, our ministry, and our life together.

Okay, dilemma. You've been asked to volunteer and commit to the children. You'd like to. But how? But where? But when? If not the typically Sunday School way:

Here are some suggestions for us to Get messy and make mistakes:

- I encourage each mission group to discuss their call as it relates to Seekers children. Discuss how your mission group might create opportunity, time, and ways to engage, inform and even include the children and youth directly with your group and the group's mission. "Get messy, make mistakes"
- I know there is a Journeying with Children mission group, but the call of Seekers church extends to each of us. And yes, it does take a village, not one mission group, to raise the children of this community.
- For those of you who are not in a mission group, talk

about what you might be interested in doing with the children. Tell one of the members of the Journeying with Children, or Brenda, or me, or one of the class coordinators. Talk about your inklings, nurture your own sense of what an adventure could be with the kids. And, if you would love to be asked, just say the special pass word "Get messy. Make mistakes"

- If you are sitting there totally blank about what you might contribute, ask for help. Ask for a partner, or practice. Maybe there is an easy and gentle way to break you into the rhythm of the kids. If you've been out of regular touch with the kids, it can be pretty hard. But my hope is that by standing in their shoes, you'll appreciate the world can be an intimidating place for both of you. Come on in – "Get messy. Make mistakes"
- We have an overnight coming up. There is lots of space, creative spaces, and very eager kids. This can be a great chance to have fun, really play, and bond in ways that Sundays don't often allow. For example, maybe there is a willing chef interested to take some budding talents and whip up a special dessert for the group. Maybe its a team game of hide and seek...what do you think?? "Get messy – make mistakes"
- Preaching – let's invite interested youth to deliver the word on Sunday. Their spirituality is as sacred as yours and mine and I would welcome a community-wide opportunity for expression. "Let's get messy. Make mistakes."
- Class retreats – last year during a Sunday School session with Samantha, Lylan, April, Chris, Mark, Daniel, Jennifer, and Rebecca, the kids asked for a retreat of their own. This is a group with the amazing mission of help the homeless, high energy, artistic and athletic talents galore, and kids who love to be needed. so, let's need them. "Get messy. Make mistakes."
- Maybe there is a special project you have, something you want to learn that one of the children knows. Mary Carol

reminded me a couple years ago about kids needing to be needed. Ask them to teach you. Solomon and Jonathan came over to my house one Saturday night almost two years ago to teach me about the internet. Being student, and being the one asking questions for a change is a great leveler. "Get messy. Make mistakes."

If I haven't touched a nerve yet, I encourage you to come in time for the circle on Sunday mornings. You'll hear about what kids are in what plays, concerts, tournaments, etc. Then you can go and watch and cheer. Or call on the phone and wish good luck, then follow-up with how it went. "Get messy. Make mistakes"

And, if you come early enough to circle, you can also observe what children stand outside the circle. Who is wearing the shoes that need a little extra needing.

You know, we have a number of children and youth to whom Sunday School per se is neither interesting, nor relevant, nor otherwise engaging. Yet, these kids come to church, sometimes to the overnights, sometimes to other functions. They are sensitive, giving, and loving kids – perhaps hoping for more than we may be wanting to see.

I feel a sense of obligation, challenge, and a lot of empathy for these kids. I know they have much to offer all of us, and it's up to us to provide a way for the relationship to grow. I know we as a community are creative, perceptive, and interested enough to find a way to hold these kids that may not fit in the easy mold.

Take another close look at the shoe you're holding. They've carried a lot of energy, fun, emotions, excitement, learning, adventure, discipline, potential, fear, faith, sweat, and a whole lot of love.

Recommitment to our children starts with each one of us, one shoe, one step at a time. How do you respond to my questions?

In whatever ways you decide to offer yourself in community with Seekers children, you will be welcome. And in case you need it, you might like to know that these shoes come with a money back guarantee. You will receive much more than you give and in ways you never anticipated, or your money back.