

# Paul Holmes: Christ for Kids

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## Christ for Kids

Good Morning.

For a number of reasons, I've been a bit anxious about preaching this sermon, but having had a root canal on Monday, I should be able to handle this.

Today is Valentine's Day, Transfiguration Sunday, and the last Sunday of Epiphany, during which our theme has been "In the Shadow of God." A strange mix: valentines, shadows and transfiguration. It's what they have in common that I'd like to talk about this morning: children.

I've always been a bit puzzled by the Transfiguration. The descriptions in Matthew, Mark and Luke are all remarkably similar. Jesus drags Peter, James and John to the top of a **high** mountain where they witness an incredible, spectacular and metaphysical experience. Then Jesus asks the three not to tell anyone about what happened. What a secret to have to keep!

Why did God and Jesus do this? By this time, Jesus was well into his ministry. His disciples had already seen him heal the sick, calm storms and feed the five thousand. Jesus' special gifts and relationship to God must have been obvious to these three most trusted disciples. Yet the Transfiguration appears to be something that God and Jesus cooked up together, with just the right audience and setting in mind. It was impressively staged, complete with dazzling light and booming sound.

I think the Transfiguration was a surprise spiritual pep rally – a pep rally for those three disciples whose faith would be sorely tested not only in the days leading up to the cross, but in the years of their ministry following Jesus' death and resurrection. The scriptures say, "Jesus was completely changed, there, in front of his disciples." And so there could be no mistake, God bellowed, "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased. Listen to what he says."

Like a corporate President strongly endorsing the Executive Vice President, the disciples could have had little question as to God's opinion about Jesus. "He's my Man! Pay attention to him!"

I also see the Transfiguration as a metaphor for the spiritual growth, transformation and ministry that God expects of us. As God said about Jesus, God wants to say about all of us, "These are my beloved children in whom I am well pleased. Listen to them."

So listen up!

A couple of weeks ago, I was helping the kids brush their teeth one night. While squeezing some disgusting Tweety Bird toothpaste onto his toothbrush, Andrew looked me in the eye and asked, "Dad, could you please get us some Christ for Kids?" That stopped me in my tracks. "Excuse me?" I responded. And he repeated, "Could you please get us some Christ for Kids?" I soon learned that what he really wanted was **Crest** for Kids, but the point had been made. Few Christian ministries are more critical. It seems to me, that's what Sunday School is all about: Christ for Kids.

Kids are fascinated by God, and hunger for God. In fact, from my experience, it frequently seems that a more God-like transfiguration, might have us adults becoming more like children. Nevertheless, this morning I am advocating that Seekers give more attention to its ministry to children, to

promote the spiritual transfiguration of those children, and to assure Seekers own continued ministry.

Traditionally, the Church of the Savior has been a church of and for adults. During the era of the New Lands, and led by many in this room, Seekers courageously broke with C of S tradition to offer more space for adults with children, and for children themselves. This priority is contained in the Seekers [commitment statement](#), which reads:

*"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."*

I believe that Seekers has a lot to offer families and children. Think of the attention and visibility Seekers children get at every worship service and community activity. Seekers kids live within this faith community as comfortably as they live at home. As a parent, it's sometimes embarrassing to me, but I value the comfort they feel. A couple of months ago, I wrote [a blurb](#) that was intended to encourage families or kids surfing the internet to give Seekers a closer look. In part it reads:

*"Seekers welcomes children, youth and families to share in the caring and spiritual growth that the community offers. We're multi-generational and value the different gifts and challenges that God gives us at different ages... Seekers is small enough to know each child. We care about the development of their spirits, minds and bodies."*

*"Our Sunday School is only one part of the Christian learning experience. Its goal is to provide children and youth with biblical basics, to encourage them to explore and discuss their own relationships with God, Jesus and the world around them, and to see themselves as integral parts of a Christian community."*

I truly believe that Seekers children are fully integrated into our community. But is that enough? Other than accepting children into our community life, what are our other obligations towards them? I believe that the Transfiguration calls us all to Christian ministry. This morning, I'd like to challenge Seekers with the question: "Are we focusing a fair and reasonable share of our energy and ministry on Seekers children?"

There can be little doubt but that children of Washington and children of the world are high individual and corporate priorities for Seekers. A lot of individual Seekers work on issues of children's advocacy and health, child abuse, family counseling, and making education more effective. As a community, we have generously supported FLOC, Hope and a Home, Gary and Abigail, in their care of disabled children, and a variety of children's programs overseas. My question relates to what we are doing for the religious education of Seekers children.

In asking that question, I am grateful that children were a major part of the vision of those who started Seekers, and for how far Seekers already has moved from other C of S communities in regard to children. I appreciate the significant gifts of time and effort given by the people leading Sunday School, nursery and Christian Growth classes, family friendly activities at overnights, occasional work parties, and recent inclusion of older children into the School of Christian Living. Again, I also recognize the value of the intimate relationships Seekers kids develop with the adult community. Nevertheless, my question still stands, "Are we focusing a fair and reasonable share of our energy and ministry on Seekers children?"

I'd posit that we could do better. For example, several years ago, approximately 10 adults were teaching Sunday School at any one time. Today, with the single combined class plus nursery, less than half as many teach. And it's still a

struggle to find teachers. Another hint that we could do better, is the predictable regularity with which older Seekers children lose interest. That's undoubtedly true with many teenagers in most churches, and Seekers will never have the huge youth groups and gymnasiums of many churches. But I think we need to work harder to keep our older kids engaged.

As another example of where we might do better, let's talk money and budgets. If we include Hope and a Hope and our other giving that benefits children, I estimate that approximately 22% of the total Seekers' budget is focused on children. Not bad! On the other hand, Seekers' support to Sunday School and Christian Growth classes accounts for only 1.3% of the budget. If we make some broad assumptions regarding community passions and allocate a percentage of space and operational expenses to children, that portion of the Seekers' budget targeted at Seekers children still would not exceed 5-6 % of the budget.

Transfiguration, transformation, change. In many ways, we are a community that thrives on change. We like diversity in our music and language, in our worship and in our preaching. Most of us support racial diversity and lead event-filled lives. We're also a community that has changed dramatically over the years.

Historically, Seekers has attracted and welcomed people in transition. I for example, came 16 years ago, while in the throws of a broken marriage. Over that period, many have come, committed ardently for a few years, and moved on, as the Commitment Statement says, "to another expression of faith and Christ's ministry."

That demographic transfiguration continues. Five short years from now in 2004, 20 percent of us will be over 65 years of age, nearly two-thirds of us will be fifty or older, and there will be only nine (let me repeat that – nine) children under 18 years. I am reminded of a visit I had several years ago with Sarah, one of the last two Shaker sisters in Canterbury,

NH. Now, unlike the Shakers, certainly new people will come to Seekers and new members will join. Nevertheless, I believe these numbers reflect a serious challenge to the viability of Seekers as a whole and to Seekers Sunday school in particular.

In addition, just think of what kids teach us all about God and life. A Sunday School teacher was telling her class about Noah and his adventures in the ark. "So do you think Noah did a lot of fishing?" the teacher asked. "How could he, answered one bright girl, "with only two worms?"

Or these questions and statements from children:

- Norma asked, "God, did you mean for the giraffe to look like that or was it an accident?"
- Jane asked, "God, instead of letting people die and having to make new ones, why don't you just keep the ones you have?"
- Joyce said, "God, thank you for the baby brother, but what I prayed for was a puppy."
- And Eugene said, "God, I didn't think orange went with purple until I saw the sunset you made on Tuesday. That was cool."

Children bring energy, levity, perspective, wisdom, skepticism, and candor, without which we are poorer as a community.

What is enough? What is an appropriate balance of kid-focused energy and resources? I'm not sure that there are clear guidelines. But biased though I am, I do believe that neither I as a parent, nor Seekers as our faith community, is doing enough. What could we do? What could you do? Let me throw out a few specific challenges:

- Let's be really intentional and vigilant about the commitment we have already made to make worship on the first Sunday of each month inclusive of children, including instructional communion, more participation by

youth, and sermons of interest to youth.

- Let's encourage parents to make Sunday School a priority rather than an option.
- Let's assure that whatever space Seekers ultimately selects is friendly to children and families, including ready access to green space, space where noise can be celebrated, and input by youth into furnishings and decorations.
- Let's continue to welcome older children and youth to participate in classes in the School of Christian Living. And how about designing special School of Christian Living classes for kids, and pitching it at them?
- Let's declare a Seekers year of the child or (echoing President Clinton or Governor Glendening) – launch a Seekers religious education initiative.
- Let's set aside 10% of the Seekers budget for Sunday School and youth work. Subsidize kids' trips to retreats, youth conferences, work camps and service projects.
- Let's urge the leadership team to devote 25% of their time to children and youth affairs.
- And bordering on the really radical for Seekers, let's get evangelical – invite families to church. We could have a visitors Sunday, or a three-month recruitment drive.
- Most importantly, let's recognize that the Christian education of our children is the responsibility of us all. Leadership is essential, but the education of Seekers children can't be left to a coordinator, or delegated only to a mission group. I believe that each of us has to search within ourselves as to what our roles will be.

Christ for Kids. This is only a partial list. But, if we were to take these, or comparable actions, Seekers would indeed experience a transfiguration. I believe we must make the

effort. We have to make the effort because it is right for our children and because it is good for our community. We can't guarantee the results, but I am confident that God will look upon our efforts and upon us and say, "These are my beloved Children, in whom I am well pleased."

Amen.