

AND A LITTLE CHILD SHALL LEAD THEM

5 DECEMBER 2004

Forgive me if I mention Christi, my new corgi, in each sermon for at least the next month. I found out this week that Ellie had an impact far beyond the borders of Bolton and that Christi is already having an impact. Saturday, a minister who received our newsletter left a message on my answering machine thanking me for my minister's message about Christi and God's grace. He was crying as he left the message. Thursday, I received a lovely email from the registrar of the Massachusetts Conference of the United Church of Christ. She told me that she had loved following Ellie's exploits in our church newsletter, and that when Ellie died, she cried as if she had lost her own dog. She rejoiced with me that I have Christi and said she was sure it was meant to be, and that God had something to do with it.

After a week with Christi, I think so, too. Oh yes, she has her puppy moments. Corgis herd cattle, you know, and I must bear some resemblance because as I walk around the parsonage, Christi tries to herd me --- by biting my ankles, exactly what she would do if I were a cow. And she does try to eat everything in sight, including my blue jeans, my shoes, the sheets on the bed, the computer cords, the telephone lines, the rugs, and a corner of my desk. After my shower, I open the curtain to discover that she has run off with the bath mat. As I was writing this sermon, she was gone from the study longer than she should be. I went looking for her and heard her running from room to room --- upstairs. I nabbed her just as she was trying to come down the stairs. She stepped down with her front legs first, and then let her back legs sort of fall from the higher stair tread --- not a good idea. If anyone has a child gate or two you're not using, give it to me!

But, half the time, she acts as if she has been my dog forever. When I'm working at the computer, she curls up at my feet. At bedtime, she claims a corner of the bed and one of my pillows and stays right there until I wake up.

Ellie, as you know, came to me fully grown and fully trained, with, usually, impeccable manners. I have never raised a puppy on my own, though, and, as I've said, it is hard work.

It is joyful work, though, and the part that has given me the most joy is introducing Kristi to things she has never encountered in the long months

she spent in a crate behind a window at the pet store. We've been to Bob Davis' orchard several times now. On our first visit, Christi was unsure what to do. She'd walk for twenty feet then stop and sit and look at me. She knows nothing about the outdoors. One windy night this week, she chased every leaf that blew across the back yard. I hold her up to a window and she is fascinated by the cars flying by on Main Street. She hears and responds to a host of sounds I'm so used to I don't hear them anymore --- the pinging of a radiator, the creaking of a floorboard, the click-clack of a computer keyboard.

And I am determined that she will not be frightened by this new world, but that she will instead take delight in it and find a sure and safe place in it. So I've gotten her used to the car, and taken her around to meet other dogs --- Christi and Father Fleming's golden retriever Reilly even exchanged kisses -- and when she seems mystified by an object, I get down on the floor and hold it so that she can examine it. Unlike Ellie, Christi pays no attention to the telephone or the teapot or the piano, but, unlike Ellie, she loves watching TV. She settles in next to me on the couch and each evening and doesn't take her eyes off the screen. She particularly enjoyed Mrs. Doubtfire, growled and barked at 102 Dalmations, and we have taken to ending our day with whatever is on the animal network.

I think I have been reasonably responsible and successful as a pastor to you. I have walked with you as I was able through difficult or challenging moments in your lives. I have tried to support you, to say the right words at the right time. Some of the things you know about, I know about, too, and that's helped. Mental health issues, addictions, the breakdown of relationships, depression, life-threatening illnesses, aging parents, doubts about God, deep wounds casually inflicted by people we thought were our friends, the seeming randomness of life, the death of someone we love, the whole catalogue of bad things that happen to good people.

But there are two things I've never known much about --- shepherding a large bank account or having a child, and I don't expect I ever will know much about these things.

Being entrusted with the care and nurturance of a puppy, however, has taught me a little about what you experience as parents. Like Rowan, whom I baptized this day, life is new for Christi, too. Whether her life will be good

or bad is, to a large extent, up to me, whether she will learn what she needs to learn to be safe and happy is, really, up to me.

It is an enormous responsibility, and it is a bit scary. Now I understand why you are so obsessed with your children (and never have parents been more obsessed with their children than today's parents are).

I was thinking this week as I read and re-read the passage from Isaiah of the vision it presents of a place where the poor will be judged fairly, where the rights of the helpless will be defended, where wolves and sheep will live together in peace, where leopards will lie down with young goats, and calves and lion cubs will feed together, where cows and bears will eat together, where their calves and cubs will lie down in peace, where lions will eat straw like cattle, where a baby playing near a poisonous snake will not be harmed, a vision of a mountain where none will hurt or destroy. And who is in charge of this vision, according to Isaiah, who will make it real? A small child. Of course.

Who but a small child could believe in such a place or know how to bring it about --- a small child who has not yet learned from his parents that rich people are better than poor people, that if someone is helpless, it's their own fault and no one else's problem, that the earth and all its resources and all that dwells therein is his to use as he sees fit, and, of course, to make the largest profit that he can, a small child who has not yet learned from his parents how to judge, how to hate, how to destroy, how to kill. Who else could be entrusted with such a vision except a small child, who knows nothing of the world except wonder?

Will the vision ever come true? What will the world be like when your children are in charge of it?

The answer to these questions is in what you are teaching them now, especially by the way you live, by the example you set, and whether or not you realize how important, how very important, it is.

Amen.