

CHRISTENING AND DEDICATION SERVICES:

Ceremony of Christening and Dedication of Children with Explanation All Souls Community Church

[Service in bold italics, explanations in plain print]

And they brought young children to Jesus, that he should touch them; and his disciples rebuked those that brought them. But when Jesus saw it, he was much displeased, and said unto them, "Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not; for of such is the kingdom of God. Verily I say unto you, whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, he shall not enter therein." And he took them up in his arms, put his hands upon them, and blessed them.

There is no account in any New Testament text of Jesus baptizing anyone. When it came to his reception of human beings he was open to all, and especially to children, which he repeatedly identified as representing the most immediate access to God's presence in reality. The christening or naming of children is an ancient and honored custom. And a service to welcome them into the human family, into the Unitarian Universalist faith tradition, and into this particular religious community, is an equally time-honored tradition. This is not a superstitious rite, for as Unitarian Universalists prizing reason, we do not expect to gain any magical protection or confer special privilege through this service. It is not a baptism whereby the "stain of sin" is wiped away, as our tradition recognizes that all human beings are made in the image of God. It is liturgy whereby we dedicate ourselves to the loving care of children and to their future. Their nurture should be the most treasured responsibility of parents, and is recognized by the charge given to them in the ceremony, and to which they respond:

Dearly Beloved: In bringing this child [these children] to be received, by this ancient symbol, into the fellowship of the church, you declare your desire and purpose to bring him [her/them] up, according to your best endeavor, in the way of that religion which speaks most forcefully to you, from out of your own hearts. Will you, therefore, as you are given to know it, teach him [her/them] the way of truth and righteousness and love?

Parents: We will.

The Godparents' charge and response, where applicable, is similarly recognized:

Will you as sponsors of this child [these children] ever bear in mind the tender and solemn duty, which you here undertake? Will you trust, befriend, and love him [her/them] always?

Godparents: We will.

Our children do not belong only to us, but to a community and to history. In this ceremony we pledge ourselves as a congregation to pass on the great and noble traditions of the Free Church and Unitarian Universalism, which have nourished us and brought us to this time and place. We dedicate ourselves to the unfolding of the individuality of each child; an unfolding that serves to liberate and cultivate the human spirit. We would have them know themselves as strong enough to rely on the authority of conscience and life experience. We acknowledge that there will come a time – the “years of discretion” – when these children will be welcomed as young adults, fully able to begin to assume a place in strengthening the customs, institutions, and ideals that keep the spirit free. Those “years of discretion” are recognized at All Souls when they enter 9th grade and participate in our Youth ROOTS class, and learn the history and customs of our tradition, that they might begin to form the outlines of their own faith:

Remember, when this child [these children] shall have reached years of discretion so that he [she/they] can of his [her/their] own free will acknowledge his [her/their] duty to God and to humanity, that you lead him [her/them] to confirm the meaning and purpose of this hour.

All Souls Community Church repeats this pledge to the parents, accepting our role as a community of faith:

Now, we, the people of All Souls Community Church, understanding our solemn obligations to share in the upbringing of this beloved child [these beloved children], do hereby pledge ourselves to promote his/her/their welfare in mind, body, and soul, to the end that he/she/they may grow freely in beauty, love, and truth.

In naming the child, we lift up, as it were, this new life to the community, as a special and unique individual. And in presenting the child to All Souls Community Church, each new life is welcomed into the larger human family:

NAME OF CHILD, I welcome you into the fellowship of all good souls, and dedicate you to the service of righteousness and love.

A prayer in the Unitarians Universalist tradition closes the service, upholding the primacy of individual conscience in a covenanted community of freedom and faith.

Let us pray: The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious unto you; the Lord lift up the light of his countenance and give you peace. For what is required of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.

AMEN.