



CHILDREN'S SUNDAY (BIRTH-AGE 12) (BUILDING SELF-ESTEEM) LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

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Lection – Philippians 4:13 (New Revised Standard Version)

I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Today, we celebrate children ages birth–12. This is when we again ensure that our children know that they matter to us and to God. Typically, in black churches, Children's Sunday is a time when we see Sunshine choirs (choirs for children under 10); these choirs are also known by numerous other names. We may see children serve as ushers or greeters, and they may be called upon to read Scriptures, play hand bells, or do liturgical dances. This is the time when parents who have brought their children to church get a chance to see what the children have learned, how they are progressing, and, my favorite, how they will act in public—squirming in chairs, chatting with buddies, or sitting quietly and acting well-behaved.

But much more than a time when we put children on display, each Children's Sunday is a time for adults to be attentive for two other reasons. One, Children's Day is a moment in the life of a

church when a church makes known its priorities—in this case, they make known whether children really matter. It can be discerned whether children and the ministries that serve them are really being given the level of attention and funding they need. Do we see loving Sunday school or Sabbath school teachers for all ages? Are they well-prepared to teach children? Has the church provided them the funding to aid children whose reading skills are deficient? Does the children's choir sing music that challenges children and teaches them messages they need to hear? Are auxiliaries and departments that include children training them to do more than go through the motions of ushering or passing out programs? Is time spent teaching children to read and understand Scriptures?

Second, Children's Day is a time when adults get to hold themselves accountable as the church out of which children will emerge as leaders or as those who give up on the church. Children's Sunday is the moment when adults are also on display. Do we show up as loving adults who live before children and support children's ministries financially so that children know that they matter to us and to God?

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Philippians 4:13

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

Erik Erikson (1902–1994), a German-born American developmental psychologist known for his theory of psychosocial human development, believed that the initial stages of human development are: 1. Trust vs. Mistrust (birth–age one), 2. Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt (ages 2–3), 3. Initiative vs. Guilt (ages 3–5), and 4. Confidence vs. Inferiority (ages 6–12). Because this unit focuses on children from birth to age twelve, I have only included the first four of Erickson's eight stages.¹ The stages I address cover human development from birth to age twelve. Each stage poses a unique developmental task and simultaneously confronts individuals with an “opportunity” or issue that they must resolve.

In stage one (Trust vs. Mistrust), Erikson suggests that an infant must form a loving, trusting relationship with his or her caregiver, or he or she will develop a sense of mistrust of people and life. The child will also later learn when it is healthy to mistrust. In stage two (Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt), a child's energies are directed toward the development of physical skills. Erikson suggests that if a child is unsuccessful with physical skills, the child can develop a sense of shame or self-doubt. In stage three (Initiative vs. Guilt), a child continues to become more assertive and to take more initiative. If this stage is not successfully completed, Erikson posited that a child will develop a sense of guilt due to their failure to show initiative. In stage four (Industry vs. Inferiority), the child must deal with the demand to learn new skills or risk a sense of feeling inferior due to his or her failure.

Each stage in Erikson's theory is concerned with becoming competent in an area of life. If the stage is handled well, the child will feel a sense of mastery, which is sometimes referred to as ego strength or ego quality. I would term this as self-esteem. If the stage is managed poorly, the child will emerge with a sense of inadequacy. In each stage, Erikson believed people experience a conflict that serves as a turning point in development. In Erikson's view, these conflicts are centered on either developing a psychological quality or failing to develop that

quality. During these times, the potential for personal growth is high, but so is the potential for failure.

I present this synopsis of Erikson's stages to make clear that I believe that the development of self-esteem is a psychosocial, step-by-step process. Although I believe, as did Erikson, that people can grow and change throughout their lives, it is also clear that the potential for growth can be severely harmed or stunted depending upon how children are reared from birth to age twelve.

Self-esteem issues have become one of the most prevalent concerns among today's youth. Self-esteem can be defined as a feeling of pride in one's self and one's abilities. As I meditate, reflect, and write this commentary on Philippians 4:13, I am noticing an ever-increasing influence of today's culture impacting our children like never before. With influences and pressure from magazines, music, movies, television, the internet (social media), and their peers, children today are persuaded to act certain ways, look certain ways, not be confident in themselves, and even treat themselves negatively because they don't fit what the "status quo" indicates they should be or should look like.

Now more than ever, the Church and families are needed to instill in children a healthy sense of self at the earliest age and to continue this process until children reach adulthood.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

In the first clause of the focus verse for today, "I can do all things..." the Apostle Paul writes as the voice of experience. By looking back at his life, he reaches this bold conclusion. This was indeed a bold conclusion given that the real possibility of death still faced Paul for his work for Christ (Paul writes this letter from prison) and given that so many of the missionary work that he has done could end in abysmal failure. Many of the congregations he helped form were still fledgling. Paul speaks confidently that he can withstand any trial, subdue any evil propensity of his nature, and meet all of the temptations incident to any condition of adversity. Nothing would be required of him by God that he would not be able to perform. This declaration was not a vain self-reliance, nor was it a mere result of his former experiences. He knew well where the strength was to be obtained by which to do all things.

From where would Paul find strength? Why does he speak with such certainty and boldness? The answer is found in the second clause of this verse, "through Christ which strengthens me." Paul had an abundance of experience of the strength that Christ was able to impart. Now he entirely relied upon Christ in all things. He was now wise enough to know that his strength could not be found in his capacity as an orator, his passion as a missionary, or even his understanding of Hebrew Scripture and his high knowledge of Greek culture. His strength was derived from the Redeemer. Through the power given him by Christ, Paul was able to overcome and endure all things.

Paul's message, though not one from a child to children, is just the message on which children need to be reared, especially African American children who are bombarded with negative images and messages from the moment they are born. Without intervention—early intervention,

at that—the healthy development of our children is negatively interrupted and perhaps permanently interrupted. As I said earlier, the development of one’s self-esteem is a process. By making Christ and the Word of God essential aspects of our children’s development as early as possible, we increase the probability that they will grow up to be confident, well-adjusted adults. With the help of parents, family members, the Church, and the community, our children are buttressed to become teens and ultimately adults who are not mainly driven by the mores and movements of society. Instead, they will blossom as adults who are leaders, compassionate and possessed of the skills and attributes that will allow them to leave positive legacies as did the Apostle Paul.

Challenge

This Scripture challenges us to put our total trust in the Lord and to teach children to do the same. As children trust in Christ, their self-esteem grows. This is made possible only as they are affirmed by adults who live as Christ-like examples before them. When a child feels that they’re not good enough, smart enough, or pretty or handsome enough, if they are taught well they will remember that because of God they are capable and they are fine just as they are. They will know that because God made them they are capable, because God does not make junk.

I want to challenge adults to speak positive, godly messages to your children and to all children. When your children wake up in the morning, help them to know that they are a King’s Kid. Post Scriptures on their walls to remind them who and whose they are! They can feel good about themselves because God is pleased with them. Every day and in every way, let them know that they matter to God and that they matter to us.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details in this passage include but are not limited to:

Sounds: The screams within the prison from which Paul wrote; the conversations among prisoners; the dialogue between guards and prisoners; the discussion among those who received Paul’s letter;

Sights: A dark, damp prison; bare prison walls; underfed prisoners; persons in the house churches gathering for the reading of Paul’s letter; young black children walking through poverty-stricken neighborhoods; young children in schools with bad lighting and inadequate school equipment; churches embracing children during worship services; children sitting to discuss their pain and questions about who they are and their value; and

Emotions: Paul’s certitude about the strength that he has because of Christ; Paul’s resolve as he considers the circumstances that he has faced and those he may face; sad children; anxious children; proud children; well-adjusted children; and children who are happy because they believe God loves them as they are shown love by adults.

III. Other Material That Preachers and Others Can Use

“About all you can do in life is be who you are.”

—Rita Mae Brown

“The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams.”

—Eleanor Roosevelt

Note

1. For further information about Erik Erikson’s theory of psychosocial human development, visit http://psychology.about.com/library/bl_psychosocial_summary.htm.