

We keep hearing it—and many of us keep saying it: We are living in interesting times. And these next few months are shaping up to be intense and uncertain as well.

For the past several months, I have often felt exhausted and overwhelmed by the endless political drama. Part of what has overwhelmed me is watching people from the faith tradition I claim use Christian language to sanctify nationalism and political power. Using faith to harm.

This week someone shared the ways that people had tried to proselytize them on their college campus and “save” them, and how harmful those encounters have been.

My guess is many of us here have been as the saying goes “beaten over the head with a Bible”. That is to experience Christianity as controlling and coercive. As a means to dominate and instill fear. To silence questions, to sanctify power. To put an end to conversations because well the bible says it.

That posture appears in a movement known as the Seven Mountain Mandate, which teaches that Christians should seek dominion over seven spheres of society: religion, family, education, government, media, arts and entertainment, and business.

In that vision, Christian faithfulness means gaining enough influence to control the institutions that shape our common life.

In an effort to not be domineering, I often just want to hide my Christian affiliation.

This summer, I was spending time with some people from outside the United States whom I did not yet know very well. I found myself dreading the inevitable question: “What do you do?”

“Oh, I work for a nonprofit,” I said.

I did not want to tell them I was a pastor. I did not want them to make assumptions about me before they knew me.

I wonder if that response reflects something that has happened within many mainline and progressive Christian communities. In our desire not to participate in religious domination, we have sometimes chosen religious silence. We have withdrawn from public life or hidden the faith that animates our commitments. Or become less practiced at explaining why our faith leads us to care about the things we do.

As a result, many people do not know that another expression of Christianity exists.

But domination and disappearance are not our only choices. We can bring our faith into public life without wielding it as a weapon. We can hold deep convictions without coercing our neighbors. We can speak honestly about what grounds us while honoring people who believe differently.

So how do we show up? That is the question we will be asking over the next 4 weeks.

This series begins with a different vision of Christian participation. We do not enter the places that make up our shared life in order to conquer or control them. But neither do we abandon them. We show up to love our neighbors and seek the common good.

Through stories from the Gospel of Mark we will consider how our faith shapes the way we show up - I don't plan to do all 7 spheres of influence - but we will talk about how we show up in schools, in our families, at work / or the sphere of business, and in the public square.

The question is not whether our faith will shape how we show up. The question is how.

So today - given that we had a blessing of the back packs - we are going to talk about how we show up in schools, how we show up for education.

Blessing these backpacks is about more than asking God to accompany our children into their classrooms. It also asks what it means for us—as families, as a congregation, and as a wider community—to accompany them. What kind of educational communities will we help create? Which children are being welcomed, and which are encountering barriers? And are we willing not only to teach children, but also to listen to them?

Those questions bring us to today's story from Mark.

People are bringing children to Jesus, hoping that he will touch and bless them. But the disciples speak sternly to them and try to send them away. Perhaps they think they are protecting Jesus's time. Perhaps they assume he has more important people to see. Whatever their intentions, the people closest to Jesus become the ones preventing others from reaching him.

When Jesus sees what is happening, he is upset.

“Let the children come to me,” he says. “Do not stop them, for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.”

The disciples have treated the children as an interruption. Jesus places them at the center.

And Then Jesus goes one step further. He tells the adults that they must receive the kingdom as a child. The children are not merely people who need something from Jesus; they have something

to reveal about God's kingdom. Jesus takes them into his arms, lays his hands upon them, and blesses them.

Mark 10 does not give us a theory of education. It does, however, give us a posture toward children and learning. The disciples try to control access; Jesus makes room. The disciples assume that the children have come only to receive; Jesus says the adults must also learn from them.

And that tension—between controlling a space and making room within it—continues to shape Christian conversations about education today.

Education is about more than preparing children for employment. It helps people develop their gifts, seek truth, understand their neighbors, and participate in the world they share. It teaches children something about themselves: whether their minds matter, whether their questions are welcome, and whether their futures are worth investing in.

If we believe that every child bears sacred worth, then we must care.

But as we said earlier, Christians have not always entered this conversation with the posture of Jesus.

In conversations about education, the voice of religious domination often sounds like this:

“We need to put prayer back in the schools.”

“That is what is wrong with our schools—they are no longer Christian.”

“If we could post the Ten Commandments in every classroom, things would be better.”

Behind those statements is an assumption: that Christians can participate faithfully in education only if Christianity controls the educational environment.

If we cannot control it, another response is to withdraw from it—to remove our children and build explicitly Christian alternatives.

Now, to be clear, families choose private schools, religious schools, homeschooling, and other educational options for many thoughtful and legitimate reasons. I am not interested in judging the decisions individual families make for their children.

But domination and withdrawal are often presented as the only Christian responses to education: take control of the system or leave it behind.

And I understand the temptation to withdraw in another way—to enter conversations about equity, belonging, and public education without identifying the Christian faith that helps lead us there. Given the harm done in the name of Christianity, silence can feel safer.

But religious domination will not be overcome by religious silence. If we hide the faith that animates our commitments, we may leave our neighbors with the impression that controlling Christianity is the only Christianity there is.

So what would another way look like?

How might we participate without imposing our beliefs?

How might we speak from our faith without using it as a weapon?

How might we show up without attempting either to possess the classroom or abandon it?

What if faithful participation is not about forcing Christianity into education, but about allowing our Christian commitments to shape how we care about education?

Christian love widens the question. It asks not only, “What do I want for my child?”

It is Because I believe every person is of sacred worth, I care whether every child has the opportunity to learn and flourish.

It is Because I believe our salvation, our wholeness or lives are inextricably connected, I cannot separate my child’s future from the futures of the children around them.

And because I believe in God’s vision of *shalom*—a peace in which relationships are made whole and communities flourish together—I cannot be satisfied with a system in which some
And because Jesus teaches me to love my neighbor, every decision I make for my own child must remain connected to my responsibility for the children of my neighbors.

This is how faith enters the conversation—not as a demand that Christianity control education, but as a commitment to seek the flourishing of every child.

Public education does not always fulfill its promise. But it is the only social institution that is seeking the education of ALL children.¹

¹ <https://pastorsforncchildren.org/>

Embedded within public education is a conviction that people of faith should recognize: every child who arrives is entitled to be received. Every child should have access to learning. Every child's gifts are worth developing. Every child's future is worthy of our shared investment.

There are other educational options families can opt into. Public education carries a responsibility to the child who shows up.

The child whose family has abundant resources and the child whose family is struggling.

The child who learns easily and the child who needs additional support.

The child who speaks English at home and the child learning a new language.

The child who is Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, atheist, uncertain, or too young to have words for what they believe.

The child whose family looks like ours and the child whose life experiences are unfamiliar to us.

And that brings us back to Mark.

When the disciples control access to Jesus, he tells them, "Let the children come to me. Do not stop them."

Jesus does not tell the children to become easier to welcome. He tells the adults to stop standing in their way.

Churches and schools can say, "Everyone is welcome," while leaving untouched the barriers that prevent some people from participating and flourishing. An open door is not the same as equitable access. A seat in a classroom is not the same as belonging within it.

So when there is not room for every child, followers of Jesus should be among the people asking what stands in their way.

And let me be clear: families choose public schools, charter schools, private schools, religious schools, homeschooling, and other educational options for many thoughtful and legitimate reasons. This is not a judgment of the choices families make for their own children.

It is simply an insistence that our responsibility cannot end with our own children.

Christian love asks us to take what we want for the children closest to us—the opportunity to learn, to be safe, to be known, to discover their gifts, and to imagine a future—and work for those same things for every child.

We may make different choices for our own families. But what I want for my child, I must be willing to seek for all children.

So perhaps showing up for public education begins by taking its promise seriously—that There should be a place for every child.

not pretending that the promise has already been fulfilled, but helping our communities move closer to it:

And when there is not, followers of Jesus should be among the people asking what stands in their way.

PAUSE

This is where the challenge can begin to feel overwhelming.

It is one thing to say that every child deserves room to learn, belong, and flourish. It is another thing to look at unequal funding, teacher shortages, childhood poverty, inaccessible buildings, political conflict, and all the other forces shaping education and ask, “What am I supposed to do about any of that?”

The systems are large. Most of us cannot change them by ourselves.

But recognizing that we cannot do everything is not permission to do nothing.

This is stuff you all know. There probably isn’t anything new I’m saying today. What may be new, and may not, is bring this conversation into a sermon. Of taking something that is absolutely central to life in our society - education, - and asking what our faith has to do with it.

Because education is not separate from discipleship. How we regard children, whose gifts we nurture, which barriers we are willing to confront, and how we distribute our shared resources are all questions about what—and whom—we value.

And our response has to be more than, “Well, I try to be a nice person.” It has to be more than imagining that Christian witness in education means showing up with donuts and a Bible at the flagpole before school, hoping to convert someone.

There is nothing wrong with donuts. There is nothing wrong with students freely gathering to pray or study Scripture.

But following Jesus cannot mean merely being nice inside an unjust arrangement.

Jesus calls us to make room—and sometimes making room requires moving more than a chair. Sometimes it requires changing the way the room itself has been arranged.

That means people of faith must learn to act at more than one level.

Some of this work is relational.

Sometimes showing up is personal. It means listening to a child, encouraging a teacher, volunteering, tutoring, or offering our time and resources.

Sometimes it means asking harder questions about our schools, our communities, and the policies we support.

That means our faith may lead us beyond individual kindness and into more difficult questions about access, funding, staffing, discipline, disability, transportation, curriculum, school choice, and whose voices are included when decisions are made.

You may reach different conclusions than I do about how Christians should participate in education. Faithful people can disagree about particular policies, priorities, and strategies. I really do want us to have those conversations!

But I am becoming increasingly convinced that if our Christian faith has little effect on how we show up beyond the walls of the church, then something essential is missing.

Not showing up to dominate or — or because we think we possess all the answers, but because we arrive asking different questions:

Who has been welcomed?

Who is encountering barriers?

Who has been heard?

Who has been overlooked?

What do children need in order to flourish?

And what responsibility do we bear for one another?

We may not agree on every answer. But we can refuse both domination and disappearance. We can bring our faith into the conversation with humility.

FOR DISCUSSION:

Because of our faith....what do we believe about children? What do we believe about education?

What do we believe we owe one another? Does my responsibility end with the children in my home, or does love make me responsible for the children of my neighbors too?

What do we believe children deserve—not because they have earned it, not because of the family into which they were born, but simply because they are human beings made in the image of God?

And if we truly believe that every child possesses sacred worth and belongs within our circle of care, what might need to change in the way our community is arranged so that every child has a genuine opportunity to learn, belong, and flourish?