Most American adults already know they have the power to influence children into becoming healthy, responsible, and mature adults.

Research has confirmed that the more involved adults are in kids' lives, the less likely the kids will engage in self-destructive behavior. Peter Benson, president of the Search Institute, says: "Relationships are the oxygen of human development.”

Complimenting a kid on good behavior, or telling his parents about it, is obviously meaningful to any child, but only twenty percent of adults do it. While 75 percent of adults are all for advising kids about money, only 36 percent actually do it. Nathan Dungan, vice president of Lutheran Brotherhood, says: "There are 190 million adults in this country. If just five percent of them jumped up and did something, it would have an enormous impact on kids."

Today is homecoming Sunday. We are back to school – secular school and getting back to Sunday School. We will be blessing students and their teachers – secular and Sunday School-- as they begin this season of learning. The best teachers – and, of course, all of our Sunday School teachers are the best teachers -- develop relationships with their children. They love their students and they care for them. At St Johns and St Andrews, the whole community, in fact, are good teachers of our children. We nurture them in the faith (something we promised to do in baptism), we get to know them, we compliment them when they do well, we train them when they make bad choices. We forgive them when they make mistakes by virtue of being children; they forgive us when we make mistakes by virtue of being adults.

This way of relating to our children (different as it is from the way that survey tells us much of society relates to children) is an example of living together in Christian community that is discussed in Romans and Matthew. Christian community is love in action – with all of us supporting one another, serving one another, forgiving one another.

This love in action means that we do all we can to help and serve others – to cease actions that do others harm and to do those things that help them. It means to encourage them when they are down, to love them even when they irritate us, to make ourselves servants to others. We are to avoid quarrels, but recognizing that we are human and sometimes do cause offense, we are to seek reconciliation with those we’ve offended at any cost. When others hurt our feelings, we are to forgive them. We don’t just say we’ve forgiven someone and then move forward secretly remembering the offense every time we see that person. Forgiveness, according to author Anne Lamott, means it finally becomes unimportant that you hit back.

We are called to actively love within our church community but also in the secular world. Because we are called to show Christ to the world, we are also called to encourage society to act in ways that help others, that encourage others in their journey –whether that be through laws, or through the creation of organizations that cure diseases or help the poor to find a path to financial freedom or help people just to better understand each other and to get along with each other. We are called to teach through our actions that the best leaders are those who serve others, not those who see themselves as worthy of being served. In our workplaces and in our schools we are called upon to put the needs and good of others ahead of our own ambitions --- and yes, that’s very countercultural – yet that is what is meant by love in action. By doing this, we spread the love through the wider community.

Spiritual growth is a goal of all Christians as individuals and of all Christian communities. We want to grow in the likeness of Christ – that’s the whole point of discipleship. The interesting thing about our own individual spiritual growth is that it often happens best when we don’t really think about ourselves, but rather put the needs of others above ourselves. Eric Swanson, a pastor and church leadership expert, surveyed his congregation about their experiences in the link between ministering to others and spiritual growth. When asked, "To what extent has your ministry or service to others affected your spiritual growth?," 92 percent answered positively. None responded that ministry had a negative effect on their spiritual growth.

Sixty-three percent indicated that service was equally significant in their spiritual growth compared to other spiritual disciplines, such as Bible study and prayer.

Twenty-four percent responded that ministry or service to others had been "a more significant factor" to their spiritual growth than Bible study or prayer.

Over half (58 percent) of those who were not actively ministering to others felt either "not satisfied" or "somewhat satisfied" with their level of spiritual growth.

We are called to building and nurturing relationships of love – where we place serving others higher than being served ourselves. We are called to support one another, and to love one another – especially within our Christian community, but also within the world. We’re called to forgive, to forget about needing to fight back at those who’ve hurt us. As we focus more on the needs of others, and on living in peace with all people, we, ourselves will grow in faith and knowledge of Christ and Christ will shine brighter in us.

Amen