



Sermon

At this point in time, it is probably safe to say that in Anna's* world, everything is about Anna. At 20 months old, she is the center of her universe, and that is exactly as it should be at this time in her life. What she knows best is her own needs, and all of her focus is on meeting those needs, usually in exactly the moment she's feeling those needs. Delayed gratification is not something she is capable of doing. She needs to touch her world, experience her world, and sometimes, to her parents' dismay, even chew on her world! Most important of all, she needs her parents' reassurance many times during the day.

Anyone who is a parent knows that at this age, your child is completely dependent on you, which is why a child dedication is often more for the parents than for the child. You need the support of your family and your community, you need as much as you can in your life that helps you reorient, refocus, strengthen and renew, so that you can be the parent your child needs and the parent you want to be.

I've heard many of you say over and over again that being a parent is one of the most rewarding and challenging things you've done. Not only are you helping your child develop their sense of self, your sense of self is going to transform. While Anna may have no ability to delay gratification, you are expected to delay your needs and your wants many times during the day often with no guarantee of when you will have time for yourself. This takes incredible strength, endurance, patience, and love.

Last fall, I planted two burning bushes in my front yard. We don't have burning bushes where I grew up and I have become entranced by their fall colours. What a fantastic way to die! So I bought two, planted them carefully, watered and mulched them, and hoped that they'd make it through the winter. As spring has come, I've been examining them every day to see how they're doing. And the news is good and bad. One of them is throwing out buds like crazy. But the other one isn't doing the greatest. There are buds, but they're coming on so slowly. And I've been wondering what's wrong? They come from the same greenhouse, planted the same time, and only ten feet apart. What's going on? And I think I may have figured it out. When the sun rises from behind my neighbor's house, its light hits one bush before the other. The one that gets more morning light is budding sooner than the one that gets less.

We want our children to be like the burning bush that catches as much of the sun's rays as possible. And who are we kidding, we want ourselves to be like the burning bush that gets more sunlight. Far too often it feels like we're in that place of shadow, waiting for the sun. We feel alone, disconnected, anxious, unsafe, worn down by worries and responsibilities. We need to be renewed.

Several years ago I did some basic training as a pastoral counselor, and one of the theories we learned was the theory of self psychology, developed by Heinz Kohut. Kohut believed that all human beings have three basic needs and much we experience life depends on how well those needs are met during childhood.

First, we have the need to be valued. As children we need to be shown by our parents or those who raise us that we are special, wonderful, and welcome. We need to be praised. "Oh, you're so good. You're my special child. I love you so much." Kohut called this mirroring, that we see ourselves in the way others see us. We learn our value by experiencing other people valuing us.

Second, we need what Kohut called an idealized parental image. As children, we need to be able to trust that at least one parent or caregiver is powerful, calm and confident. Whatever may happen, they can protect us and keep us safe. In this idealizing, we learn that the world is a safe and trustworthy place.



Third, we have the need to be like others. We need to know that we are like one of our parents or caregivers, that we are not too different, that we fit into this world. Kohut called this kinship. This where we learn that we belong and that there is a place for us.

Those are the three basic needs all of us have – the need to be valued, the need for safety, and the need for community.

When these needs are adequately met, note I said adequately not perfectly, when these needs are adequately met, we will mature into relatively healthy adults with a strong sense of self-esteem and purpose. We will be like that bush that gets the extra sunlight.

If those needs are not adequately met, we may struggle like the bush that works to open its buds. I think of the outsider who deliberately sabotages relationships and then says, "Should have known! I never belonged anyways." The drug addict who can't believe he deserves to be clean and keeps using because heh, he's not worth it anyways. I know a woman who struggles with issues of trust. She has great difficulty allowing herself to become vulnerable to her partner, so she never quite tells him everything; she's always holding something back. Not surprisingly, her partner has come to distrust her because he does not experience her trusting him. So she's recreated for herself a distrustful environment. It's become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Now just in case all you parents are getting uncomfortable, worrying that somehow you're not giving your child what they need (and I know you're doing it. I see the worry lines!), or if you're making a mental check list of all the ways your parents didn't give you what you need, it's important to know that there is one other really significant part of Kohut's understanding of the self. Our sense of self-worth is not dependent on us getting exactly what we want when we want it. In fact, there is a time when we need those we depend on to let us down.

There are going to be times that you are going to let down your kids. They're going to need something from you, and for whatever reason, you're not going to give it. Whether it's because you don't have the inner ability because of what your parents couldn't give you, or because you decide that it's in their best interests that you not give it, or because you simply didn't in that moment for whatever reason, you are going to let them down. We can probably all look at the relationships we have with our parents and those who raised us, and see clearly those times when they let us down. I know that if I sat down with all of the youth and asked you, what could your parents be doing better – you'd probably be able to write out a long list, right? The thing is though, this letting down doesn't have to be a problem. In fact, if you've received adequate amounts of valuing, idealizing, and kinship, it may in fact be the best thing for you.

Kohut says that these times of letting down are absolutely necessary. If everyone around us gave us perfect valuing, idealizing, and belonging – we would be the most selfish, self-centered, arrogant people around. We would get to think we were the center of the world all of our lives. Anna needs to feel like she is the center of the world right now because of how old she is. Her sense of self-esteem, her ability to trust, and to feel like she belongs depends on it. But if she stayed like that, in about fifteen years she would be a very difficult person to be around, because she would be incapable as an adult of giving that value, of providing that trust, and of offering someone a sense of belonging.

Something important happens when someone lets you down. In those moments, you have to find your own sense of inner value, your own sense of safety and security, and your own sense of belonging. If we can't give ourselves that, then we will be as vulnerable as a toddler all our lives. Now make no mistake, I'm not talking here about abuse and neglect or intentional and malicious acts of harm. That is a whole different matter. I'm talking about the every day kind of letting down. And I'm not saying that we have to do it all on our own. We are not islands and aren't meant to be. We do need each other all our lives. But we have to have that inner strength. Every time we



are let down, we have the opportunity to go inside and get stronger. All you as parents have to do is to give your children enough valuing, idealizing and belonging, so that when you and others let them down, they will be alright.

I want to ask every one of the youth to think about this question – Are you starting to get the sense that you are not at the center of your parents' life like you used to be? Maybe they're doing more things for themselves. Going out on the weekends. Hanging out with friends. Going on a date. Maybe asking you to make more decisions for yourself and take more responsibility for yourself. They're still there for you, still protecting you, but it's just a little different. I remember when I was a lot younger than I am now, my mom went through a difficult time in her life, and she wasn't there for me the way she used to be. And I found that really hard. Sometimes I felt abandoned. In fact, she had spent the better part of twenty years giving everything she had to her four kids. She desperately needed to give back to herself and so she couldn't give me what I was used to. But I somehow knew that she still loved me. She had given me enough valuing that I never lost faith that she loved me. That was never going to change, even as she changed. When I look back at it now, her need to figure some things out actually helped me grow up because I had to learn to do some things for myself and to find my value inside me. If everyone around us met our needs perfectly, we'd never have the chance to grow up.

Today is Palm Sunday, the day that a Rabbi named Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, and the crowds who had gathered for Passover hailed his arrival. They idealized him, saw him as their valiant savior. In the week that followed, he let them down because he was not the kind of savior they had imagined. He was an ordinary man with a radical message. Turn the other cheek. Love your neighbour as yourself. Forgive seventy-times seven. If someone asks for your coat give him your shirt as well. They wanted a hero and he gave them homework. And what happened when he failed to meet their need for idealization? Well first, Good Friday is what happened! Not an unusual first response when those we idealize become simply human. The rest of history has been about us growing up from that experience of being let down, growing up into the reality that our liberation is about responding with maturity and openness to the empty tombs in our lives. It is one way that we grow whole and experience the resurrection over and over and over again.

The meeting that is following this worship service, and I do ask all of our members and friends to please stay for that meeting, is an opportunity for us to respond with maturity and grace and trust to a set of unmet expectations. Not unlike many in these difficult economic times, we are experiencing a time of some emptying. Not unlike a parent of young children, we are being asked to draw on our reserves of strength, endurance, patience, and love. May we enter into this time with our hearts open, eyes ready to see, and hands extended in fellowship.

And may we continue to rejoice - rejoice for the blessing of all the children in our lives. Rejoice for the bushes that have all the light they need, pray for those who do not. May the Spirit of Unconditional and Unfailing love rise within us and live through us in times of abundance and scarcity.

Amen and blessed be.

* Anna was dedicated on the Sunday this sermon was presented.