



CHILDREN'S SUNDAY (Birth–Age 12)

CULTURAL RESOURCES

Sunday, June 1, 2008

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I. An Opening Poem

Ysaye M. Barnwell's composition, "We Are," celebrates children as evidence of the unbroken chain of life in the universe. The lyrics state that each child is called into this life pulled and protected by the prayers of the elders and the ancestors.

We Are...

For each child that's born
a morning star rises
and sings to the universe
who we are.

We are our grandmothers' prayers.
We are our grandfathers' dreamings.

We are the breath of our ancestors.
We are the spirit of God.

We are
Mothers of courage
Fathers of time
Daughters of dust
Sons of great vision.

We are
Sisters of mercy
Brothers of love
Lovers of life and
the builders of nations.

We are
Seekers of truth
Keepers of faith
Makers of peace and
the wisdom of ages.

We are our grandmothers' prayers.
We are our grandfathers' dreamings.
We are the breath of our ancestors.
We are the spirit of God.

For each child that's born
a morning star rises
and sings to the universe
who we are.

We Are One.¹

II. Songs on Becoming Like a Child

As a child, I grew up hearing the adults in our congregation sing these African American spirituals testifying that as Christians we strive to become as children.

Anybody Ask You Who I Am (Traditional)
Anybody asks you, who I am, who I am, who I am
If anybody asks you, who I am
Tell them I'm a child of God.

Talk About A Child Love Jesus (Traditional)

Talk about a child love Jesus, here is one, here is one
Talk about a child love Jesus, here is one, here is one
Talk about a child love Jesus, talk about a child who do love Jesus
Talk about a child love Jesus, here is one, here is one

III. Historical Offerings

A. Children’s Day is a celebration of children and a special time to honor the efforts of staff and volunteers who find their witness in the offering of time and energy to be sure there are constant activities devoted to the ministry of the young people of the community. In doing this work, it is important to be mindful of Kahlil Gibran’s offering, “On Children.” Here, Gibran speaks of children as living elements of the unbroken strand of universal life. Our children are not our property; they come through us and should be blessed and supported by a loving community.

On Children

Your children are not your children.
They are the sons and daughters of life's longing for itself

They come through you but not from you,
And though they are with you yet they belong not to you.

You may give them your love but not your thoughts,
For they have their own thoughts.

You may house their bodies but not their souls,
For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow,
which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams.

You may strive to be like them,
but seek not to make them like you.
For life goes not backward nor tarries with yesterday.²

B. In 2002, David Hicks MacPherson, a Universalist minister, summarized pertinent history about the celebration of Children’s Day:

The formalization of a day in the work of the church in celebration of children, dates back to the nineteenth century, and the work of Universalist minister, Reverend Charles Leonard (1822-1918). Reverend Leonard, who also served as Dean of Ministry at Tufts University, began his ministry in Chelsea, Massachusetts. Feeling that children were not properly recognized or celebrated, in 1858, he set aside a Sunday for that recognition, which became known as Children’s Day. On this day, families sat together, and at a point near the close of the service, children were brought forward by their

parents to participate in what was then called a ceremony of Baptism and Dedication. This was followed by a short prayer and congregational hymn. After the service there was an informal reception for the families. Dr Leonard called it "...a soul-feast after the manner of the early church."

Over the years elements in the service have been added, changed, or dropped. For example, today children are no longer baptized, but they continue to be welcomed into the guardian fellowship of the church. The parent or sponsors, and the congregation, each in turn welcome the children and promise to raise them to be a credit to them and to the world. In our church we say:

Dedication:

As members of this congregation it is our task to strengthen each other in every high resolve. This must apply to the infant, the child, and the youth as well as the adult. Therefore, we will do our best to make of this meeting house a home wherein these children may learn that love, patience, honesty, courage, beauty, and service to humanity are real values, shared and sought after by real people. Our hearts will always be open to the persons in their failures as well as their triumphs. This do we covenant with them and their parents.

In 1862, the second Sunday in June was selected as the day for regular celebration. By 1867 the concept had spread so that the Universalist General Convention, meeting in Baltimore, Maryland, adopted it and commended it to all Universalist societies. In 1868, the Methodists recommended it to their churches, also for the second Sunday in June. In 1883, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church did the same³

In the decades that followed, other denominations including the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and the Church of the Nazarene adopted the custom. It may be the only holiday founded by religious liberals that has gained some measure of public acceptance.

IV. Reverend Nancy Crawford Sanders Remembers...

There was a time that many in the church believed that children should be seen, and not heard. As a child, I was blessed to experience being welcomed and needed as a part of the workings of our local African American church congregation. There was a time set aside in the service called "children's moments," when we were brought to the front of the church to share what we had learned in our Sunday school lessons. The opening session of Sunday school was attended and shared by all, with a small service of song, prayer, and scripture before we all moved into individual classes organized by age. With our teacher we read and discussed the lesson, for that particular Sunday.

I seem to have had a double portion of sharing as a child, because my grandmother, though not academically trained as a teacher, was a Sunday school teacher of great faith and wisdom. She never let a Saturday night go by without teaching me the Sunday school lesson for Sunday morning. I was taught to read the Bible at age five, and would travel with her to the Wednesday night prayer meetings. There were few children present, and many of the elderly

did not know how to read. However, my grandmother would always volunteer me. This was my opportunity to be seen as well as heard. They would stand me upon a milk crate, and I would read the scripture. Until this day, I can still hear the voices of the elders saying, “Read baby, that baby sure can read!”

We all sang these songs at Children’s Day celebrations:

Jesus Loves the Little Children

Chorus:

Jesus loves the little children,
All the children of the world.
Red and yellow, black and white,
All are precious in His sight,
Jesus loves the little children of the world.

Alternate chorus:

Jesus died for all the children,
All the children of the world.
Red and yellow, black and white,
All are precious in His sight,
Jesus died for all the children of the world.

Verses:

Jesus calls the children dear,
“Come to me and never fear,
For I love the little children of the world:
I will take you by the hand,
For I love the little children of the world”.

Jesus is the Shepherd true,
And He’ll always stand by you,
For He loves the little children of the world;
He’s a Savior great and strong,
And He’ll shield you from the wrong,
For He loves the little children of the world.⁴

Perhaps the most well known children’s song is “Jesus Loves Me.” It was composed in 1860 by Anna B. Warner, after Anna’s sister Susan had asked her to write a song for a Sunday school teacher who wanted to cheer a dying boy. Later, David Rutherford McGuire added stanzas two and three. The song first appeared in the Anna B. Warner novel, Say and Seal.⁵ In 1862 William B. Bradbury composed the music and added the refrain.

Jesus Loves Me

Jesus loves me! This I know
For the Bible tells me so.
Little ones to Him belong;

They are weak, but He is strong

Refrain:

“Yes Jesus loves me!

Yes Jesus loves me!

Yes Jesus loves me!

For the Bible tells me so.

“Jesus loves me! This I know,
As He loved so long ago,
Taking children on his knee,
Saying, ‘Let them come to me.’

“Jesus loves me still today,
Walking with me on my way,
Wanting as a friend to give
Light and love to all who live.

“Jesus loves me! He who died
Heaven’s gate to open wide;
He will wash away my sin,
Let His child come walking in.

“Jesus loves me! He will stay
Close beside me all the way;
Thou has bled and died for me,
I will henceforth live for Thee.

(Note: this next stanza which was central to the original inspiration and function of the composition is today commonly omitted in hymnals)

Jesus loves me! Loves me still,
Though I’m very weak and ill,
That I might from sin be free
Bled and died upon the tree.”⁶

African American mothers, beginning at the time of slavery, have had the twisting pain of taking care of the babies and young children of other mothers, while leaving their children outside of the warmth and comfort of their care. The lyrics of this lullaby often sung to rock a white baby to sleep, also captures the pain of a mother aching and worrying about her child who is not being rocked and held.

All the Pretty Little Horses (Traditional)

Hush-a-bye, don’t you cry

Go to sleep you little baby

When you wake, you shall have cake

And all the pretty little horses
Blacks and bays, dapple and greys
All the pretty little horses

Way down yonder, down in the meadow
lies my poor little baby
The bees and the flies pickin' on its eyes
Poor little child's crying Mama

Hush-a-bye, don't you cry
go to sleepy little baby
when you wake, you shall have cake
and all the pretty little horses.

V. A Safety Zone for Children (Within the Home, the Community, the Church)

A. As we move further into the twenty-first century, within our communities, churches, schools and families there are endless dangers on the journey of child rearing. Many of our children now grow up without being invited into a church family.. This situation, which is not only local but global too, impacts our many efforts to act as responsible parents and caretakers to all children, especially children being born into brutal and fractured societies. For example, there are child soldiers in Sierra Leone and Central Africa, children of 8 and 9 years are forced to commit acts of brutality against other children, forced to kill or be killed, and kept drugged so they have no time to internally focus on what their acts are doing to them. There are groups trying to find ways to assist these children to find their way forward, to be healed from their internal horror, and to be reconnected to communities. It is hard for these young children, and hard for the communities who still carry the scars of these battles on their bodies, and who mourn those they have buried. How does the church become a global safety zone for our young people? And how viable are programs that we put in place to deal with these problems?

B. The United Nations and UNICEF

The need to address the care of children has been taken up in many different ways during the twentieth century. Soon after its establishment, the United Nations realized that it had to make some effort to guarantee children certain rights, just as governments granted rights to full enfranchisement to adult citizens. UNICEF, begun in 1946 as a part of the support of children in Europe at the end of WWII, became a permanent part of the UN in 1953. Its Declaration of Children's Rights, was aimed at raising international consciousness and ultimately to effect international actions.

UNICEF'S Declaration of Children's Rights

The right to affection, love and understanding
The right to adequate nutrition and medical care
The right to free education
The right to full opportunity for play and recreation
The right to a name and nationality

The right to special care, if handicapped
The right to be among the first to receive relief in times of disaster
The right to be a useful member of society and to develop individual abilities
The right to be brought up in a spirit of peace and universal brotherhood
The right to enjoy these rights regardless of race, color, sex, religion, national or social origin.⁷

C. Young People Organize to Join the Fight Against Famine

A great example of young people being pro-active community members took place at People's United Church of Christ in Washington DC, as the congregation neared the season of Thanksgiving. The young people of the church decided to do a special project to raise awareness concerning world hunger.

During this season, when families gather for a time of great feasting, the young high school and college members organized a project that included fasting and eating a minimum amount of food, coupled with sponsorships. The funds raised went to support projects fighting world hunger. The project had as a key element an unusual feast where some participants had no food, others had very inadequate portions and others ate from a regular plate. After they conducted their research, they asked for and gained time during Sunday services to report to the congregation on the problem of world hunger. The presentation was informative, if sobering, for all in attendance.

VI. A Rap for Children

Nitanju Bolade Casel, of Sweet Honey In The Rock, composed a 'rap' that is a declaration that children are the source of light, strength and positive living.

Young and Positive

I am young, and I'm positive
I am the future, I'm gonna' tell it like it is
I won't let anything stand in my way
My eyes are on the prize and they will stay that way

I've got self respect and a whole lot of pride
I won't let you pull me down into a negative stride
Down a dead end street where only trouble lies
That's not the way to keep my eyes on the prize

I am Young! I am Positive!
I am the future, I'm gonna tell it like it is!
I won't let anything stand in my way,
My eyes are on the prize and they will stay that way!⁸

Notes

1. Barnwell, Ysaye M. "We Are." Sweet Honey in the Rock, and Sonia Sanchez. Sacred Ground. Redway, CA: EarthBeat! Records, 1995; used by permission. See children's book of same name: Barnwell, Ysaye M., and Brian Pinkney. We Are One. Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 2008. Online location: www.ymbarnwell.com accessed 28 January 2008
2. Gibran, Kahil. "The Prophet." 1923. Online location: Gibran online location: www.leb.net/gibran accessed 28 January 2008
3. MacPherson, David Hicks. "The Meaning of Children's Day." Unitarian Universalist Association. Online location: <http://archive.uua.org/re/faithworks/winterspring03/worship/worshipe.html> accessed 28 January 2008
4. "Jesus Loves the Little Children." Anonymous
5. Warner, Susan and Anna Bartlett Warner. Say and Seal. Philadelphia, PA: Lippincott, 1860.
6. Warner, Anna B. "Jesus Loves Me."
7. UNICEF. Online location: www.unicef.org/index.php accessed 28 January 2008
8. Casel, Nitanju Bolade. "Young and Positive." Sweet Honey in the Rock. I Got Shoes. Redway, CA: Music for Little People, 1994. Used by permission.