Sermon delivered by the Rev. Lilia Cuervo
September 22, 2013. First Parish in Cambridge

Karin, thank you for bidding on, and winning, my sermon at the First Parish silent auction. I hope I interpret correctly your ideas and aspirations for a congregation where young, old, and all in between, contribute to create the Beloved Community and possibly paradise on earth.

For the title of this sermon, Karin suggested Isaiah’s famous words ...and a little child shall lead them. These words are part of the messianic oracle in which the prophet of old expressed his longing for a king who would manifest the characteristic of the great leaders in Israel.

Besides having spirit of wisdom and understanding, spirit of counsel and might, spirit of knowledge and fear of the Lord, Isaiah said, this king shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; ... righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

In his kingdom, the wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. What an inspirational set of ideals! What trust and hope in the human possibility of creating a community where there is no fear of the other, where innocence shall lead, where the leaders practice justice, understanding, and wisdom; a community where people do not stop at what they hear or see, but with faithfulness and without judgment help the meek and the poor. Are we that community yet?

It is obvious that First Parish is undergoing radical changes. This is especially true in our Religious Education program where enrollment is growing and where we are attracting mixed families. This has prompted Mandy Neff, our RE Director, Fred Small, our Senior Minister, the RE Committee and me to periodically ask deep and relevant questions. What is an intergenerational service? Is it just when the children are here in the sanctuary? Do we need special planning for these services? Do we need to entertain the children? Do children have the capacity to understand, or should preachers lower their standards and vocabulary?

Recognizing that We are called to acknowledge and live out the reality that all people in our congregations –no matter their identity or age- ARE the church and need to involved in the whole ministry-serving and being served- the Unitarian Universalist Association is encouraging us to become a truly multigenerational, multicultural faith.

Some of you might have read in the World about the church in Utah where all their Sunday services are intergenerational. I asked their minister, the Rev. Theresa Novak, questions such as: Have they lost many members because of this change? Does she have to lower her standards? How do they involve the children and youth in the service? Her answers indicated that she does
not have to substantially alter the subjects of her sermons, or the way they she delivers them. The children help with the Offertory and other tasks during the service.

I, for one, would love to have our children and youth listening to the testimonies every Sunday. These are such a genuine and moving way to declare what Unitarian Universalism and First Parish mean to its members. Yet, there are objections about shortening the Religious Education time with the children. I would like to invite you to reflect on the benefits to the children and to the congregation, that sharing our religious/spiritual experiences together more often and more deeply could bring.

I know we have some families which strongly believe that our worship should be longer, and more multigenerational: yet others skip worship if they know it is going to be multigenerational. I do not judge the families, or the elderly, or anybody for not wanting to be in the same room with children even if it is in worship, or for not wanting to do programs with them. I myself was that way before I had my own children, and after they grew up, when I felt freer of motherly responsibilities. It was only right after my mother died that I felt this warm feeling for all children and young people, and a desire to do my best to love and protect them as my own. If was as if my mother, who dedicated her life to serve and benefit mothers and children, implanted with her last breath the same desire in me.

First Parish is not alone in facing new situations and questions regarding integration of, and hospitality toward, children. Other denominations around the country, trying to be intentional about multigenerational life and multiculturalism, are facing them also. Erik Erikson points out that, while abstract words and theoretical concepts are not the conscious questions of young children, they concretely experience faith through relationships within a community that shares a common perspective, ethos, or faith.

Barbara Kimes Meyer and William R. Meyers authors of the book Transcendence. Engaging in the Church’s Ministry and Covenant with Young Children, assert that the experience of the child is profoundly intertwined by the often unintentional consequences associated with belonging to a particular family or community of faith. But adults can be intentional about this process, as well as imaginative. We should not forget that the community, in tandem with the family, is a powerful presence in the developing lives of young children. People who believe ought to be developing communities of faith that are open and affirming to children and the wide variety of family constellations occurring in present day American society.

Kimes and Meyers also ask: What does the church believe about children? ... Do we view children as “real persons,” or are they unfinished expressions of our will awaiting correct instructions in order that they might become something worthy of our effort? Are children “sinners” in need of conversion, “innocents” born with a clean slate, or a crazy-quilt mixture of both good and evil, vulnerable to relationships and yet capable of immense joy.

David Owens, a Pastor in Illinois for his part states: Do we isolate and marginalize children? To whatever extent that is true, we ourselves are thereby diminished. I totally agree. And Ralph Waldo Emerson seems to have agreed also when he wrote in his diary: intellect is alike in the
father and in the child. We old fellows, affect a great deal of reticence with the young people, but their wit cannot wait for us. ...But when young and old see “Faust” on the stage, or “Midsummer Night’s Dream” or read them in the closet, they come silently to the same conclusion. No age to intellect.

We are witnessing great and profound changes in our society. I am hopeful for the future because every day I see or hear about a new invention by a young person, or of acts of heroism, or of compassion, or activism for a cherished cause. Do you remember managing lemonade stands by the road, or seeing children having fun doing so, while at the same time being serious about raising money for college or charity? How about rain or shine, delivering the paper on a bike, or throwing it from the window of a car driven by your dad or your mom? And who can forget the girl scouts selling cookies door to door or wherever they can find a willing customer? From these and similar activities, millions have grown to become successful entrepreneurs and, better yet, real philanthropists and caretakers of the planet.

With such rapid advancement in the social media, young people have become, in many homes and even offices, the teachers and trainers of older generations. It is common to see in immigrant communities young children translating for their parents. But their contributions go well beyond these important tasks. In this country there are thousands of children going to school full time while caring for disable, or terminally ill parents at home, doing the cooking, cleaning, and shopping, just like adults. One reassuring fact is that the younger generations are looking for authenticity after learning the fraud that politics has become. They do not want to be boxed and labeled, but to live free of prejudice and stereotypes.

The ease of communication, particularly through social media, has connected us instantly and widely. It has helped us in emergencies and it has contributed to saving lives. The shadow side is the careless and irresponsible use of it, instantly misleading millions around the world, robbing people of their privacy and reputations. It is our duty as a caring community, to model and insist that our children, youth, young adults, and yes, adults, use these powerful media responsibly and wisely. For, is one thing to have fun and show smart ways, and quite another to dangerously expose yourself, or others, or to use these media to harass, demean, and bully.

Here at First Parish, we have amazing goals of welcoming all people to the celebration of life, of nourishing and serving each other, and of respecting the inherent worth and dignity of every person. However, we recognize that to achieve these goals it is essential that we, as a community, create safe spaces wherever we are, so that our children and adults can be safe and free to work on their spiritual growth. So, we crafted, and the Standing Committee adopted, our Safe Congregation Policy in May 2011. This policy was designed to make sure that all here feel safe and free to follow their own spiritual paths in an atmosphere of respect and mutual support. With this Policy we encourage anyone who has witnessed or experienced verbal, sexual, or physical abuse at First Parish to contact the appropriate team: SafeCongregation@firstparishcambridge.org (for issues involving adults) and safechildren@firstparishcambridge.org (for issues involving those under 18.) I have seen this policy working efficiently and fairly. I encourage each one of you, nay! I urge you to read the
policy, and to make it a living document. Information about this is on the last page of the announcements in your Order of Worship.

We often say that the children and youth are our future. Yet we know that they are also our present. Let us help them live the lives of their dreams. Let us hold them in love and trust so that we may empower them to grow confident and proud of whom they are becoming. And yes, the children and youth are our future. What future will that be? For better or for worse, their future will be imbued with the teachings and examples given by us. What an awesome responsibility!

Let us live, from this moment on, lives of which we feel proud, lives of which our children could feel proud and want to emulate. Emerson wrote: *We live, late in life, by memory, and in our solstices, or periods of stagnation, we live on our memories; as the starved camel lives on his humps.* Let us collect great memories to live from, by living lives of integrity, courage, compassion, love, joy, understanding, generosity of spirit, and hospitality of heart and mind.

Grateful for both the precious and tender dreams we dared to dream when we were children, and for the fresh and daring flights of fancy of our own youth, let us open ourselves to the possibilities of joy and fulfillment that life may still bring us. Let us continue creating and inhabiting the Beloved Community where children, young, middle aged, those approaching or already in their older years, are loved, appreciated, and accepted as a person and possibly even known by name. Let us continue striving to create paradise on earth, that holy place where we see and honor the sacred in each one and in all.

Amen, axé, and blessed be.