



CHILDREN'S DAY (CHILDREN AND HEALTH)

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, October 16, 2011

(See the attached PDF that contains a great article by physician John Clarke and Elizabeth Clarke on the use of Hip Hop to help kids stay and get healthy. Music is a powerful teaching tool.)

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Lection – Matthew 18:5-7, 10 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 5) Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me. (v. 6) If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea.

(v. 7) Woe to the world because of stumbling blocks! Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to the one by whom the stumbling block comes!

(v. 10) Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones; for, I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven.

I. Description of Liturgical Moment

Children's Day is a time to celebrate and honor God's precious gift of children. Although there is no permanent annual day designated in the United States, a special day to celebrate children predates the 1860s. One of the earliest records of Children's Day in the United States dates back to the second Sunday in June 1856. Rev. Charles H. Leonard, pastor of First Universalist Church of Chelsea, Massachusetts, designated a Sunday for the purpose of dedicating children to a life of faith and a rededication of parents/guardians to training children in the way they should go. Subsequently, between 1867 and 1883 the Universalist Convention and various denominations commended churches to set aside one Sunday annually for Children's Day.¹

To date, Children's Day is celebrated annually worldwide by various entities at varying times. In October 2000, in response to a letter written by a 4-year-old, President William Jefferson (Bill) Clinton proclaimed October 8th as National Children's Day, but in June 2001 President George W. Bush proclaimed June 3rd as National Children's Day. Regardless of the date of observance, the significance is that within every child lies the opportunity to positively impact the world; however, this potential must be nurtured. Thus Children's Day serves as an inspiration to parents, guardians, the church, and the community to do just that.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Matthew 18:5-7, 10

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

The affordability and access to healthcare are currently hot topics. As I write this commentary on Matthew 18:5-7, 10, much of the United States is in dialogue about healthcare. In 2010 the Affordable Care Act was signed into law by President Obama. This act will provide health coverage for 32 million uninsured Americans, of which 95% are children.² As stated by Marian Wright Edelman in her Child Watch Column, "Racial minorities are disproportionately uninsured today and the Affordable Care Act will have a particularly positive impact in communities of color if allowed to go forward."³ However, before the Affordable Care Act can take root, it has come under attack. Those who oppose the act have vowed to take necessary steps for its repeal. If successful, this will be detrimental particularly to children.

As we strive to balance the budget and make difficult financial cuts in our country, it should not be done at the expense of children's health. As adults we are not to erect barriers and stumbling blocks to health. We must take seriously the words of Christ, "Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to the one by whom the stumbling block comes!" Therefore, the church must take a critical stand and lead the charge to avoid causing children to stumble, especially as it relates to their health. The health of black children is the business of the entire village.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

The Matthew 18:5-7, 10 pericope is a smaller narrative within a larger context. In chapter 18 Matthew is providing a discourse on living together in the Christian community. The chapter is divided into two parts: Consideration for the “Little People” (verse 1-14) and Discipline and Forgiveness (verse 15-35).⁴ A key phrase in the passage for our purposes is “little ones.” Typically this phrase is interpreted to mean not children but new converts. In the previous verses (1-4), Matthew’s Jesus uses a child as an analogy to illustrate what is required to enter the kingdom of heaven. “To get ‘in,’ one must be converted, which means to become like a child.”⁵ One must become humble and relinquish self importance, position, and independence and rely on the Lord God. From there Jesus continues the discourse and inserts the phrase “little ones” to identify those of whom he spoke. Thus children or little ones is synonymous with new converts.

Seeing that this passage is not typically used when speaking about the care of children, the mere fact that Jesus uses them to provide a heavenly point and taken in conjunction with other scriptural references regarding children, parallels can be drawn. According to some scholars, historically children in biblical times were viewed as inferior, without status or rights. They were without power or influence and considered more like property rather than human beings. Moreover, they were rarely referred to as models for effective living. Yet Jesus uses that which was considered unworthy as an example of worthiness for the Kingdom. However, Jesus did more than declare the little ones of the community worthy. By insisting that whoever welcomes a child in his name welcomes him, Jesus identified these little ones as bearers of grace and divine presence. When we really understand this, it should give us pause concerning children and their health. How can we dare allow little ones filled with the presence of the divine to be unhealthy? How can we (adults) cause them to stumble in an area that is so important? We rob children of being all that they can be and of fully living out their divine purposes if we fail to ensure that they are physically, mentally, and emotionally healthy.

In verse 5, Jesus’ invitation to welcome a child is an invitation to humility. It is an opportunity to think of others more highly than we think of ourselves. To welcome a child involves humility because a child (as identified in the biblical text) is dependent, vulnerable, and unable to significantly further an adult’s ambitions. Therefore, with this in mind, one cannot genuinely welcome a child with ulterior motives and hidden agendas but must welcome them with humility.

In verse 6, Jesus informs the community of faith of the consequence of causing a little one to stumble. Many scholars tend to agree that Jesus was not advocating murder, but was emphasizing that in the long run, as it relates to divine judgment, it would be better for a millstone to be tied around one’s neck and be drowned rather than to cause a little one to stumble. How greatly would parents, educators, politicians, churches, and communities be changed if we sincerely believed these words of Jesus? Could we dare harm or neglect children? Could we dare fail to protect them from physical, mental, or emotional forces that can scar, denigrate, and even kill them?

In verse 7, Jesus reemphasizes the consequence by stating woe to the world because of stumbling blocks. Interestingly, Jesus acknowledges that in life stumbling blocks are bound to come but tenders a warning to the one by which it comes. In essence Jesus is teaching the community of

faith the importance of responsible Christian freedom. Even though we live in a world where “stumbling blocks are bound to come,” the community of faith must not use this as an excuse to neglect the little ones of the community.

Since children were often looked upon with disdain, some religious leaders in the biblical text may have been tempted to disregard them and take for granted the influence they had upon them. However, Jesus shows us the error in this way of thinking. It would behoove us to resist the temptation to look upon these little ones with contempt because as verse 10 suggests, high-ranking angels (angels who continually see the face of God) have been appointed to see about these little ones. In addition, verse 10 suggests that heaven does not forsake the seemingly insignificant; therefore, since heaven places value upon them, we must do likewise. When we begin to value our children as Jesus did all children we will begin to sincerely care about their health. We will care enough to monitor their food choices and encourage the type of life activities that will greatly increase the chances that they will be physically and emotionally healthy. There is no reason for the African American church to fail in leading the way as it concerns the health of our children. Sermons, Bible studies, Sunday school lessons, exercise classes, on-site health check-ups and more can occur at all of our churches. This is especially critical for those churches who serve communities in socio-economically disadvantaged areas.

An initial view of this text would suggest that the point is to show great consideration without condescension for the little ones in the community of faith. While this is true, an additional point is to govern the way we live. Christian freedom gives us the opportunity to choose how we will live; however, the faith community must live a life of discipleship in such a way that no stumbling block is placed in the way of another.⁶ Given the epidemic state of obesity and bad health among our children, one has to wonder what greater stumbling block could be put in their way than bad health.

Children in many ways are the epitome of the divine in that they love unconditionally, without prejudice or discrimination. They fully give of themselves, withholding nothing. Yes, they are dependent, powerless, and lack influence, but heaven takes note of them and the eyes of the Lord God are upon them. In response to the divinity within them and the heavenly value placed upon them, the faith community must be purposeful in our actions to promote for them optimal health of body, mind, and spirit. In the words of Mary McLeod Bethune, “We have powerful potential in our youth and we must have the courage to change old ideas and practices so that we may direct their power towards good ends.”⁷ In directing them towards good ends, we honor God’s precept and become a welcoming presence in the lives of children.

Celebration

The inclusive love of God makes a place of importance for the little ones of the community of faith. In the midst of current attacks on the health and stability of children, we celebrate that God invites and empowers us to welcome these little ones and be a saving, empowering, and healing force in their lives.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details of this passage include:

Sounds: Children laughing and playing, running around Jesus and the disciples; the voices of parents/adults scolding children for rambunctious activity; the voice of Jesus teaching; the inquisitive voice of the disciples; the sounds of daily living; people in the marketplace transacting business;

Sights: A gathering of children playing; disciples surrounding Jesus, sitting on a hillside or perhaps a grassy knoll; people in the marketplace transacting business while the children are running free;

Colors: Golden sunrays; the brown dusty roads/hillsides;

Smells: Baked bread from the marketplace; fruits and berries; animals/meats for sale; grass; a breeze coming off the water; and

Textures: Hardness/smoothness of the ground/stones of which people are sitting; and the softness of grass.

III. Suggestions That Clergy, Christian Educators, and Others Can Use

Consider exploring the following:

A. Stumbling Block. The King James Version renders this phrase as offend/offences, which according to the Strong's Concordance with Hebrew and Greek Lexicon (<http://www.elijah.com/lexicon.html>) can mean:

- to put a stumbling block or impediment in the way, upon which another may trip and fall;
- to entice to sin; and
- to cause to fall away.

As it relates to children's health, there are many ways in which we offend or place stumbling blocks in their way. An obvious offense is the denial of health care for the uninsured and impoverished. Other offences may be:

- Failure to prevent risky behavior before it becomes a crisis;
- Failure to monitor a child's contact with the surrounding world and keep tabs on their environment;
- Failure to mentor, encourage, and support a child in desired behavior; and
- Failure to model appropriate, positive, and consistent behavior.

This list of offenses is adapted from a publication by the United States Department of Health and Human services entitled “Adventures in Parenting: How Responding, Preventing, Monitoring, Mentoring, and Modeling Can Help You to Be a Successful Parent”; NIH PUB.NO. 00-4842 – October 2001. Additional information regarding raising healthier kids can be found at <http://www.letsmove.gov/>

B. Music. The following songs emphasize the importance of children to the Lord or focus our attention on the plight of our children:

- Jesus Loves the Little Children. By C. H. Woolston and George F. Root
- He’s Got the Whole World in His Hands. By Hezekiah Brinson, Jr.
- Greatest Love of All (I Believe the Children Are the Future). By Michael Masser and Linda Creed. Sung by Whitney Houston
- What about the Children? By Yolanda Adams
- Children of the Heavenly Father. By Caroline V. Sandell-Berg and Ernest W. Olson

C. Children’s Sabbath. This is an annual program to promote awareness of children’s issues and our role in addressing these issues. Please also use it as an opportunity to let children express their concerns and questions. For instance, a Children’s Sabbath or Children’s Day is a great opportunity to talk with children about health. Determine if they understand what it means to be healthy. **Include a discussion with parents concerning what it takes to rear healthy children especially if the parents are poor. Given how many of our children are unhealthy such discussions should occur at least once each quarter.** It is also an opportunity to have children participate in worship services. Also, there is no reason that a church has to hold a Children’s Sabbath just once each year; why not do so once each quarter. The following websites may be helpful in providing ideas for your celebration:

- <http://childmin.com/eng/programs.php?index=1>
- www.childrensdefense.org/childrenssabbaths
- <http://www.childrensdefense.org/child-research-data-publications/data/childrens-sabbath-manual-planning-section-2010.pdf> - (Children’s Defense Fund Website)
- <http://new.gb-gm-umc.org/resources/annual/childrens-sabbath/>

D. The Children’s Defense Fund. This website—<http://www.childrensdefense.org/>—has a wealth of information regarding children of all races, as well as information that is ethnic-specific. A portion of their mission statement is, “The Children’s Defense Fund Leave No Child Behind[®] mission is to ensure every child a Healthy Start, a Head Start, a Fair Start, a Safe Start

and a Moral Start in life and successful passage to adulthood with the help of caring families and communities.”

Notes

1. Wikipedia, “Children’s Day.” Online location:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Children%27s_day accessed 9 May 2011
2. Children’s Defense Fund, “Marian Wright Edelman’s Child Watch Column: Celebrating and Protecting Health Reform for Children.” 1 April 2011. Online location:
<http://www.childrensdefense.org/newsroom/child-watch-columns/child-watch-documents/celebrating-and-protecting-health-reform-for-children.html> accessed 17 May 2011
3. Ibid.
4. Keck, Leander E., et. al. The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary: Volume VIII. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995, 372.
5. Ibid., 374.
6. Ibid., 375.
7. Think Exist.com, “Mary McLeod Bethune Quotes.” Think Exist 1999–2010. Online location:
http://thinkexist.com/quotes/mary_mcleod_bethune/ accessed 17 May 2011.