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Introduction

Molly, My Kids, and Me

REV. BROMLEIGH MCCLENEGHAN

When the first American Girl Doll catalogue arrived in our home, back in the day when it was a mail-order-only business owned by former history teacher Pleasant Rowland, I devoured it. Not literally, of course, but with my blue pen: circling all the things I wanted. All those perfect accessories, the carefully detailed clothes. And the furniture! Kirsten Larsen’s 1854 bed and Molly McIntyre’s 1944 school desk. Despite my lust for the entire collection, I was delighted when I received Kirsten as a gift and found all the books, for all *three* dolls, at my school library. My seven-year-old mind understood that I didn’t need to own those, since I tore through them so quickly.

Certain details from the stories stick out in my mind—in particular, Kirsten’s friend dying of cholera and the traditions of Saint Lucia Day. But it was Molly’s story that kept burbling up from my subconscious in the first months of the pandemic. As I futilely hunted for toilet paper, I thought of the ration coupons from the World War 2 era. As so many folks took up gardening and bread making in the first weeks under “stay at home” orders, I thought of the McIntyre family’s “victory garden.” I wondered if Americans would be able to handle a similar sustained, collective effort to make sacrifices for the common good.

The original Molly doll came with an actual 1943 steel penny; pennies were produced out of steel due to a wartime copper shortage. A sign of the times.

My friend (actually, Lee Hull Moses, who has a chapter in this volume on discernment) told her thirteen-year-old daughter the other day to hang on to her vaccine card. A part of daily life, worth next to nothing—a piece of cardstock, a single cent—that would become a part of history.

I grew up as a white kid in suburban Chicago in the ’80s and ’90s, thinking—almost subconsciously—that we were living *after* all the big historical, world-shifting events. There had already been two world wars, and the prevailing notion was that a third would end us all. The civil rights

movement had ended Jim Crow laws, and women could wear suits with shoulder pads; while Diane Keaton starred in *Baby Boom*, so clearly the sexual revolution and feminism had worked, too. We read *Number the Stars* and *Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes* and *The Diary of Anne Frank* in school, and I was thus under the impression that humanity had learned its lessons about weapons of mass destruction and genocide. We could recycle our aluminum cans, and *we* never littered, and Chicago didn't smell nearly as bad as it did in the days before environmental regulation started; and we could drink out of the lakes when we went canoeing in the boundary waters every summer, so clearly our stewardship of the earth was going okay, too. And, yes, the space shuttle blew up on the TV in front of my first-grade class, but we would mourn and go back and try again.

I thought history was sort of... done? I couldn't fathom a time or reason why families would be separated or goods would be hard to find, or hundreds of thousands of lives would be lost. I couldn't imagine a global event that would shape my life the way the second world war shaped Molly's.

And while my illusions eroded consistently over time as I became an adult and learned that, in fact, nothing had ever been as simple as I'd imagined, I still couldn't fathom something like the pandemic. My little microcosm of a generation, for example, is known as the "Oregon Trail generation" after a computer game we played in school, in which we tried to ford rivers on pixelated rafts and frequently "died" of dysentery or cholera (like Kirsten's friend!) on days when we couldn't go out to play on the playground. Our kids' generation? Their understandings and experiences are being shaped by living through months of shelter-in-place orders, "attending" digital school and enduring more disappointments than any kid should have to bear, and watching the total collapse of responsible leadership on the federal level. At least Molly McIntyre could still go trick-or-treating, even if she did have to wear a homemade costume.

When we first started thinking about this companion to our first volume of *When Kids Ask Hard Questions*, we hadn't yet seen the first cases of COVID-19 in the United States. We did some brainstorming of the kind of topics we wanted to include, but our content felt softer somehow. We'd published some wonderful essays on race, gun violence, prison reform, economic inequality, and sexuality. This one might be a little less edgy, more domestic.

But then the world turned upside-down. We had a pandemic, along with a quarantine summer of masked protests following the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. We had an armed insurrection that horrified even the most cynical among us, even if it was not particularly surprising.

In the first volume, my beloved and very wise spouse wrote an essay on the life-changing magic of setting limits on screen time. We asked him

if he might want to update it, this time around, to reflect on what's changed (i.e., to reflect that our children and every child we know are now constantly on screens, for entertainment and school and connection). He didn't want to, insisting we didn't need a 2,500-word piece that could be summed up "I was wrong."

But he wasn't wrong. Back in the Before Times (as we call them at church) it was good for us to set limits on our kids' screen time. It still would probably be good to do now, more than we do. But our relationships with technology have changed. And while boundaries are good, we're also trying to do the impossible: survive a pandemic, avoid irreparable damage to our kids' bodies and souls, and keep working...somehow. If they want to watch a show on a school night, that is truly the least of anyone's concerns.

Things are just different now.

And so this volume reflects the things our kids have seen and heard and asked about this year. And a number of those things are, as we originally intended, a little more domestic. Naturally so, given that a lot of our kids haven't really been anywhere other than home for a long time. But domestic or otherwise, kids' big hard questions remain. Because while the pandemic did change so much for so many, it also simply brought more clearly into focus the fault lines that have existed in our society since its imperialist, racist origins. It revealed whose lives are valued and whose are not; it revealed how wealth protects some and not others. The pandemic has been revelatory, and in having their eyes opened, our kids are now wondering how in the world things got to be as they are and, moreover, what they can and should be doing in response.

Sometimes I find the author of Ecclesiastes depressing, other times just brilliant. *There is nothing new under the sun.* The brokenness of the world isn't new. Children's innocence of that fact erodes over time, at speeds indirectly related to the amount of privilege they have. But I have been so moved, in this year of increased proximity and intimacy and concern, by my kids' empathy and concern. (Not for one another, over the control of the remote, obviously.) I am moved by their insistence that things shouldn't be this way—that things shouldn't be so hard for some people, that our leaders shouldn't lie or endanger us, that people shouldn't deny science or the humanity of some. I am moved by their questions, by their curiosity, and by the hope that lies therein.

And, of course, some questions transcend this particular moment in time. *Who am I? Why do I have to do that? Who gets to decide what happens to me, or to my body? Can I have that? Why not? Am I different? Am I good enough? Do you love me?*

This isn't the volume we imagined. This isn't the year we imagined. Molly McIntyre has been reissued for the 35th anniversary of American Girl Dolls,

a further reminder that there's nothing new under the sun. Still, not knowing what will come next, whether the next question we receive has historical precedent or comes out of the blue, we can nonetheless seek out resources to aid us in the work of loving and caring for children. In the midst of so much change, we can give thanks that we are so blessed: to receive their questions and to be invited into their frustration for what is, and their hope for what might be.

Questions as Conversation Starters

Finding Your Way with Unanswerable Questions

REV. DR. KATHERINE L. KUSSMAUL

Several years ago, on All Saints' Sunday, I sat with the children of our congregation during a moment in worship and asked, "What does it mean when I say that 'someone died'?" A collective gasp went up from among many adults – talking to children about death! – but this particular group of children knew, from years of experience with these kinds of conversations, that I was curious about their ideas and that their ideas mattered to me.

Their initial answers varied: "You mean they are dead."

"You mean their heart stopped."

"You mean they aren't alive."

"It means you won't see them again."

"It means their life is over."

Some of them shifted to stories about particular people or animals who had died. Others shifted to talking about the emotions we feel after someone dies.

After a period of active listening (and a little group management), I then asked, "What happens after a person dies?" There was a moment of quiet before children started talking about a range of things: heaven, afterlife, reincarnation, bodily death versus spiritual death, as well as particulars such as living with God, seeing a bright light, not being sick anymore, and so forth. I did not evaluate their answers as "correct" or "incorrect"; I simply listened.

After a second period of active listening, I asked a final question: "Which of those things can we prove?" I listened and, ultimately, our conversation "landed" with an acknowledgement of mystery: We do not know for sure. We cannot prove one answer is correct. But we can affirm that this kind of conversation invites us to think and wonder and grow.

Children are curious and often capable of great wisdom, absorbing creation with wonder and asking questions without constraint (or end). They

are thus far more ready to engage with meaningful questions and participate in substantive theological reflection than many adults would imagine.

Because of the ways children see, wonder, notice, and don't mince words, their big questions can be startlingly complex. When I have asked children about their questions for God, for example, their responses have reflected some of the thorniest theological and ethical questions for someone of any age:

- Why does God stay in heaven?
- Why can't Jesus be on earth?
- Why doesn't God make us with full knowledge?
- Why is doing "the right thing" so hard?
- Why is life so difficult?

When I sit with children encountering dying and death, here are some of their common questions:

- Why do people (or pets) die? Why can't we live forever?
- Why did this particular person (or pet) die? Why didn't a doctor or vet "make them better"?
- What happens when we die? Does dying hurt? Is dying scary?
- What happens after we die? What happens next?

I love these questions. I love these questions because these questions do not have answers. These questions touch on core beliefs and create opportunities to engage children in meaningful conversations. And, in my experience, engaging children in meaningful conversations leads to theological reflection that is profound for children and adults alike.

I love these questions, though I know these questions can spark fear and anxiety in many adults. With a little coaching, we can reduce this fear. With regular practice, we can lessen anxiety. And over time, we—parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, teachers, pastors, troop leaders, and other recipients of our children's prophetic clarity—can engage children in meaningful conversations that explore unanswerable questions and cultivate deep spirituality.

* * *

My core beliefs about God are simple. By sharing them, I hope to encourage you to reflect on your own core beliefs as a first step in engaging the children in your life in the work of pondering the hard questions they may have.

1. **God is mystery.** God is more than we can comprehend. We cannot fully know or understand God. God will always be beyond

our grasp. Reminding ourselves that **God is mystery** prevents us from thinking we have the answers and gives us permission to say “I don’t know.” This permission extends to “No one knows” as well as “Anyone who says they know *for sure* is probably wrong.”

2. **God is eternal.** God *was*. God *is*. God *shall be*. God precedes us. God is with us. God outlasts us. Reminding ourselves that **God is eternal**, unending and beyond time, helps us remember the vastness of God and our very small, albeit important, space in the continuum that is God.
3. **God is unconditional.** God is total love. God is absolute acceptance. God claims us exactly as we are. God calls us—*all of us*—“beloved.” Reminding ourselves that **God is unconditional** creates space to be fully *who we are* as humans. God loves us in our perfect imperfection. God loves us, even in our flaws and faults, real or perceived. God loves us. Full stop.
4. **God is relational.** God longs to be in relationship. God engages creation and invites creation to respond to God. Reminding ourselves that **God is relational** nudges us toward relationship. We can trust that God wants to be in relationship with us, right here and right now.
5. **God is creative.** God creates with breadth and depth we could never imagine: vast galaxies and particular places, the lushest of gardens and driest of deserts, and blue whales and lady bugs. Beyond physical things, God creates emotion, longing, and desire. God creates thought, insight, and reflection. Reminding ourselves that **God is creative** compels our creativity. God’s creativity fosters space for creativity in *our* wondering, in *our* thinking, and in *our* conversations. God’s creativity encourages ideas that stretch logic and discernment that reaches beyond “universal norms.”
6. **God is at work.** God is active. God is a participant. God does not sit back and observe. God is not an armchair quarterback. God is wholeheartedly involved even when God’s involvement or seeming lack thereof mystifies us. God is at work in the task of liberation, in pursuit of justice, and in the ministry of healing. God is at work in *our reflection*: as we examine our identity and discern our purpose. And God is at work in *our conversation*: in the exchange of ideas as well as in silence. Reminding ourselves that God is at work means there is always more for us to notice about God and what God is doing. God’s being at work facilitates our being co-workers with God.

The above six statements combine with the following five *qualities of being*. Qualities of being are attributes and concepts that are fundamental to

the practice of engaging children in meaningful conversation. While some of these qualities of being have clear connection to Christian or Jewish tradition, others are more sociological or relational. All of these can be sources of knowledge and understanding about God; our theology does not exist in a vacuum, wholly separate from how we understand or think about the rest of reality.

1. **Sabbath.** In the beginning, sabbath was a period of rest. “God rested from all the work that God had done” (Gen. 2:2–3 CEB). Over time this “period of rest” became defined as a “day of rest.” More recently, sabbath has sometimes been redefined to include shorter periods of time that engage the very basic practice of *going slow*. The Rev. Fred Rogers facilitated a daily *going slow* practice marked by “replacing his dress shoes with sneakers, [and] his suit jacket with a cardigan.”¹ Rogers continued, “Our world needs more time to wonder and to reflect about what is inside...to explore the deeper levels of who we are—and who we can become.”² The quality of **sabbath** asks me to establish a practice of going slow and promoting silence: for me and for the children with whom I am in conversation.
2. **Space and Place.**

Moses...led his flock out to the edge of the desert, and he came to God’s mountain called Horeb. The LORD’s messenger appeared to him in a flame of fire in the middle of a bush. Moses saw that the bush was in flames, but it didn’t burn up. Then Moses said to himself, Let me check out this amazing sight and find out why the bush isn’t burning up.

When the LORD saw that he was coming to look, God called to him out of the bush, “Moses, Moses!” Moses said, “I’m here.” Then the LORD said, “Don’t come any closer! Take off your sandals, because you are standing on holy ground.” (Ex. 3:1–5 CEB)

Moses noticed the bush and took time to check it out. As Moses explored the space, he heard God identify this space as holy. When we are at our Moses-best, we take time to notice where we are and check out the space. We may experience something new like Moses, but more often we experience what is familiar. Our challenge is to notice the familiar and to cultivate a sense of place—of sacred place—in which we can notice what is new and what could be new. Our challenge is to be where we are and claim the location as holy, as a place in and through which we experience God. The quality

1 Amy Hollingsworth, *The Simple Faith of Mister Rogers: Spiritual Insights from the World’s Most Beloved Neighbor* (Nashville, Thomas Nelson, 2005), 1.

2 *Ibid.*, 4.

of **space and place** asks me to take time to notice where I am, be present in that place, acknowledge that every place is holy, and be open to what God is doing. **Space and place** asks me to help children do the same.

3. **Neighbor.** The Lord speaks to Moses, “You must not take revenge nor hold a grudge against any of your people; instead, you must love your neighbor as yourself; I am the LORD” (Lev. 19:18 CEB). *How do (or should) I love myself? How does (or should) that impact how I love my neighbors? In what ways do I care for myself better than I care for my neighbors? In what ways do I care for myself worse than that I care for my neighbors?* At the end of a long story about social awareness, caregiving, and hospitality, Jesus asks the lawyers, “What do you think? Which one of these three was a neighbor to the man who encountered thieves?” (Luke 10:36 CEB). From this story, there is one answer. Only one of the three interacted with the man who had been assaulted. “The legal expert said, ‘The one who demonstrated mercy toward him.’ Jesus told him, ‘Go and do likewise’” (Luke 10:37 CEB). In other words: *Pay attention to those around you. Notice their needs. Care for them. Provide for them.* The quality of **neighbor** asks me to do just that: Love my neighbor, search for my neighbor’s inner pearl, name my neighbor’s inherent worth, and encourage my neighbor to explore and become who they are meant to be.
4. **Authenticity.** The quality of authenticity, the quality of being authentic, is related to being genuine, truthful, and sincerely present. Authenticity poses the question, Am I my most honest self? Brené Brown writes,

Choosing authenticity means cultivating the courage to be emotionally honest, to set boundaries, and to allow ourselves to be vulnerable...Authenticity demands wholehearted living and loving—even when it’s hard, even when we’re wrestling with the shame and fear of not being good enough, and especially when the joy is so intense that we’re afraid to let ourselves feel it.³

In my experience, children detect “fake” adults with ease. Their “authenticity radar” is exact: There is no room for pretense. The quality of **authenticity** asks me to know myself, accept my quirks, acknowledge my faults, and show up exactly as I am. This means saying “I’m overwhelmed” when I am overwhelmed. This means saying “I don’t know” when I don’t know. This means trusting the children with whom I am in conversation as much as (if not more than) I hope they will trust me.

³ Brené Brown, *The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You’re Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are* (Center City, Minn.: Hazelden Publishing, 2010). 50

5. **Vulnerability.** The quality of vulnerability, of being vulnerable, is related to courage, honesty, and growth. Vulnerability invites us to examine ourselves, talk about difficult things, give and receive feedback, and incorporate important discoveries into our personal development. Vulnerability poses the question, How do I open myself to be changed?

Amy Hollingsworth writes about Fred Rogers and vulnerability:

We wouldn't have known about Fred's complexity had it not been for perhaps his most important quality: vulnerability. Every day he opened himself up vulnerably to the viewer, not only through the puppets, but also through his other activities in the Neighborhood...There were times when his vulnerability on the program made me almost embarrassed for him, like when he tried break dancing or the Charleston or was so wobbly on rollerskates that he almost fell. Other times it was just amusing, like when he fumbled through a series of exercises, hopelessly mixing up the heads, shoulders, knees and toes sequence and [was] able to laugh at himself. But each example showed he was vulnerable; he was willing to try new things and keep trying new things even if he wasn't good at them."⁴

The quality of **vulnerability** invites me to try new things, to be honest about my strengths and weaknesses, and to commit myself to continual self-discovery and development.

These *qualities of being* compel me, in my best moments, to slow down and embrace silence. They invite me to notice what is happening for the child or children as well as for me. They invite me to show up in the silence, in the mystery, in *my* not knowing. They ask me to respond to the child or children in ways that honor their inherent worth and encourage them to explore and embrace who God is calling them to be. And they require me to show up as my most real self who is ready and willing to be changed by this child, these children, and this interaction that might open the door to transformation we cannot yet imagine.

Crafting the Conversation

When a child asks an unanswerable question, I take a deep breath and slow down. I position myself in ways that communicate that both the question and the conversation to come are sacred. I remind myself that my conversation partner is a neighbor: How I engage my neighbor matters. And then—and I believe this is the biggest area for growth for most adults seeking these sorts of conversations with children—I honor my authentic self while summoning up the courage to be vulnerable.

4 Hollingsworth, *Simple Faith*, 59–60.

I honor my authentic self by being fully me—with all my quirks, all my faults, all my biases, all my fears, and all my limitations. I honor my authentic self by saying things such as:

- That’s a big (or important or scary or...) question, or
- I don’t know, or
- I don’t think anyone really knows, or
- That’s a question I haven’t thought much about, or
- anything that is authentically me and audaciously honest.

I summon up the courage to be vulnerable by saying things such as:

- Can we think together about this? or
- Will you share your ideas with me? or
- I’d like to learn from you, or
- I have some ideas, but I’m not sure, or
- That question makes me wonder about _____, or
- anything that creates space to slow down, be present in the moment, and explore not as a child and an adult, but as neighbors.

Such questions can arise in relation to a particular death (often a pet or elderly family member, but sometimes someone younger) or in response to some sort of particular tragedy (natural disaster, gun violence, etc.). Such questions can also arise out of the blue.

I was spending time with an elementary-aged child a month or so after the death of her beloved pet. We were talking about friends and sports and school and suddenly she asked, “Hey, Kat, what happens when we die?” After a brief pause in which I hope she sensed the importance of her question, I responded. “That’s an important question. And honestly, I don’t know for sure. Can we talk about it together?” We locked eyes for a moment. She nodded. “Yes.”

We were sitting in the living room, which had been rearranged for a hospital bed. His grandmother, with whom he had lived for nearly his entire life, was in the bed. Sometimes we read from his favorite chapter book. Other times we sang silly songs. Today we had recorded her telling stories about her childhood. She fell asleep and we, the three of us, sat together in silence interrupted by her shallow breathing. Into the silence, he wondered, “What happens after we die?”

“Good question. I can think of several ways to understand your question. What are you wondering about?”

In these types of conversations, hearing the question is vital. Adults (myself included) are quick to hear what we think is being asked. Rather

than making that assumption, take a moment to intentionally listen for what the child is asking.

In the first example, it is tempting to assume she is asking a question about heaven or afterlife, a “what comes next?” question. She might be asking this kind of question. She might also be asking about the biology of death. She could also be asking a practical question related to her beloved pet’s body or cremains.

In the second example, many adults hear a spiritual question when he might be asking a practical or process question related to her body. Unless we clarify the question, we risk exploring the wrong topic. Exploring the wrong topic could be a minor hiccup or a major redirection, both of which shift the attention to us. Take a moment to hear his questions. Ask a clarifying question that honors his curiosity.

FURTHER EXPLORATION

As you set the stage for conversation with the beloved children in your life, take the time to reflect on your own experience of big, unanswerable questions.

- When have you been asked an unanswerable question? How did you respond?
- In light of this chapter, how might your response change?
- Have you ever heard “I don’t know” in response to an important question?
- If so, what happened next?
- Do you prefer having answers or exploring possibilities?
- How are you impacted when a child asks you an unanswerable question?
- What are your unanswerable questions?
- With whom do—or could—you explore these questions?

THE REV. DR. KATHERINE L. KUSSMAUL is a pastor, preacher, hospital chaplain, and end-of-life doula living in Raleigh, North Carolina. Katherine cherishes opportunities for meaningful conversation about topics that matter to a broad range of God’s beloved: children, youth, and adults; individuals, household groups, and congregations; and folks spanning a comprehensive and growing continua of identity. Katherine treasures time laughing with friends and family, preparing and sharing meals, and curling up with Dibley, her snuggly bichon frisé.

“But Doesn’t the Bible Say...?”

Equipping Children to Discern Biblical Truth

REV. SARAH MCWHIRT-TOLER

My first ministry job outside of divinity school was at an ecumenical Christian, independent, conservative primary school. I had the utterly delightful job of leading Bible classes and chapel services for students in pre-kindergarten through fourth grade. Since you are reading this book, I can already guess that you are doing the incredible work of walking alongside young people as they grow in their faith.

The school had some rather generic Christian guiding statements, but there was nothing concrete about some of the big divisive issues such as Biblical literalism or inerrancy, salvation, and so forth. Instead, these guiding principles were about nurturing children in Christian love. Throughout my time teaching, it became clear that many of the families of the school would share a yearning for their children to be raised in a Christian environment without being able to articulate what that meant in specific terms. As a faith leader in that community, it was a delicate dance to support faith development without undermining or contradicting any faith education going on at home or in a family’s congregation.

One day, a third grader came up to me in a panic because another student told him that he read in the Bible with his dad that gay and lesbian people go to hell. The other student repeatedly told his friend and me, “I read it with my dad, so I know it’s true. And we know everything in the Bible is true!” My sweet, curious friend was alarmed at this possibility. After all, if his friend read it *in the Bible!* it must be true.

The Bible has become so ubiquitous with American cultural ideals that sometimes the line between what the Bible says and what people *think* the Bible says gets blurred. Adam Hamilton, a United Methodist pastor and prolific writer, wrote a study a number of years ago, *Half Truths: God Helps Those Who Help Themselves and Other Things the Bible Doesn’t Say*, exploring

some of these supposedly scriptural clichés that are definitely not Biblical truth.⁵

There are dozens of plans for reading through the Bible each year, and certainly one of the best ways to be able to discern if someone is actually correct about whether or not something is in the Bible is to...read the Bible.

In truth, I'm fairly biblically literate, but nothing will give me the cold sweats faster than a child, youth, or parishioner saying, "you know in the Bible where it says..." In fact, just a quick Google search will yield dozens of "Is it actually in the Bible?" quizzes. If you want a laugh (or to be surprised!), take a few for your own personal knowledge.

One of the best practices you can employ with children is to take time to read the Bible together and expose children to the vastness of the stories of God and God's people. Elizabeth Caldwell, a professor emerita at McCormick Theological Seminary and specialist in children's faith education, writes, "Hearing the Bible stories in relationship with loving parents or family members forms children in faith and helps them develop a language of faith, a faith vocabulary that will grow with them."⁶

Beyond just reading the Bible, it is essential to talk to young folks about what the Bible is and, maybe just as importantly, what the Bible is not. The Bible is a collection of stories about God and the identity of God's people. It was written by human beings attempting to understand God and explain their relationship with God. It is a book of historical recollection, laws, poetry, and even advice about how to be filled with love and grace. It is not a book written by God. It is not a book of definite answers or absolutes. It is not a book that is static, with unchanging meaning. The Bible might have been written out of a different historical context than our present reality, but the fundamental truths about God's love and God's desire for relationship with God's creation are forever relevant.

Children are never too young to start learning that the Bible was written by people trying to understand who God is. It certainly would be simpler if the Bible floated down from above filled with absolute truth and all answered questions, but that is not the sacred book we are gifted. It is not our responsibility as shepherds of young ones on faith journeys to only talk with children about what the Bible says, but instead we must empower

5 *Half Truths* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2016) explores the following phrases: "God helps those who help themselves"; "everything happens for a reason"; "God won't give you more than you can handle"; "God said it; I believe it; that settles it"; and "love the sinner hate the sin." Although this book is written with adults in mind, it's a great example of excavating truth from these biblically attributed phrases.

6 Elizabeth Caldwell, *I Wonder: Engaging a Child's Curiosity about the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2016), 10.

them to find out for themselves. New psychological research claims that the capacity for spiritual development⁷ is “inborn...[just] as one of our many perceptual and intellectual faculties.”⁸ This can be an intimidating exercise, especially if you, yourself, are still figuring out your relationship with God, or with the church, or with spirituality in general. There is great news, though. *You do not have to have all the answers.* In fact, “you don’t have to understand spiritual development completely in order to support it in your child: you can simply welcome the questions and the conversations.”⁹

Unfortunately, there are so many children who do not grow up with the opportunity to think about how they interpret the Bible. For some reason, it has not historically been popular to use the same tools that children are learning in their English-language arts classes to excavate truth and meaning from the Bible. You’ve probably heard of the ideas of biblical literalism and biblical inerrancy. Biblical literalism is an interpretation of the Bible that understands the Bible to be a collection of stories that literally took place. Biblical inerrancy focuses on the idea that the Bible is the word of God perfectly recorded. Both of these ideas are popular and extremely pervasive in evangelical and fundamentalist circles.

As children age, their ability to understand abstract concepts broadens, and if you haven’t experienced it already, questions are certainly coming about the Bible. “Did Jonah *really* get swallowed by the fish?” “Did God *really* flood all the earth and everyone drowned?” “Did God *really* part the Red Sea for Moses?” It might help you to consider your feelings and beliefs on these questions before you’re surprised by them. Oftentimes, it’s helpful to reflect these questions back to the curious one: “Do you think Jonah got swallowed by the whale?” “Why do you think the biblical writers want us to know this story?” Some favorite questions of mine to ask after reading the Biblical text are “What part of this story is most important to you?” and “What does this story tell us about who God is?” It is important for children to hear their own ideas reflected by an adult, rather than be told they are correct or incorrect: “Oh, you said that God gave Jonah a second chance. We all need second chances sometimes.” Or “Ah, God did love Jonah, even though Jonah did not do what God asked him to do.”

As you have probably experienced, it is most often unproductive to argue with someone about what they know (or *think* they know) to be true. In that third grade Bible class, I didn’t tell my Bible-reader, “You and your dad are wrong. It doesn’t say that in the Bible.” What I did say was, “Hmmm.

7 For more information on this inborn spirituality, check out Lisa Miller, *The Spiritual Child: The New Science on Parenting for Health and Lifelong Thriving* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2015).

8 *Ibid.*, 25.

9 *Ibid.*, 15–16.

I don't think I've read that, but I know that is a question that many people have. What I do know is that one of the very first things in the Bible is that God made human beings just the way we are, and then God said that we are 'very good.' And, all throughout the Bible are stories about how much God and Jesus love us just the way we are, no matter what we do or don't do. God's love for us is bigger and wider and stronger than we can ever imagine." I redirected the conversation to fundamental truths we all could agree on (and had been touchstones of our class throughout the year). My questioner left with some reassurance that God loves everyone, and I hope my Bible-reader wondered about how big God's love is. Maybe he talked to his dad about it, too.

Crafting the Conversation

- Whenever a child comes to you with these kinds of big questions, you are *doing something right*. You have cultivated a relationship that has encouraged and welcomed the space for big questions. This is good and holy work.
- Recognize your own feelings, trauma, or baggage around people superimposing their beliefs onto the Bible or even just the Bible itself. Many of us have been harmed by someone wielding the Bible as a weapon. Be honest with the child about your feelings and reactions. Maybe through this conversation, you can spare someone from the same hurt you have experienced.
- Take time to recognize the bravery and curiosity behind the question. If at all possible, engage with the conversation immediately. If now isn't the ideal time, make sure to share clearly and directly that the question is important, and schedule a time to come back to it together.
- Encourage context around the question. A question about what the Bible says could be a question about a good friend, about theological messaging from a trusted source, or even about themselves. Lovingly excavate some more details if that seems appropriate.
- Don't be afraid to admit that you aren't sure whether or not something is in the Bible. Look it up and read together! There are many excellent study Bibles out there that provide notes and explanations that could be helpful to have on hand.
- Be consistent with your messaging about God and God's creation (people). Keep it simple. Affirm that God made everyone and declared everyone good. Affirm God's unending love for God's creation. Those are the biggest truths any child can know about God.

- Unfortunately, the Bible isn’t completely full of cheerful and love-filled stories. There is tragedy, violence, death, rape, slavery, mistreatment of women, mistreatment of children, and on and on. It is never a bad idea to utilize the education and expertise of a trusted pastor, Christian educator, or clergy person if you have one in your life.
- At the end of your conversation, take time to validate again the openness and curiosity of the child who brought this conversation to you. Offer a blessing or a prayer, if that is comfortable to you.

FURTHER EXPLORATION

The following suggestions are a wide variety of resources falling under a few different umbrellas. As you’ve read, there are a number of pieces of this puzzle: biblical knowledge, biblical interpretation, encouraging faith conversations and curiosity with young folks, and theologically solid children’s Bibles.

For adults who are new to and/or exploring the Bible beyond literalism:

- *Faith Unraveled: How a Girl Who Knew All the Answers Learned to Ask Questions*, Rachel Held Evans
- *Inspired: Slaying Giants, Walking on Water, and Loving the Bible Again*, Rachel Held Evans
- *Parenting Forward: How to Raise Children with Justice, Mercy and Kindness*, Cindy Wang Brandt¹⁰

For adults curious about the Bible and encouraging faith-based curiosity with young people:

- *I Wonder: Engaging a Child’s Curiosity about the Bible*, Elizabeth F. Caldwell
- *The Spiritual Child: The New Science on Parenting for Health and Lifelong Thriving*, Lisa Miller
- *Half Truths: God Helps Those Who Help Themselves and Other Things the Bible Doesn’t Say*, Adam Hamilton
- *Midrash: Reading the Bible with Question Marks*, Sandy Eisenberg Sasso
- *The Common English Bible Study Bible*

Bibles for children:

- *Growing in God’s Love: A Bible Storybook*, Elizabeth F. Caldwell

¹⁰ Cindy Wang Brandt also has a podcast, *Parenting Forward*, as well as a vibrant Facebook community, Raising Children Unfundamentalist.

- *Spark Story Bible*, Patti Thisted Arthur
- *Children of God Bible Storybook*, Archbishop Desmond Tutu
- *Shine On: A Story Bible*
- *Celebrate Wonder Bible Storybook*, Brittany Sky

SARAH MCWHIRT-TOLER is an ordained deacon in the United Methodist Church with a passion for Christian education. Currently residing in Nashville, she walks alongside young people and their families as they grow in faith together. That's a great job, but being a mama is her best job.

The Skin I'm In

A good part of the work of childhood is figuring out some answers to the question, Who am I? And, often enough, that reflection on identity is prompted by someone else. Who are you? Are you white, or Black, or something else? Are you a boy or a girl? Do you learn the way I do? Why is your body different from my body?

The ways that we model responses to this sort of question are varied, but one thing has to be absolutely explicit, and oft-repeated: You are as you should be; beloved, always. By God, and by me. No matter what. No matter what happens. No matter what you might learn about yourself. Always.

Both/And: Walking Alongside Biracial Kids

MIKHAIL STEPHENS

“Dad, who am I?” my seven-year-old son, Liam, asked while watching CNN nightly news reporting on the death of Breonna Taylor. My eyes began to feel heavy as I processed how I would answer this question from my son, the child of a Black father and a white mother with joint custody and separate households. We co-parent well, but our son still spends half his time with his Black family and half his time with his white family. He lives between two worlds, the hinge connecting two wild, wonderful, and loving families. He is what makes his family whole, and yet he is *different* from *everyone* he loves. How can I help my child navigate an experience that I’ve never had? How can I help him discover his identity?

As a father, I know how we see Liam in our family: He is loved and adored as a son and a human being. We also know the issues that multi-racial children face—finding an identity amidst the racial hate and division, especially living in the South. Walking through this question from Liam, we struggled to give equal honor and attention to both aspects of his racial identity while also allowing him to choose how he is perceived by society. Liam’s features are such that he could choose, to a degree, to identify more strongly with one culture or another, but we worried he would fit in with other kids accustomed to a mono-culture as a child with a mixed heritage.

“Who am I?” is one of the key questions of this late childhood stage. Family, culture, friends, and personal interests all shape a person’s identity and mind. We so often think of things as either/or. But more often than not, really important things are better described as both/and. I’m not an American or a Christian, I’m an American Christian, with all the baggage of both. I am a Black man and a single father. I am a son, a brother, and a friend. I am a mentor, motivational speaker, and entrepreneur. My son is a bright, energetic seven-year-old who loves Spider-Man and LeBron James. He’s a Lakers fan who can dance to anything, but he spans a broader section of racial identities, which is a confusing and painful place to be at this moment in history. He lives at the intersection of one of the great divides of our nation and our world.

As a parent it's difficult raising children in a world that is centered around hate and division. I feel this pressure even more as the parent of a child who is of mixed race because of the stares and second looks I get walking with my son. I want to make sure he is aware of the weight of history without being burdened by it. In her essay later in this book, Rev. Bonnie McCubbin tells her story of being a white mother raising mixed-race children, and she references so many of the points of historical pain particular to our beloveds (pg.158). As the Black father of a mixed-race son, I don't want him to be afraid to identify as Black. I want him to wear his identity with pride and power, but I also want to protect him. How can I help him claim the fullness of his identity?

Ultimately, the identity I hold most dear is that of a child of God, and I want that to be the same for my son. As parents, we love our children and see them as gifts from God long before the world labels them, so it's vital that we teach our children to turn to scripture for answers to questions of identity. In fact, one of the purposes of scripture is to teach us who we are as the people of God. It is foundational, and can be found in more than 160 verses of scripture.

From the very beginning in the book of Genesis, we hear the double assurance that "God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them" (Genesis 1:27). Every part of our being bears the mark of God's handiwork, and the image of the Divine. In Christ, we find true identity in our calling and purpose, as "salt of the earth" and "light of the world" (Matthew 5:13,14). When we teach our children the simple yet powerful words of the spiritual "This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine," we remind them they are bearers of the light of Christ. "In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven" (v. 16).

As with any hard question, be gentle and speak with love as you yield to the Holy Spirit to give you wisdom for the conversation. I believe that as parents the most important thing we can do with our children is to affirm their questions and wondering, but lead them to the Creator who has marked them and called them before they were even formed (Jeremiah 1:5).

One of the things that helps me talk about mixed identity with my son is the deity of Christ—the one who is both fully human and fully God. We have to be careful in using metaphors because they are all imperfect and can be difficult for young children to understand, but my son takes comfort in knowing that when Christ became human, he didn't take on a single, white identity. He was of Middle Eastern descent—a person of color oppressed by the Roman empire. He, too, moved between many worlds and bore what we can conceive of as a mixed identity.

I also appreciate that our identity hasn't collapsed in Christ—we're still who we are, in all our particularity, but we're also still related to one another, in their particularity. As the apostle Paul described, we are one body with many members who need one another to survive (see 1 Corinthians 12). We must declare to children that they were made perfect, without flaw, and that our diversity is a gift for the full flourishing of humanity, not differences by which we might divide and designate into some kind of devastating order. We serve a very big God who is not limited on what God creates or what God needs on the Earth. With a child of mixed race, they may identify with one culture over the other. We can allow them to make choices and support their work to build their own identity. It is very important that we don't assume what they will identify as, but we just support them in whatever they feel and also give them the support and help they may need to fully step into who God called them to be.

As I began to answer my son Liam's question about identity, I spoke to him about culture from an African American perspective. Later, his mother shared her perspective as a white woman. This was very important for our child because he was able to gain background knowledge about his own family, traditions, and cultures. When we study traditions, it allows us to blend both cultures together to show the beauty of being mixed with both races.

As a father and man of God, I always hoped I could teach my children history without division, but that just isn't possible. Despite what we teach our children, society still insists on classifying people into racial groups. Additionally, trying to teach history without covering these divisions and the horrific oppression, specific adaptations, and current manifestations amounts to erasure.

Growing up in a home where my mother spoke to me with love and care allowed me to know the value of how to treat others equally. But other homes may have other values: racism is a still-taught and practiced behavior. For example, I remember taking Liam to the park and seeing parents tell their kids to play alone, or watching Liam ask kids to play and seeing their parents say "no." These moments would leave any child confused. They don't know the challenges of the world just yet, the pain and the twisted perspectives and false divisions that still operate today. As a Christian the only way to counter division is with love. I am a believer that love will always be the strongest force in the world. When we love, it leads us to the One who created it. When we seek the Holy Spirit's power to help us see others, we are better able to see the world through God's lens of love and freedom. All this can be hard on a child because they are still trying to find themselves and their minds are not developed fully enough to understand it all. We see that for Liam it is challenging because he loves both cultures so much, but society challenges him to pick one over the other; and children struggle with the fear of letting others down. During the time of this teaching

moment, we always want to make sure we allow him to grow and develop and water the seeds from both sides. The measure of how we speak and how we say it will mean a lot in the end!

In his great exhortation to the Galatians eschewing divisions in the Christian community, the apostle Paul writes, “for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith” (3:26). This scripture is a staple when it comes to shaping our identity. Before we are Black, white, Hispanic, Asian, American, French, or any other identity, we are children of God. Our faith in Jesus binds us up as family in the kingdom of God with a holy calling. The light of Christ that shines through us and unites us can carry us through any type of worldly heartbreaking event. When I look at this example, I think about the beautiful image of Pentecost in Acts 2:1–21. In creating the foundation for the church and for Christian community, the Spirit started with a multitude of languages but soon created a shared and deep understanding. I love how when we dwell in the Holy Spirit it allows us to be in sync with one another. It is through the Spirit’s holy power that we can love one another despite our differences.

Each day, we must teach our children the value of their God-given identity, no matter what is said or how they may be viewed by others. Seeing Liam walk into school and into the world with authority and boldness with no shame is a beautiful thing. I pray that every child can do the same and allow Christ’s light to shine through them. “Let it shine! Let it shine! Let it shine!”

Crafting the Conversation

There are a few tips I would love to mention to give you guidance with answering this difficult question.

- Speak God’s truths over your child, and reinforce the foundation of their identity. You could do this as a daily blessing, sending them out into the world. Try using the words God speaks to Jesus at his baptism: *Remember you are God’s beloved, and you make God so very proud* (adapted from Matthew 3:17). Or use the words of the apostle Paul in Romans 8: *For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God* (v. 14).
- Encourage and support multicultural life. Explore other languages and traditions. Live in a diverse community or seek a diverse school where you can stretch the mind of the child.
- In our house, we watch movies such as “Remember the Titans” (2000) and “Glory Road” (2006). These are sports stories, to be sure, but they also show people who were able to bridge hate with love.
- I would also recommend visiting history museums because it allows the child to learn about their culture and to also see how

the world has changed (or not changed) with racial and social development. In Greensboro, we're blessed to be the home of the International Civil Rights Center and Museum on the site of that Woolworth lunch counter where four students from North Carolina A & T staged a historic sit-in. This, along with so many of our Greensboro streets and the campuses of A & T, Bennett College, is a holy ground for us. These are places I want my son and your children to know well. You might not live close enough to visit these places, but find the important locations in your area. Consider a pilgrimage to The African American Museum in Washington, D.C., instead of or alongside a mission trip with your church community. Look for ways to visit and support Native American or First Nation peoples in your area. Educate your children as well as yourself on how to walk this journey in love and wisdom. It is very important that you establish support networks for your child, and church is a great place to do that! Sometimes, when other people share their own perspectives, children hear things in a new way and are better able to understand.

My prayer is that when tough questions arise about identification, this will be a helpful resource to affirm your children. May God grant you the wisdom, love, and compassion to lead your children to truth to make the world a better place.

FURTHER EXPLORATION

- *For Beautiful Black Boys Who Believe in a Better World*, Michael W. Waters
- *Liberty's Civil Rights Road Trip*, Michael W. Waters
- *A Kids Books About: Racism*, Jelani Memory
- *My Two Grannies*, Floella Benjamin
- *When God Made You*, Matthew Paul Turner
- *God's Dream*, by Archbishop Desmond Tutu
- *Dreams from My Father*, Barack Obama

MIKHAIL STEPHENS is the founder of *Reach One, Love All*, where he speaks to children and youth in schools, churches, and other settings. He came into fatherhood younger than many, but with deep love and commitment to his son that has been a guiding light in his life, leading Mikhail to return first to the Lord and the church community, and then to college and starting his own business.

The Way God Made Me

A Little Different, a Lot Loved

REV. JULIE A. HIGBEE

It never fails. Sometime during the first year of being in a new congregation when I am leading the children's sermon, I am interrupted. The question is usually asked one of two ways: "What's wrong with your hand?" or "What happened to your hand?" And in that moment, you hear the adults in the congregation take a breath in, the silence becomes palpable, the parents of the child who asked look like they want to be swallowed up by the floor, and the entire focus of this moment changes.

I was born with a noticeable limb difference. I have two fingers on my left hand, and my left arm is significantly shorter than my right. There are other issues, but these are what you might notice when you see me for the first time. I have been teased and bullied, or watched people notice and then pretend they didn't. This may be why I no longer flinch when I'm asked this question by a child. I have decided I much prefer the direct honesty of children who want to know why I'm different over the unspoken assumptions of adults. This is why that moment in the children's sermon actually becomes a gift to me. It's a chance to speak directly to the children in the room and also to the grown-ups who don't know how to approach the subject. I've developed a script over time, and it sounds a little bit like this:

I honestly don't know what happened to my hand. I was born this way. I didn't do anything to cause it, nor did my parents. I wasn't in an accident, and it doesn't hurt. There's nothing wrong with me. This is the way that God made me. You have brown hair, and your friend here has blonde hair. Your eyes are different colors. Some of you are tall and some of you are short. That's how God made you special. God makes each of us special in our own ways, and that's a wonderful thing. Would you like to hold my hand, or touch it? How did God make you special?

I'm not an expert in child development. I'm an expert in being a friend to my friend's kids, being a great Auntie Jules, and trusting my instincts around this issue. So here is what I find important about having this conversation. It answers the question at an age-appropriate level. Yes, I

am different. No, we don't know why. There is a name for the formation of my hand, but it's long, complicated, and, according to my orthopedist, not really right. So I don't go there, even though it ends in -dactyl and sounds like a really cool dinosaur name. I also name that this feature of my body is not anyone's fault.

I had a second-grader once ask me what I did wrong to lose my fingers. That hurt a little bit. I can honestly say, though, that it is a question with biblical precedent. In John 9 we read the story of the blind man who was healed by Jesus. At the beginning of the story, the disciples asked Jesus whose sin had caused the man to be born blind—his or his parents'. Jesus answers with resounding clarity—neither sinned. I wonder how Jesus' response would have gone over with that curious second-grader. If she, like many children, was looking to assign responsibility or blame as a way of making sense of something, I couldn't help her. And even Jesus' contention that "he was born this way so that God's glory could be revealed," (see John 9:3) may be trickier than saying "it's a mystery" or "we just can't know."

But I choose to see Jesus' response a little differently. The man was born with a disability, and God works through that to reveal God's glory. I see that in myself in ways I have had to be creative in approaching life, by learning resilience, and by practicing perseverance. I don't think God was messing around with my development in utero, but by claiming that those differences come from God and then asking how God makes each of us special, I'm able to reframe the thinking from "this is bad" to "this might be okay."

Asking children if they would like to touch my hand is a newer addition to the conversation. One of my former congregations had an after-school program where a child with a physical difference was being bullied, and I was asked to go into the classrooms and read a story to the children so they could see someone else who was "different." In all honesty, part of me felt used at the request. It seemed too easy and too convenient to ask me to do the hard work of explaining being different and being held up as an example. I felt as if I was valued not for who I am but for what I am. I felt that I was asked to be on display. As someone who has not wanted to be known for how many fingers I have, I was hurt that this was the exact thing being asked of me. But I also didn't know how to say no to the request. I didn't know how to say "here are some resources you can look at and share." So I did it. I gathered up my courage, along with a beautiful book about creation, and went to the classrooms to read to children so they could see an adult with a physical disability.

One little boy saw me and asked how I got my "monster hand." While on the surface I looked cool as a cucumber as I gave my speech, I was boiling inside with anger, sadness, and embarrassment. Then he asked if it hurt.

And if he could touch it. Every fiber of my being wanted to shout, “Hell no! You don’t get to say mean things and then touch my hand,” but then I saw a small hand reach out from another child. She tentatively reached out toward my larger finger and touched the nail. Then she pulled her hand back and asked, “Did that hurt?” I said no, and then another child asked if he could touch my hand, and I said yes. I think all of the students in the room touched my hand. Some did, I’m sure, because everyone else was doing it. Others did because they wanted to see if my fingers that looked so different felt like theirs. I realized that if my hope was to offer a safe space for exploration, the physical touch was part of their learning experience.

People often describe me as persistent, tenacious, and adaptable. I sometimes wonder if I had been born with ten fingers instead of seven how strong these characteristics would be. One of the refrains I heard growing up was, “Don’t say you can’t; figure it out until you can.” This response to my attempts to learn how to do things was infuriating to me as a child and teen. However, in these words was also a gift: my parents’ assurance that “you can do anything you want, despite your physical limitations.”

Now, I will never be an Olympic gymnast, but that’s okay. I did not learn how to swing on the monkey bars or turn a cartwheel, but that’s okay too. I decided that those things were not important. My vision of gymnastics stardom was an internal one fueled by a popular book series, watching the summer Olympics, and three weeks of PE class during which we got to try the vault and bars and beam. But I’m scared of heights, falling, and breaking bones, so even if I had all of my fingers, that vision wasn’t going anywhere. If I had been serious (or expressed it out loud as an interest), I’m sure I would have heard the same mantra when I reached obstacles.

Having to figure out how tasks and skills worked for me gave me valuable life skills I’m only now appreciating. I’m a knitter, but learning that task took time and patience and having to figure out how to make it work. There are no YouTube videos for how to knit with two fingers on your left hand, so I had to adapt with the information available. When I learned how to drive a car, my parents and I had some brief conversations about possibly needing adaptive devices for the steering wheel at some point, but I wanted to try it the “normal” way. By figuring out how to steer in a way that felt comfortable, I never needed the adaptive devices. I also learned how to drive a stick shift, something I am immensely proud of. Refusing to quit without trying, or to give up if I failed the first time, I learned that if I want to do something physically, there is probably a way—even if I do need an adaptive device of some kind. I modify push-ups because of the build of my wrist, and I don’t do burpees. I do mountain climbers and modified planks, and I love a good workout. I wear a weightlifting support (it looks like a wrist wrap with a sideways

cupholder on it) to use dumbbells because I can't grip. I love cooking but still have to be really careful when using large knives, because I'm holding the item I'm cutting with the two fingers on my other hand that don't curve enough to protect the fingertips. But I figured it out. I'm not a fast chopper, but I make great food.

Being tenacious means I identify with the mustard seed that started small and grows up to be a large, wild bush. The story of the woman who refused to be turned away when she went to anoint Jesus before his death resonates strongly with me. Remember the story of the paralyzed man who was lowered through the roof by his friends so Jesus could heal him? I think his friends were amazing for figuring out how to make it happen.

One of my friends, Peyton, continues to amaze me. I met her mom when Peyton was four and I stopped them in the hallway at church to introduce myself. Peyton is now a second-grader who is fiercely independent, loves all things sparkly and unicorn, and has a "baby hand." Her physical development was impacted when she was in her birth mother's womb, and she was born with a hand with webbed fingers that will remain small through her life. Like me, we don't know what caused it. As her mom said, "It could have been caused by something nefarious, or it could have been caused by cold medicine; we don't know." Peyton has had surgery and will require more at some point to aid in flexibility and development. Her mom does a great job of saying the right things—explaining things at a developmentally appropriate level, answering questions, not letting her use it as an excuse not to try or do something. Peyton takes piano lessons (something I quit when my teacher wouldn't let me figure out how to do the left hand in a way that worked), dances, sings, and plays soccer. I'm pretty sure one day she will be head of a Fortune 500 company, President, or the equivalent of Taylor Swift. For Peyton, I am a safe space to talk about her hand, to compare our hands together, to say things she is just trying on about herself. The first Halloween I knew her she was Princess Sophia, and I took her gloves home and sewed the fingers shorter on one so they would fit. I did a disastrous job, but I think they did the job so she could have gloves that looked like they fit and weren't too big. Peyton's sister Charlotte is four now, and she went through a phase where every time she saw me Charlotte would re-notice and ask about my hand. This was a road I'd walked with other children in my life, and I just answered her questions honestly and let her hold my hand, and then we would go back to coloring or eating pizza. For Charlotte, I was also a safe space to ask things that maybe she could not ask about her big sister.

As I was writing this, I called Peyton's mom to ask what was helpful for her, and she shared something that caught me off guard. She told me that Peyton sees me every week and sees in me what is possible for her. Now,

I've been a pastor for almost fifteen years. I am very aware of how much it matters that there are children in four states who will remember that they had a strong, confident, smart woman who was regularly in the pulpit and was their pastor. I've worked hard to be that role model. But I had not given much thought to being a role model for those who also have physical differences, or what seeing me in that capacity means for them. I have fought battles with worship committees over how I need the bread poked so I can break the loaf for communion (if it's scored, I don't have enough leverage to finish tearing it). I've had to precariously balance a chalice between the fingers on my left hand so I can raise the broken loaf in my right and invite people to the table. And, because I have spent so much of my life wanting to be "normal," I had not examined my worship leadership through the lens of modeling Christ's welcome to a community that may not have ever seen a pastor with a disability before. That was me figuring out how to do what I needed to do to follow my calling. From the pews though, if you are Peyton, you see someone who has a hand that is small and you see her doing great things. And then you think that maybe you can do great things. Representation matters. Not in leading seminars on disability or reading books on being different, but in being who you are and living out your calling, whatever that calling may be. This is why we need leaders of different genders, races, body types, and ages. Seeing someone you can identify with allows you to dream that you may be able to do the same thing one day.

I don't identify with many of the Disney Princesses. I do, however, strongly connect with Nemo, the clown fish from *Finding Nemo*. Nemo is a young clown fish who lives with his father, Marlin, in a sea anemone. Before he hatched from his egg, his mother and the other eggs were killed in an attack by a barracuda. His egg was damaged and he was born with a right fin that is significantly smaller than it should be. Because of the loss of all of the other eggs and the loss of his wife, Nemo's dad is overprotective and very cautious about letting Nemo explore the world. He wants to make sure that his son, who is his whole world, stays safe. I usually cry when I watch the movie as Nemo tries so hard to seek out his own way despite being different.

I once applied for a job and was asked to draw the cartoon character I most identified with (I think that was the question). Most of the applicants drew *SpongeBob SquarePants* because he's a square. I drew Nemo. And I got the job.

When I was born, my Aunt Barb wrote me a song, with one of the lines being "Julie Ann, He's got a plan." I have a vague memory of my grandmother singing it to me and can hear that phrase set to music in my mind. For me, it is deeply reminiscent of Psalm 139:

