

## **“SCHOOL DAZE,” A Sermon delivered by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas, St. Paul United Church of Christ, Taylor, September 20, 2020**

Congregation, this is a time of “School Daze.” On the one hand, kids are back to school. In that sense, these are “school days.” But in light of Covid-19 we are in more than a bit of a *daze* in terms of what’s happening and what’s to come. Some kids are heading into the classroom nearly every day or part of the week. Others kids are enrolled strictly at home online. However, that’s not even stable. Some of our kids will be heading into school at month’s end. Meanwhile, some schools that have pursued on-site learning are already canceling those plans and moving to remote learning instead. This has been the case with a number of area colleges and universities that young people of this church are attending, including my own alma mater, Michigan State University, as well as other colleges and universities.

I suspect that we are going to continue to see many changes and modifications for schools in the whole year ahead. Parents, teachers, school administrators, and students are between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand, we all want to remain safe and healthy. On the other hand, the on-site classroom experience is important too. Socialization with teachers and peers matters. It’s hard to replicate the full classroom and school experience through remote learning. Virtual experience remains virtual. It’s certainly a lot better than nothing. But it doesn’t have all the dimensions of the real, in-person experience. Then too, not to be forgotten, our schools supervise kids while parents are off at work. They also provide social services, which are especially important for some of our youngest children across Michigan and America. The breakfasts and lunches served at school are sometimes the only decent meals kids receive. Schools further assure some “at-risk” kids with a safe, structured setting where they can escape from the tensions and chaos of family and neighborhood life, which—sad to say—is not always beautiful. For these kids, school is a safe place where they can find friends and adults with encouraging words.

Some time back there was a poignant Pulitzer Prize-winning play about the tragic reality of some kids’ lives. Written by Paul Zindel, it was entitled *The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds*. The story is not as strange as the title suggests. It focuses on the story of a young girl who, against the backdrop of a troubled family upbringing, discovers that she has worth, value, and talent as she completes a science project on the effects of radiation on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds.

In my own life, I have known many actual kids whose lives have been uplifted by their everyday experiences simply attending school and church school. School and church relationships have helped them find purpose and meaning for their own lives, which is so important. Right here at St. Paul, I have met many church school alumni, now adults

elsewhere, who have come back here to savor a place that made such a great difference for them, particularly in face of tough or tragic family circumstances. Church school was a bulwark for their young lives—an anchor in the storm. As they have shared with me, they learned things through school and church school that has helped them navigate positively and constructively the rest of their lives. They found out that what may have started out bad or shaky in their young lives didn't doom them to an unhappy end. Thanks to Sunday School and those teaching Sunday after Sunday, these former young people discovered amid all the troubles of their young lives that those oft-spoken words "Jesus, loves you—and we do too" are not empty platitudes but sincere and a true fount of hope.

In the Bible so dear to us, we have the story of Jesus' own birth at Bethlehem and moments of his own early adolescence where his parents found him in earnest conversation with the wisest elders of the Great Jerusalem Temple. (*Luke 2: 27, 46*) From all indications, Jesus never forgot what it was like to be a kid. Where others preferred that children be seen and not heard, Jesus made clear to his apostles and disciples that no child should be shunted aside or kept from his company. He made clear that we have much to learn from the children in our midst. (*Matthew 19:14*) Their trusting innocence and faithfulness can and should be an example for us all, calling into judgment any cynicism and jadedness on our part as adults which takes us very far from the spirit of God's kingdom.

Moreover, as we all know, Jesus was very fierce and passionate about protecting the physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being and safety of our children. Should anyone harm any hair of the head of a child or cause a young boy or girl to stumble, it would he said, be better for the perpetrator "to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone around his neck and [be] drowned in the depths of the sea." (*Matthew 18:1-9; Mark 9:42; Luke 17:1-3*) God's punishment and retribution for such a crime will be so severe! This is an admonition and teaching right from Jesus Christ that should sear our own hearts.

One of my own great disappointments is that we have not been more responsible as a society at large in containing Covid-19 so that our children could return to more normal school and church school programs this fall. Frankly, our nation has not acted as if our kids and their well-being are our biggest priority—the most important consideration, trumping our own convenience, entertainment, and satisfaction. We have not mobilized all that well to ensure that they are *both* protected and educated. Shame on us! We are now reaping the consequences in all the confusion of this fall season.

Fortunately, even in the midst of our failures, God continues to reach out to us and provide resources so that we have a path forward. I do see a lot of last minute ingenuity and resourcefulness at work on the part of our schools and on the part of many parents.

Right here at church we are being resourceful too.

As much as I believe that real is better than virtual and on-site is better than remote, I am grateful for the technology we do have that allows our students to make connections beyond their own homes when there's a need to limit or restrict person-to-person contact. That same technology is also proving useful in on-site classrooms where and when students are physically gathered together. Where would we be right now without laptops and Chromebooks and computer tablets? We are blessed too to have a lot of teachers at school and church who are adapting to what's possible right now and doing their best with it on our children's behalf.

In recent weeks, we have been getting prepped to resume Sunday morning church school in ways to minimize any hazards. Yes, hand in hand with ingenuity go flexibility and adaptability whether we're working in on-site locations or through distance learning.

In the divine grace of things, if we're open and alert to it, God has a way of helping us compensate for deficits and limitations through other unexpected gains. Ironically, some kids may be gainers from the present Covid-19 crisis. Our present circumstances are compelling us more than ever to hang together as families and not take what we have so much for granted. Parents and children are spending more time in closer proximity with each other. Brothers and sisters too. Instead of engaging in all those outside activities that sometimes encourage more individualism than may be good for us, families are doing things together that affirm mutual bonds in ways not before seen—or at least not in recent years. In many cases, this is proving intergenerational as well with grandparents brought back into the household—or what we conceive our household to be. Parents and grandparents are also getting more involved in the home-based teaching of kids and grandkids. There's a valuable message in all this. As much as going to school can enrich our lives, we can and should learn at home as well. All those home-schooler families of recent years have shown how, in spite of a lot of difficulties and challenges for parents and kids alike, it can be done.

When I was growing up, my own parents believed in the importance of regular school and the classroom experience. But they never abdicated the responsibility of education to the schools. They were always home-schooling us also. In fact, I learned fractions through cooking in the kitchen with my mother with a measuring cup as a major instructional device. Likewise, summer yard work with my parents became the occasion for simple botany and geology lessons. I learned the difference between igneous and metamorphic rocks in my own backyard. Later, when my parents took us on trips out to California to see my dad's family, we stopped at various locales that were historical. We picked up a lot of history that way. Additionally, in the car on supposed vacation, during my Middle School years, my dad had us reading aloud chapters from *Great Men of*

*Mathematics*. He would even quiz us about what we had read. To be honest, I hated all that reading aloud back then. But I am so grateful and appreciative for it now.

In similar ways, both my parents used to talk with us about Christian values that were essential for a truly good life—honesty, integrity, duty, humility, and kindness. Often this was in the context of the news reporting on both the good and bad behavior of men and women in public life. It was part of our moral education, which went hand-in-hand with what we were learning in Sunday School at church.

Our two-career households which prevail today make this Covid-19 time especially stressful. Parents are juggling jobs and kids at home more than ever. Yet parents can do these same kinds of things that my parents did with my brothers and me, using whatever knowledge and skillsets they have. Some of the simplest household chores can be lesson times too. When was the last time that you had your child or grandchild read the ingredient label on a box of food or a cleaning solvent, adding to their vocabulary and giving them a simple chemistry lesson?

Just talking with children and really listening to what they're saying when we're more home together than ever can also make a world of difference for them. When polled in the recent past a lot of kids in America felt that their parents hardly talk with them at all. Yelling doesn't count! Another study found that one quarter of parents were spending no more than 34 minutes in uninterrupted time with their kids on any given day. This included sharing in an activity where there was genuine opportunity for back-and-forth conversation and emotional connection.

It's been claimed that kids lose a lot when they are out of the school classroom for the summer months. But deeper, more probing studies reveal that's only half-true. Kids passively parked for entertainment in front of a television or video screen all day for weeks on end *do* lose out. Quite literally, young brain cells aren't much ignited and stimulated this way. However, kids from more educationally conscientious homes where parents continue to encourage learning and engage their kids in conversation about family life, faith, and the world at large, don't lose ground at all—or at least not much. In fact, the time apart from the conventional school classroom gives kids from these families opportunities to learn and grow in more dynamic ways. What's true in summer months for kids with parents committed to their education and ongoing conversations can hold no less true this fall and winter ahead when regular classroom education is getting disrupted.

Although I would never have wished this pandemic upon us, let alone our kids, I think that if rightly guided by caring parents, grandparents, and other adults, young people can learn in a larger way from what we're all going through. For starters, our situation teaches that life is bigger than all of us. We can't control everything that happens. None

of us, adults or kids, are the center of the universe that we sometimes make ourselves out to be. Under these difficult circumstances, our kids and grandkids can learn from us that priorities matter. So does faith.

Yes, there are more important things in life than our own leisure, pleasure, and entertainment. Like our own good safety and the health and well-being of our extended family, friends, and neighbors. Rather than being selfish and self-centered, we need to look out for one another. That's a moral lesson that will stand our kids and grandkids well for the rest of their lives.

At the same time, how critical for our kids and grandkids to have thoughtful reassurance from us on several different fronts. First of all, they need to hear from us as the adults in the room and as their resident theologians that God is not visiting this Covid-19 pandemic upon us as some kind of intentional punishing plague. Secondly, they need to know that God's healing, redemptive grace is at work even now to help us tame this virus. As the Apostle Paul from deep personal insight so wonderfully declares: "[I]n all things God works for the good for those who love him." (*Romans 8:28*) Thirdly, they need to understand that, even as God has his part in bringing this pandemic to an end, we have a part to play too. Indeed, all of us—young and old alike--need to cooperate with God and one another to halt the virus in its tracks as we together employ the scientific and medical wisdom that God has made possible for everyone's benefit.

Our home and church school teaching of a positive theology and faith like this can make a huge difference for our kids and grandkids. Helping them face the present and future with less fear and more courage, it can spiritually equip them against any temptation to be depressed. Since in teaching we get taught, as we can help our kids we simultaneously help ourselves maintain a positive outlook on the future.

Thanks to a gracious God, human beings are made with an incredible resiliency. Neither we nor our children are as fragile as we sometimes think. If we add faith and love to the lives to our children, they can survive incredible things and go on to have wonderful lives.

Years ago, I remember coming across a film by the French director Francois Truffaut about children. It's called *Small Change* or, if more directly translated from the original French, *Pocket Change*. It's all about children's innate resiliency, which is truly a gift from our Creator God. In one scene a toddler has been left unguarded in a family apartment and climbs up on the window sill of their high-story apartment building, where he plays. Then before the horrified eyes of any audience, he actually falls out the window. Yet, miraculously, he bounces to safety in cushioning shrubs on the ground below. Of course, as we all know, it could have ended up very differently, very tragically. But Truffaut, who had a very challenged childhood of his own, wanted to show that kids can, figuratively speaking, be pretty bounceable in real life too, especially if they are loved and know it.

If you think about it, this is a very biblical message. Consider the baby Moses cast upon the waters of the River Nile. (*Exodus 2:1-10*) Or young Joseph sold into slavery by his own jealous brothers. (*Genesis 37:2*) And Jesus inadvertently left behind in Jerusalem by his own parents where, as a twelve year-old lad, he fended for himself on his own for several days. (*Luke 2:41-52*) Through God's grace they not only survive their adversity but do so without becoming jaundiced or hard-boiled. Instead, they all keep both a close relationship with God and have in their hearts a huge empathy and a deep well of compassion for other men and women.

Yes, our kids will survive this. They can even grow through it into better, more thoughtful and caring human beings. Yet, in the meantime, it's up to us to be thoughtful and caring in the ways that we protect, uphold, prepare, and equip them for this time and life ahead. May God truly and guide and help us as we do so. **Amen.**