

On this last day of Church School for this academic year at C&HT, the children of our church school and their teachers will gather in their classrooms for a special celebration before their summer break. In the 9:15 liturgy, we shall offer special thanks to our church school teachers for their steadfast ministry to these young people and their parents through this year. Besides our teachers, we lift up persons without whom we would have not had a church school program this year, nor middle school discussion group, nor Confirmation class. We are grateful for the ministries of Diane Greenhill, our volunteer church school coordinator, Colleen Yarusavage organizer and author of the curriculum for our 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> grade, and our 8<sup>th</sup> grade middle school discussion groups, and for Jeannie Bunce and Julie Mombello who shepherded the Confirmation class through this challenging and rewarding year in preparation for Confirmation at C&HT this Saturday. Along with Louise Kalemkerian preparing the adults who shall be received and Confirmed on Saturday, these persons, and their colleagues as discussion leaders and church school teachers have offered themselves and overflowing love to all the young people participating in our spiritual formation programs at C&HT. We are grateful and appreciative to each of them, and offer our heartfelt thanks.

Their ministry, one that we don't acknowledge enough as teacher/mentors to the youth of this congregation is the heart and soul of our lives as Christians. Seeds of hope and promises of joy offered children are the dreams and aspirations fulfilled in later lives—lives full of meaning incorporating (embodying) Jesus who guides us down life's rough and tough pathways. If life in and with Christ has vitality and meaning for us adults, why wouldn't we want our children to know our love and joy? For this reason we teach, share and offer to our children what we adults believe. We are asked to make a *sacrifice* for Christ's sake and for the sake of those who will come to taste, touch, see and know as we are known.

There is a remarkable story you all know well, a story affirming of why we teach and why we share our love of Christ in this community of faith. It is the story of Helen Keller. In her remarkable life there was a special moment of transformation—a moment which affirms much about our hopes and dreams as a community. Born a healthy, hearing, speaking child, Helen was stricken by a disease as an infant leaving her blind, deaf and unable to speak. Language, sight, and hearing gone, she withdrew from her family and the world and became isolated, bereft of human interaction and meaning. Bewildered by her withdrawal and anger, her family held onto Helen hoping for a miracle which came in the form of a teacher and companion they hired for Helen—Anne Sullivan. In the beginning and in spite of all Anne's efforts, Helen remained angry, fearful, terrified of a world that made no sense in any shape or form.

As she later recorded in her autobiography, Helen's experience of separateness was miraculously changed through an interaction with Anne. It became an inspiration for thousands of others like Helen who were deaf—called by the cruel expression of those days, “deaf and dumb”. Helen says:

*We walked down the path to the well-house...Someone was drawing water and my teacher placed my hand under the spout. As the cool stream gushed over one hand she spelled into the other the word water, first slowly, then rapidly. I stood still, my whole attention fixed upon the motions of her fingers. Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten—a thrill of returning thought; and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that “w-a-t-e-r” meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy, set it free! There were barriers still, it is true, but barriers that could in time be swept away....As we returned to the house every object which I touched seemed to quiver with life. That was because I saw everything with the strange, new sight that had come to me.*

Helen Keller's experience was truly a second birth, the very same that happened to Nicodemus when he asked Jesus, "Can a man be born again?" Yes! The word "water" had been lost; it was found; and in the recovery of this word known before her illness, life suddenly opened to Helen. No longer constricted by her physical disabilities, Helen could "see" another dimension of reality she had forgotten. It was a moment of insight, a breakthrough, a conversion. *That living word*, she wrote, *awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy, set it free.* And so it is and can be for us and our children—the *misty consciousness of something forgotten*, the ability to see and trust and know many of us lost a long time ago as children—the trust, the love, the grace of God in Christ Jesus.

The teachers of Christ & Holy Trinity's church school, though not in quite as dramatic fashion as Anne to Helen, are the connection in our children's lives to Christ demonstrating that "*living word that awakens their souls, giving them hope, light, and joy—setting them free.*" They are the ones who Sunday after Sunday are present with and for the children of this parish; showing, guiding, forgiving, supporting, loving our children that our children might make the connection to God and Jesus. In that communion with their teachers they are filled with that *living word of love setting them free.*

Jesus told stories to his disciples and to all who came trying to make sense of their lives. These stories have been gathered together—his teachings, illustrations and parables—in what we call the New Testament, the Good News, the Gospel of Hope, the Gospel of Love, the Gospel of Salvation. When our church school teachers guide our children in making connections with this Story it is as if they were drawing and naming the word "water" in the hands of our children. As if these stories are a cool, refreshing power flowing through them and around them—as Anne named the power flowing through Helen's hands—our church school teachers name the power of God's love that sets them free.

Such a demonstration appears in our first lesson in the Book of Acts this morning. This is the story of Philip, an apostle of Jesus, on the Jerusalem road who encounters an Ethiopian, the chief financial officer of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians. The Ethiopian has been to Jerusalem and the Temple and is now returning home. As he rests his horses, the Ethiopian uses the time to read the scriptures. At that moment Philip, guided by the Holy Spirit, approaches the Ethiopians' chariot asking: "*Do you understand what you are reading?*" And the Ethiopian responds, "*How can I, unless someone guides me?*"

Seizing the invitation, Philip climbs into the chariot and shares with him the story of Jesus. When Philip concludes, the two of them travel down the road together deep in communion and connection. They pass a body of water and the Ethiopian, on fire with the Spirit remembering Philip's story of Jesus' baptism in the River Jordan, asks, "*What is to prevent me from being baptized?*" Philip then baptizes the Ethiopian, a sign of this foreigner's awakened faith in Jesus.

The baptism of the foreigner who did not know Jesus and Anne's guiding Helen enabling Helen's awakening to awareness never before known becomes our model for Christian education. Patiently, expectantly, our church school teachers tell the stories of faith. As they tell the story of Jesus to our children, our children awaken to something never-before known and something long forgotten—love. We believe that in every person, especially children, dwells the spark of God. Our ministry, as that of our church school teachers is to fire that spark allowing, inviting the love of God come to life transforming our lives and the world in which we live. Let all of us feed this life with love and sacrifice.