

Sermon: A Quiver Full

Kerri Meyer, May 16, 2010

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I am no archer and I have a story to prove it.

When I was 14, I was enamored of the idea of archery. I had seen every film version of Robin Hood and had read every book on archery – as if that would do anything for me at all. One weekend, out antiquing with my mom, I found a longbow that cost exactly the twenty bucks I had to spend. I bought it and then later, short of money, bought one field point arrow with yellow and black fletching at the sportsmen’s outfitter near my high school. On a spring afternoon, I thought I’d go out and give my bow a try. Not wanting to accidentally shoot anything in my parents’ yard and get grounded, I walked up our country road a tenth of a mile to a vacant acre on the other side of our neighbor’s land. I was pretty pleased with this bow and was sure that in short order I’d have the skills I needed to steal from the rich to give to the poor. I dropped a pink Frisbee on the ground as something to aim toward. I walked to the far side of the empty parcel of land and faced back toward home. I knocked the arrow, drew back the maybe 20 pounds of draw, tipped the bow just a little bit up to the sky to give it some loft, ostensibly and I let the arrow fly.

What happened next was horrifying. The arrow flew up and out of the empty farmland where I stood, over our neighbor’s house and yard, over my parents’ acre lot AND the acre lot on the other side disappearing into the yard of our third neighbors five long acres away. The arrows’ flight left me plenty of time to stand there, squinting, astonished. Astonished. And in big trouble. Their dog would have yelped, right? I ran – yes ran – along the road and arrived at that neighbor’s back door. Car in the drive. They were home. I knocked at

the door and with the most casual 14-year-old nonchalance said, "I may have misplaced an arrow in your yard. So sorry. May I go and look for it?" Bewildered nod. Went through their wooden gate, skirted their swimming pool, eyes down scanning the water, the lawn, the shrubbery for my arrow. Their Lhasa Apso, praise the Source of Love and Mystery, panted on the grass and watched me unblinking. No arrow anywhere. And then my eyes lifted. There, at eye-level, driven half its length into and through the solid wood picket of their privacy fence, was my field point arrow. Astonished. Leg up on the fence, I extracted it with some effort and slunk home as quickly as I could manage.

Perhaps I should not have picked up that bow. I had no understanding of the capacity of that simple arc, no sense of the sticking power of that arrow

Thank God I had only one arrow and not a full quiver.

I still like this stuff, though. Arrows and bows and quivers. I put that bow and that arrow away. But today, I've gathered these images, these stories and poems, the voice of the teachers and witnesses, as an invitation to us to stop and reflect on the ministry we have picked up. There's a photograph in my office with a John Whitehead quote for a caption, "Children are the living messages we send to a time we will not see." It reminds me of the meaning of my ministry. And when I picture it happening, this ministry of sending living messages, I still picture myself - and you with me - tying poems of love and hope to beautifully fletched arrows and letting them fly past the last of our horizons.

I'm not alone in loving the landscape of this metaphor. The Psalmist wrote:

Lo, children are the heritage of GOD

and the fruit of the womb is GOD's reward.

As arrows are in the hand of a mighty man;

so are children of his youth.

Happy is the man that hath his quiver full of them:◇

he shall not be ashamed,

but they shall speak with his enemies in the gate.

Oh friends, Unity's quiver is full. 468 arrows, last I counted. Our quiver is full and what shall we do with it? We have questions to ask ourselves. Questions about our growth, our ministry, our vision, our future and our present.

We have grown. Our quiver is full but not FULL full. I hear talk sometimes that our church is turning away families, but we're not, actually. This year, 9:00 and 11:00 were chock-a-block with kids and youth and at the 4:30 we enrolled 108 children and teens in R.E. But there has always been room at 4:30 – we scrambled and we found loving teachers to be with the rapidly growing cheerful crowd. Some families are prevented from seeing 4:30 as “YES, welcome” and instead have heard, “NO, no room.” I'm sorry for this (esp. at 4:30). So, what does full mean, anyway? It means we have a policy, a Safe Church policy that sets ratios of safety and sanity around space, bodies and number adults in the room with children. Are we constrained by the space in our basement? Yes, absolutely. By the need for volunteers? It's true, yes. These are growing pains.

So, a legitimate question then, is this: in spite of the cramps in our growing places – will we keep growing? Can there be such a thing as too many children? I have to tell you that my colleagues in evangelical churches would find this question absurd. Incomprehensible, even, theologically. Look it says: Happy is the man that hath his quiver full of them. Blessed. They are clear: they want their Sunday Schools full and they have a theological mandate, a Great Commission that compels most of them to serve Sunday School teachers. Every child that we can find in the world should be raised up here with us on our path, they sing. Put them in our quiver. There are families – you've seen them on TV – who interpret the 127th Psalm to mean that every child that they can conceive and bring into the world is a blessing. These families, who call themselves QuiverFull families, mean to sway the world toward their more finite path by sheer numbers. From the most fundamentalist Christian lens, there can be no such thing as too many children.

We many of us may feel differently about procreation, but no matter, I want us to feel the same way about children. I want us to learn something from our evangelical neighbors. I dearly wish that we, like they do, might all see the act of raising children up in our faith as a religious experience, even the religious experience. Might we shape a theology of abundance around the privileges and responsibilities of bringing children up to be stewards of their own souls? I want this more than I want bigger classrooms for our kids, more than I want new programs for our youth – I want us to sing the 127th psalm in our own voice.

Not everyone will find a theological grounding as compelling as I do. Some of us choose our responsibilities and our passions based on what builds community. Theology aside, our full quiver has implications for the life of this community. Some of us from the congregation had the opportunity to hear Stefan Jonasson speak to us last weekend about the crises and opportunities of growth in our ministry. We learned that the trajectories toward stagnation and collapse or toward vitality and growth hinge on a delicate ratio of adults to children in a congregation. I hesitate to ruin a perfectly beautiful Sunday with statistics, but I think we'll find what Stephan shared meaningful in your reflection. – When a church reaches a point of having four adult members for only one child, a church will likely be dead within a generation. In the opposite scenario, if a congregation's population has only two adult members for every child, the weight of the ministry to the children may become too great to be borne by the other generations – unless every single adult becomes a servant leader in that ministry. Equilibrium is somewhere in between those two ratios. You can do the math later, and you'll discover that, friends, we're somewhere on the risky side of the generational ratios.

We won't be anxious, though. Nor will we make my mistake and underestimate the power of what we hold in our hands. We are prepared to be astonished. Astonished. The common arc of our lives, we who gather here and call ourselves Unity Church, the common arc of our lives has capacity far more amazing than we imagine.

You ask, how can we ALL be that bow for any one child? How could all of these people call themselves the launching point for the flight of a child's soul? Doesn't Gibran mean that the bow is the parent? Yes, and it's true. Every time I say it, I undermine my job security, but the true religious educator in every child's life has always been and will ever be their parent, that the stewardship of a child's growing spirit is the whole duty of the parents. It's true. It's also true that when the bow was first invented it was crafted from the wood of one tree. And when religion was invented, historically, I suppose that a parent rooted in one tradition would have been the one legendary tree for each child, and that tree that would be carved by sorrow and bent by gladness into the arc that sent children on their path. Historically, that spiritual path would have more likely been finite rather than infinite. One wood, one starting point.

But humanity innovated on the bow, and discovered that a composite bow – with an arc of many layers – wood, horn, sinew, bone – could be made and it was a better tool – wieldier, stronger, with more energy and power in each draw, and a bowstring of many fibers twisted together, bundled and twisted again was stronger and more durable. How like this elegant composite is our congregation? How different we are in our ways with children, in our talents and strengths. How different our imaginings of the Archer in whose hand we are bent. How absolute our unity. When we ally ourselves to the parents of our faith community, we strengthen them; add energy and power, help them to endure. And we give our children values with true sticking power.

Does this mean you all have to teach Sunday School? Okay, no. We don't need 855 Sunday School teachers. But we need many Sunday School teachers and we sure would like for you to try it sometime. I hope you heard a call today in the voices of our teachers. What I'm asking of us as a congregation – no, what I am charging us to do as a congregation is to enter into relationship with the children who are here with us. I'd like to charge each of you to spend the next year being Unity Church in the life of our children. By this time next year, I hope you have learned the names and faces of a dozen children and youth. I hope they have learned yours. I hope you greet one another every Sunday.

Those of you who teach Sunday School are smiling to yourselves and saying, "Dozen kids? Check." Meet them. Hold them in your gaze, your memory, your prayers. Imagine that you bear them there in your own quiver. When you form these spiritual friendships with our children, you will have a chance to send words that are true and kind with them into that time you will not see.

Next spring will be here before you know it. Start now. If you share our aim, if in the house of tomorrow you hope there will dwell people who lead lives of greater integrity, more loving service and deeper joy, send that message with these children. The arrows are in our hand now. Once they have gone abroad into the world, we cannot bend the arrows' paths.

See how our quiver is full?

Call us happy and blessed.