

The Space Behind My Mother's Chair
Sunday, October 3, 2021, 9:00 a.m., All Saints Church, Pasadena
The Rev. Mike Kinman

When I was growing up, we had a Pembroke Welsh Corgi named Bunny. Though the tale is lost to history, I think she was named by my brother, who at the age when kids did this kind of thing, first looked at her head with her ears that stuck straight up and said: "Bunny!" So, this animal, not cursed with any knowledge of the English language, went through life blissfully unaware that she was being continually mis-specied.

Now Corgis are herding dogs, and this was an instinct deeply embedded in Bunny. We had a swimming pool in our backyard, and when we would swim, she would get panicky and run around and around and around the pool, barking at us ... and even nipping at our heels when we were standing on the edge preparing to jump in

It got worse when one day we brought into the family a white cat, whom we are convinced that Bunny thought was a sheep because she would run circles around and literally try to herd her. So, I suppose mis-specie-ing had a considerably more annoying effect on her.

In our family room, my mom had a gold rocking chair recliner ... you know the kind that were popular in the 70s. It was backed into a corner and it was Mom's chair ... where she would sit and watch TV or read. And there was a space behind it that was just big enough for Bunny to curl up in the corner with the back of the chair providing a shelter over her. It was her favorite place. If she wasn't around, that's always where we would find her.

I say that space was just big enough ... but really there was a little more room there, because when I was really little, I used to squeeze myself in there and lie facing her or wedge myself between her and the wall. And though I know I was disturbing her, she rarely got up and left but would adjust herself and make room for me.

In that little space behind my mom's chair, I would talk with her and imagine she was talking back. I would pet her, and she would lick my hands and face. She would growl ever so softly if I somehow made her feel trapped, but not enough to scare me ... only enough gently to let me know that part of me loving her was giving her just a little more space.

I don't have many memories of that part of my life ... I must have been 3 or maybe 4 years old ... but I remember being squeezed in behind that chair with Bunny. And I don't just remember it up here (head) ... I remember it in here (heart). I didn't feel alone. I felt safe. I felt understood. I felt loved.

All of our life stories are incredibly different ... and yet every single one of us comes from a common experience:

At the moment of our birth, someone held us and looked on us with love.

Even if it was only for the briefest of moments. Even if we had parents who fell far short of providing that safe, loving environment for us from that point onward or if we had no people to fill the role of parent after birth at all, every one of us at least entered this life with an initial experience of being held with awe and love.

I know this both because it is human nature when we are presented with new life coming into the world ... and also because if we hadn't, we literally would not have survived. We wouldn't be here.

No matter how different our lives have been since that moment, we all share that common origin story. We emerged from the womb, and we were held, we were looked at with at least some measure of awe, and we were looked on with love. As we made the first of what would be many difficult transitions in our life, even if it was only for a minute, the first imprint on our conscious psyche was "You are safe. You are amazing. You are loved. You are home."

The rest of the story of our lives is a tale of those messages being either reinforced or diminished. That is the role of truth and lie in our lives. For those first messages are deep truth.

You are safe.
You are amazing.
You are loved.
You are home.

And we live in a world where far too often those messages are not sustained. We live in a world where far too often we hear the opposite.

That we are in danger.
We are worthless.
We are unlovable.
That we don't belong.

Those are lies. And yet our deepest fear is that they are true.

Our lives are a continual struggle to trust the truth and resist the lies. And the force of our own will just isn't enough. Because the lies are so seductive, and they squeeze their way deep into our psyches that they become so much a part of our operating system that we need the team from Inception to come and pry them out.

When I remember being curled up with Bunny in the corner behind my mother's chair, I like to think she felt as safe and as loved as I did in that moment. And think maybe she did, because all we did in that family was love her ... and I know she trusted that love.

And ... we were not Bunny's first owners. We were close. We got her when she was just a few months old. And, before us, she had been returned to the breeder by someone who had bought her hoping she would be a show dog. That person returned her saying she was "untrainable" ... and so we, in the words of Charlie Brown discovering that Lila owned Snoopy before him ... got "a used dog." And that was fine with us. We didn't care. We just loved her.

And ... in those few weeks or maybe a couple of months she had been in that other house, that first owner had taken to beating her with a broom. And so, for her entire life living with us, whenever any of us would take out a broom or a vacuum cleaner she would get incredibly fearful. She would whine and bark and cower away from us.

After our parents explained to us what had happened to her, at age 5, I took it upon myself, using methods that would never have been approved by any trauma therapist, to convince her that brooms were OK. That we weren't those people. That we would never hit her with a broom. That she was safe.

I remember with one hand trying to hold her by the collar and with the other hand trying to manipulate a small broom to pet her with it in an unsteady way that I can only imagine now was truly terrifying for her ... and yet even then she didn't lash out at me, she just whined and wriggled away.

I was so sad that I couldn't make that fear go away. I took it personally and wondered why she couldn't trust me. Didn't she know how much I loved her? Didn't she know how safe she was with me? And, of course, the answer to both of those was yes ... only sometimes what has happened to us is so deep that it's not about that. The healing doesn't happen through force of will but only through time. And even then, the memories are always still there.

In this morning's Gospel reading, little children are coming to Jesus. The Greek word Mark's Gospel uses is *παιδίον* (*pahee-dee'-on*) ... and the most common meaning for that is "infant." These were babies being brought to Jesus. Children who were not too far from that first moment where all they knew was emerging into this world and being told

You are safe.

You are amazing.

You are loved.

You are home.

Young enough maybe to remember that, yet old enough to have been told the opposite and begun to believe it.

Young enough that the only way they could get to Jesus is by someone gently carrying them.

Loved enough that whoever was carrying them knew they were a blessing and wished Jesus' blessing on them.

Young enough and loved enough that they had not yet lost the ability to trust that love was greater than fear.

The disciples ... older like us ... had heard the other messages far too long. They didn't see what Jesus saw. They saw these children, if not as worthless, than certainly worth less because they had not yet grown up and been instructed in and learned the ways of the world. How could they be worth Jesus' time?

But Jesus knew what made them unique was not what they had learned, but in what they had not learned yet. They had not learned cynicism. They had not learned rejection. They had not learned hate.

"Let the little children come to me," Jesus says.

Jesus, doing what he always does – spying the most marginalized and vulnerable and setting them in the center of the community and letting them become the agenda.

"Let the little children come to me," Jesus says ... because maybe they still remember. Maybe, just maybe they still trust.

You are safe.

You are amazing.

You are loved.

You are home.

These children, Jesus says, they are not our students, they are our teachers. Because the reign of God, the beloved community is the reality of these truths.

You are safe.

You are amazing.

You are loved.

You are home.

And none of us are there ... but maybe these children, maybe these infants are close enough that they can remind us that there was a moment in each of our lives, no matter how brief.

A moment in each of our lives before the brooms came out and we were told we were untrainable.

Were told we were a disappointment.

A moment in each of our lives where we just knew and trusted that there was no transition we couldn't make it through.

That no matter what happened everything really was going to be all right. That no matter what

We were safe, amazing, loved ... home.

My entire life, I have been searching for that space behind my mother's chair ... and I wonder if you have been, too.

That safe place I can squeeze into not with someone who is perfect, but with others who struggle as I do, as we all do, with balancing the hope that we are loved and safe with the reality of all the times we have not been.

In whispers being able to have the conversations we do not yet have the courage or perhaps even the vocabulary to have in the rest of the world.

Trusting that if we cross boundaries, a gentle growl will let us know ... but even then, we know we need not fear because grace, trust and love are strong enough.

My entire life, I have been searching for that space behind my mother's chair ... and I know it is what drew me to the church, I know it is what continues to draw me to this community. Not because we always are that perfect place ... but because we believe in the possibility of community where love comes without judgment, where our wounds are not liabilities and where together we can remember deep truths long buried.

We bless animals, Jesus blessed children not out of sentimentality but because they are all reminders of those deepest truths we so long to trust. Reminders that it's OK that we can't magically fix our wounds because our wounds do not define us, and the lies are not the truth.

We bless animals, Jesus blessed children because they are sacraments of a God who right now, still and always, cradles you in her arms, looks on you with love, holds you to her breast and whispers in your ear.

You are safe.

You are amazing.

You are loved.

You are home.

Amen.