

When I was in my late twenties, my mother said to me, “I worry about you kids so much more now than I did when you were little.” My brother and sister and I had long since passed the age of blithely warming basketballs in the microwave and daring each other to stick gum wrappers into electrical outlets. It seemed to me that our parents had raised us with good sense—that we were safe. When I asked my mother why she worried, she replied, “Because the trouble that you could get into now is so much bigger.”

I am not a mother. I am an aunt. I have watched my brother and my sister struggle with anxiety and grief as their children grow older. My sister agonized last summer over taking a job that would no longer allow her to drive her fourth-grade daughter to school each day. She envisioned bullies bouncing along the road in an orange, striped school bus, torturing her girl. “Eloise is an adventuress,” I said to my sister, to console her, and because it seemed obvious to me that Eloise would adore the camaraderie of mass transit. A few days into the school year, I got a text: “Ella loves the bus.”

One of my nephews quit college after his sophomore year and moved to L.A. to seek work as a dancer. I encouraged him in every way but packing his bags and buying his plane ticket. His parents were more measured, and more sad. How would he make money? Where would he live? To whom would he turn if something went wrong? When would they see him? Over and over again at family gatherings, I had to button my lip to keep from saying, “But have you seen him dance?”

It is easy for me to let go of other people’s children: I do not have the burden of responsibility for them. Parents are forever locked in an embrace with their children.

And that is beautiful. It is why we use the metaphor of parenthood to describe God's boundless love for us. But the perspective of human parents can be limited, because what is precious is very close to them. Dangers loom large, and possibilities for achievement and happiness seem minor in comparison to the risks a child might take to reach them. Parents can be blind to the glittering of their children's souls as they unfold.

Our Bible reading today was from a letter written by the apostle Paul to pagans who wondered if they had to practice Jewish laws in order to become Christians. In the passage, Paul reflects on how he had been an accomplished Judaic scholar at a young age. He was so fervent and faithful to the pious tradition of his family, that he took it upon himself to become what he calls a "persecutor" of "the church of God." To be plain: Paul was trying to get Jesus and his followers arrested and killed for being threats to the religious order. I say this with an awareness of its irony: he was a good man. He took his faith seriously. He cared about his society. He didn't question authority or his own beliefs. He did what was expected, courageously. His parents must have been proud of him.

And then, as we know, one day Paul was out bounty-hunting Christians on the road to Damascus when a light blinded him and a voice spoke to him, and he, himself, became a follower of Christ, a different, a peaceful man. For three years after that, Paul wandered around. He didn't consult with anyone, not even the other apostles. He sought no guidance but his own communion with the Divine. Not until he was secure in that did he visit Peter. And then he preached the good news, this man who had been a

murderer of Christians. People were amazed by his story. They converted to this new faith. Paul wrote most of the New Testament and founded Christian communities.

Imagine what his parents must have felt.

They had raised him with their love and good values, and he repaid them by spending years gallivanting aimlessly around the Holy Land, after which he took up work that contradicted their deeply held religious views.

I am thinking today about parents and children, as members of our congregation grow up, leave town, and begin to hear, in perhaps a louder and clearer way, what God intends for them. As Christians, we believe that all things come of God. Every child, like every thing in the universe, is utterly new, not just a product of his or her parents or environment, but an unprecedented and unrepeatable thing destined by God for a unique purpose. We can give the people whom we love food and shelter and the sense that, no matter what they do, our arms will be open to them. But we cannot tether them to ourselves or to our ideas. If we have faith in God, we have faith that our children will become what they are meant to become. And if we open ourselves to grace, we are able to see God in the person and the actions of our loved ones. Paul wrote that in God there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave nor free. He did not reject religion or his family. He wanted to share them, to make them much bigger.

A couple of months ago, I was talking with Joey Miller about his learning style.

“I don’t really like discussion,” he said.

I was surprised by this, because Joey is an interesting person with whom to have a discussion.

“What do you like?” I asked.

“Mmmm...projects,” he replied.

“What do you mean by projects? Give me an example,” I said.

“Well,” he replied, “like that time that we watched *Iron Man* and you told us how Tony Stark is like Paul.”

Lest this sermon sound, at this point, like unseemly vanity on my part, let me explain how this “project” went down. I had been working at the church for two weeks. I had held one class for high school students and had helped a few kids put on costumes at the Christmas pageant. I screened *Iron Man* upstairs for older kids one night during winter break while younger children and their parents watched a movie in Fellowship Hall. I didn’t know the names of half of the youth who showed up, and all we did was sit in the dark, watching the movie and eating popcorn. Before it was over, tired parents crowded into the classroom doorway, staring at the TV set and some congealed pizza, wanting to go home. So, over the music of the credits, I gave the kids a ninety-second explanation of how Tony Stark had had a conversion much like Paul’s. It was far from my most glorious hour of teaching. I was disappointed in myself for not planning better. I felt that I had failed.

And yet, such is the enormous power that one has as an adult in a young person’s world that Joey remembered it. Parents can rest in the knowledge that their lessons have, indeed, been received. But that is still not the power of God. It is God that leads children to become who they are, irrespective of how we might want to shape them. Our job is simply to delight in that.

Many of you know that my dog, Santiago, was diagnosed with heartworm this spring. Heartworm is a lose-lose: both the disease and the treatment can be fatal. After

a dog receives injections that kill the worms in his organs, the animal should neither run nor jump for months because to do so could cause a pulmonary embolism. For two days after Santi received the shots, when the worms first succumbed to the poison, he was terrifyingly still. His back muscles were so sore at the injection site that he yelped when he moved. He didn't eat. He slept.

On the third day, he awoke thumping his tail against his dog bed. He ate breakfast and went out to the yard to lay down in the grass, in the sunshine. When I had to leave home, I called him back inside, and he resisted. I hauled him over the threshold, worried that he was still in pain and incapacitated. When I unhooked his yard leash, he heard the click, backed out the door, and went running down the block. He was tired of lying around.

He ran past five houses and over a retaining wall to a four-way stop, with me chasing him in flip-flops, muttering curse words in my panic. I watched him run confusedly back and forth in the middle of the intersection on the way to his favorite park as two cars honked at him. A kindly man collared him when he crossed to the sidewalk.

When we got him home, I lay down with Santiago on his dog bed and cried, terrified that he would develop a blood clot and die. I cried and I prayed. I prayed out loud and in my head. And after a time, God said, "It's not about you."

"It's not about you." That is a difficult thing to hear when you think that what you are feeling is concern for someone else. But the love that we feel for others is often weighted with selfishness. The idea of losing someone can ignore the reality of the other person, of his or her purpose.

One of my friends texted me with admiration for Santiago's wildness, "You can't control him; you can only hope to contain him." "Santiago" translated into English is "Saint James": one of Jesus' first disciples, who left the fishing trade of his father to fish for souls, who saw Jesus bathed in light and heard God call him "son". A month ago, I asked our high school students what they thought about evangelizing, and a shudder ran through most of them. They felt that talking to other people about religion smelled too much of arrogance and oppression. But the good news is that each individual is an expression of God. We evangelize by going out into the world, being who we are.

May each of us find our way, as Paul did, in sacred safety, sure in the knowledge that God's plans for us are joyful and are always coming into being, just as they should.