

Today we dedicated children as part of our beloved community. I would like us to think deeply today, about just what this means as these families start and continue their journey of parenting. What this means for the child, for the parents, and for our entire community. Raising a child is sort of like the tag line from the show Star Trek – “going to a place where no person has gone before”. As parents there is a sense of wonder and innocence, the child’s first words, first steps, when they smile at you after you make a goofy face at them.....and then a dose of reality and a loss of innocence for the adult and the child....changing diapers, the first time they fall, the constant waking up at three in the morning.... there is the balance between protection and fostering independence. of holding back, and a letting go.... always on guard, trying to keep them from danger, but also a desire for them explore and to create, as well There is a time for teaching, how to read, how to play, and speaking as the parent of young adults, a dream that maybe even one day they will learn how to balance a check book or do a budget...and then a time for learning....how often we find out about ourselves when raising our children.....when a child asks us an innocent question about why you are doing something it forces us to become self reflective and consciously think about our actions.....they are watching, observing, mimicking, so we have to ask yourself, what do we want our children to mimic....and even if you are not parents, other peoples children in our community are seeing how you act....and so let us be conscious about what words we say and how we say those words to our children, and to each other that our children witness. When I was young my mother would curse like a banshee. However after she would curse she would say, “pardon my French”. So I grew up thinking I spoke a foreign language. That was ok until a third grade geography class when we were discussing a Europe, and when we came to France, I raised my hand and assured them I spoke French. What happened next didn’t go over well.

This concept of “right speech” reminds me of the fourth of Five Buddhist Mindfulness Trainings which states: “Aware of the suffering caused by unmindful speech and the inability to listen to others, I am committed to cultivating loving speech and deep listening in order to bring joy and happiness to others and relieve others of their suffering. Knowing that words can create happiness or suffering, I am determined to speak truthfully, with words that inspire self confidence, joy, and hope. I will not spread news that I do not know to be certain and will not criticize or condemn things of which I am not sure. I will refrain from uttering words that can cause division or discord, or that can cause the family or the community to break. I am determined to make all efforts to reconcile and resolve all conflicts, however small.”

And right speech is not unique to Buddhism. It is part of all major religious traditions. In the Jewish scriptures, in Deuteronomy 6.7 – a passage that is the source of one of the most revered prayers in the Jewish language, the people are told to recite the holy words to their children and talk about them when you at home, and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. So I ask you to be conscious of what you say to and in front of the children and to each other, how you say it, and how often you say it. Love each other, forgive other, guide each other, heal each other....with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your might....let these thoughts be written upon your heart. Let your children hear your holy words, they need to hear your holy words. They may or may not be the holy words your parents used, they may or may not be the holy words from scriptures written thousands of years ago...they may be words like Love, Compassion, Grace, Freedom, Peace, Forgiveness, Truth, Justice, Spirit, I ask you to think about what words are holy to you? What words and values do you want to share with the children of this congregation, and as well children need to be able to create words that are holy to them that have meaning to them. Your children, Our children need to hear these words, need to see all of us as role models of how to live.

But ultimately, it is our goal to allow our children to grow to reach their full potential whatever that may be, to become the unique wonderful being that they were created to be. Let us remember that we do not know what that is....it is tempting to want them to be who we want them to be....but we must have the courage to allow them to be who they need to be....Letting their life unfold, to follow where their heart leads them, based on their skills, their potentials, their choices, their hopes, their passions, their dreams.....not ours. Children have a tremendous capacity within themselves and it is our responsibility as

parents and as part of this community to nurture their talents and dreams, to help draw those out from within themselves...to help them realize who they are and what they are capable of.

So what do we as a community have to do with this...how do we participate in this. There are some very practical things we can do to support each other. We can offer parents a night out once in a while and let them know their children are in safe hands. We are working towards a commitment to have childcare at congregational events, to make it easier for parents to attend events. Our Pastoral Care program has a team to support to families in times of emergencies. We can offer parenting classes and support groups. We can volunteer to work with religious education and expand our religious education programs. We will be starting a youth choir because we have two members who have committed to working with the youth on this. What happens here happens because you make it happen. But most importantly, we can be there to help support, guide, and be mentors to young people. We can make them feel welcome within our community, in our worship, in our lives.

Today we commemorated this sacred event of life, this sacred covenant to and with families, with a drop of water. Obviously there are parallels of this in many world religions. But I ask you to think about what makes this unique to our community. Water is the symbol of life. Approx 70% of the earth is covered with water, Over 60% of the human body is made up of water. I got those facts on the internet, so they be off bit from actual, but the point is it is a substantial percentage. Water is the beginning of life, from which life then grew on this planet. Water can be both sublime and powerful. Each droplet of water on its own is not powerful and evaporates, and I hear there is this thing called snowflakes. I haven't seen them yet but I have been assured I will see them, and each one of those is unique. Enough water together can power a hydro electric energy plant. We think of a river flowing freely and fluid but often rivers are defined by and define the land surrounding them and rivers then flow to the ocean, where each droplet of water is still separate but also becomes part of same oneness of the greater ocean. Children as well, are defined by and define the communities they live in. They are each unique individuals, and they become part of our community and all of humanity. With the droplet of water we honor that uniqueness, and the joining of that uniqueness to all of creation, and we honor life itself.

In Luke – Ch 18:verse 17 – Jesus says, “It is little children that heaven on earth belongs. Truly I tell you whoever does not experience the world as a little child, will never experience heaven on earth.” See how children looks at and experiences the world, always learning, laughing when they are happy, crying when they are hurt. Expressing their honest emotions and feelings, and when they learn to speak expressing their honest thoughts in words always genuine, until they are taught otherwise by life... now of course when they get older, sometimes those expressions come out as screams, yelling and defiance. Look at this and try and emulate that same genuine expression of thoughts and feelings. But with our years of experience, let us express them with a mindful reasoned dialogue. Too often I think children are told not to yell, told to be quiet, the message they receive is not to express their thoughts and feeling differently, but to deny their thoughts and feelings. You know when a child screams during the service, I don't take it as a sign that they dont like my sermon. We rarely have any idea why they crying. But that is the only way they know how to express themselves. That is why I don't mind babies crying during service. They are part of our community. And they need to be made, and their parents need to be made to feel that they are truly accepted into our community. And they should be welcomed and supported by all, because we who attend here together as members are covenanted with each other, to stand with each other and to love each other, even if a baby is crying, even if we don't always agree with each other, even if we don't always like what the minister says all the time. Because it is about we, not I, It is about how we agree to be together...it is about loving each other even through difficulties, and holding that love, that caring for others, in their joy and in their pain...for that is what families should do. That is what a loving beloved community does.

Eboo Patel is an American Born Muslim who spoke this week at Augustana College on Inter-Faith Leadership. I was moved by something he wrote in his book Acts of Faith at the beginning of his religious awakening about his lack of religious community. “What is community but a group of people who have some claim over you, and what is a tradition but a set of stories and principles and rules handed

down over hundreds or thousands of years that each new generation has to wrestle with? And talking to his then Jewish Girlfriend he states You have these principles you talk about, and this community that watches out for you, and even when it feels suffocating, at least you know they care for you. I have none of that. I just have some things that I'm interested in and a bunch of groups I come in and out of. But I could leave them at any time, and they wouldn't know I was gone?"

I try to remind people that we do have a long tradition, the tradition of religious freedom, that has existed since the time of the beginnings of humanity, that at times has been suppressed but always rises up, as it did during the times of Jesus and then Unitarianism formally in the 1500s during the protestant reformation. And we are blessed to live in a country that allows our religious freedom to continue to evolve as our understanding of the universe evolves, as our circumstances evolve. But the key to what he wrote is to know that you are cared for., that you will be missed if you are gone, but also that requires us to care for the others, for us to miss others when they are not here. We don't say you have to like everybody, but we do ask that you love everybody. I know that is not as easy as it sounds. But worthwhile things, like what we have here, like building a truly beloved community rarely is easy.

I know some of you have expressed to me in a mindful reasoned dialogue the question as to why we repeat the same opening words each week and give a litany of who is welcome here. And I assume if there are some of you who are asking this then there are others who are thinking it, and I want you to know why I do this. There are two reasons. The first is in the name that you will see on the order of service. I call it our affirmation. These are not creeds, no requirement for membership. But there is a power in naming who we are and what we stand for. A constant reminder, A constant touchstone to bring us back to the core of what brings us together and the community we truly hope to be. So that even when at times it may become suffocating, we are brought back to and lift up why we are a member of this community, why we have committed to and covenanted with each other. To repeat it so that it seeps in and becomes second nature to us.

A second reason is that each week we often have visitors who attend our services. That is a very hard thing to do for many people. They are coming from other religious backgrounds that did not fulfill their spiritual needs or have had no religious upbringing. It is hard to enter a new community. I think we do a wonderful job of welcoming new people, (and new people let us know if this true – be in dialogue with us about that)...but we also have to let new people know they are every bit as welcome into our community as those who have been here a long time. They need to know that their voice will be heard and listened to, that they will be cared for, that they will be loved, and in turn, we expect the same from them. For ours is not a passive religion that rests on laurels, or rests on its history. But a religion that looks forward, ever unfolding based on new experiences and new knowledge and how to deal with the world in its current context and culture, not a context and culture of over two thousand years ago.

And so it should be with our congregation. A sharing of wisdom from all, old and new. Based on our current context in our current culture, not one of a distant past. We have much to learn from each other. There are some of you who have been here forty, fifty years, who have raised children here, and there are many people who are newer here, some with partners, some single, some with children, some without. Some old, some young... All Souls are welcome here. All Souls are loved here. All Souls can be a part of our family.

For all parents, but particularly the parents, families and friends of the children who were dedicated here today, I want to share my personal joy for each of you, for the unknown and wonder you are experiencing and will continue to experience. Embrace it!! Celebrate it!! Enjoy every moment of it, Enjoy the journey and know we will journey with you. Know that you are part of our family as well. May it be so