



CHILDREN'S SUNDAY (Birth–Age 12)

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, June 1, 2008

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Lection - Luke 18:15-17 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 15) People were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them; and when the disciples saw it, they sternly ordered them not to do it. (v. 16) But Jesus called for them and said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. (v. 17) Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.”

I. Description of Liturgical Moment

The black religious experience overflows with familiar examples of how children are venerated and appreciated in black religious life. In many traditions, a special Sunday is set aside for children to lead the worship service. In these moments, reading skills are honed, speaking skills are improved, and communal praise is lavishly bestowed upon the young, nervous reader, singer or worship leader as worshippers shout out, “Amen!” Well done!” “Good job!”

In recent years, sacred dance has been another way for the little ones to connect with something greater than themselves. A standing ovation is automatic when the final measure of Donnie McClurkin's "Stand" is played as young fists are raised in the air to demonstrate the power of God to deliver the weary hearts of African Americans who survived another week in a racist and immoral culture. Vacation Bible School is a yearly summer attraction for parents with little ones, and boy scouts and girl scouts are recognized in evening programs for special trips taken, new badges earned and fundraising activities. Given such a beatific setting, how do we account for the abuse of children going on in our churches right under our noses? If a little child had the power to stop abuse he or she would. Jesus said, "Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." Too often, we take the rights and personhood of children so lightly, it is almost difficult to take Jesus seriously here. From the pulpit, we praise the old days when "beatings" were commonplace. Imagine how we would feel hearing a white pastor praise the old days when beatings of niggers was the way to maintain discipline? "We didn't beat the niggers too much, just enough to make them mind us! That's what we need to start doing again!" How would we feel? Jesus wants us to feel with children—have compassion. Eighty-five percent of men who are incarcerated were abused as children, 85%! Until every church has a practice of investigating the background of every one supervising its youth, including clergy and church school superintendents, then we are leaving our children open to more abuse. Jesus welcomed the children into his protective arms, and so must we, if we want to enter God's kingdom.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Luke 18:15-17

Part One: Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

My own church life as a child was ideal. I was surrounded by loving and responsible adults at Riverview Baptist Church in Richmond, Virginia, under the leadership of Reverend Dr. Ralph Reavis. The saint, Vera T. Johnson, who led my Girl Scout troop and read the announcements every Sunday, continues to read announcements today at age 94. From the brownies, to the girl scouts, to the youth usher board, to the youth choir, my mother had me involved in as many church activities as she could schedule. As a teenager, I participated in the Miss Riverview fundraising pageant. I raised funds for missions, and wore my gown as my boyfriend escorted me down the church aisle on the big day. Many of our church mentors came out on that special evening to encourage our development into charitable Christian women. Despite this idyllic setting, even Riverview did not have a policy in place to protect children from predatory behavior. At that time, in the seventies and eighties, I never would have thought such a policy was necessary. We are now learning that our sincere expectation that all church members will do the right thing is not enough. It never has been. People do wicked things. If we did not, we would not need Christ.

When I became a woman, I learned to put away childish beliefs. The commonly held belief that I had to relinquish was the expectation that devout congregations cared more about the welfare of children, than the reputation of predatory adults. As an ordained

minister, I learned over and over again that women and men had been betrayed by their church leaders in childhood. Adults betrayed by the church in their youth are commonplace throughout American Christian churches regardless of racial make-up. Recently, a local predominantly white and highly influential congregation experienced a great betrayal when it learned that one of its youth leaders had been going on trips with youth, and taking pornographic images and privileges with children for years. This was a highly trusted member of the church. A gift of discernment would not have given him the green light to work with the kids. When it comes to our children, the gift must also be confirmed with as much background data as possible. If an adult abuses for the first time, or despite our checks and vigilance, we are not at fault when abuse occurs. But, when we fail to hold each other accountable, the abusing hands might as well be ours in God's sight—"reprove your neighbor or incur guilt yourself (Lev. 18:17)." In a local black church, a minister on staff was arrested for sexually assaulting his daughter. The church immediately rallied behind the father, and "sternly ordered [the child] not to do it (report the father)." She did and a year later the minister-father was found guilty. We can deduce from scripture that God expects our little ones to grow up in congregations that do not show favoritism to adults by protecting adults at the expense of a child's long-term mental health and safety. Providing children with the same access to the protection given to adults is what Jesus demands in our lection. Grown-ups are not more special than children, and Jesus takes his message of impartiality to a new level. Not only are grown-ups not particularly special compared to anyone else, but if we want to enter Jesus' Kingdom we must become as the little ones (pure at heart) we so easily sell out.

If at this point you are wondering if this is a hard way to describe our behavior, consider these questions. Aren't we really selling children out by pushing the issue of abuse away when it comes up? Aren't we really selling children out by not adopting policies that protect them? As we prepare to preach in our contemporary context, we should ask ourselves the following question: what were the children feeling when Jesus' disciples pushed them away? Sold out by the disciples maybe?

Selling a child out may not be something we intentionally do. The truth is that we are generally overwhelmed and lack resources to handle these situations. We are caring parents, grandparents, pastors and ministers. On the whole, we have great and pure motivations with respect to our little lambs. Children's Sunday is the day that we remind ourselves that Jesus always wants us to give special attention to children. Jesus reminds us in our lection that creating a welcoming and safe environment for little ones is what he demands today. It is time to take a break from adult activities and create a safer environment for our children (see suggested resources below).

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

In general we spread our protective wings over little ones. In the average African American church the person who is known to treat children with an uncharitable attitude will not be approached to participate in children's ministry. We want our little ones in the presence of the most treasured loving hands of grandmotherly, grandfatherly, and great-

aunt-like figures. In our twenty-first century liturgical moment, this level of protection is a great start. Yet, just as there was room for improvement for Jesus' first century disciples, so there is room for improvement for us. Too many of our children are brought to Jesus only to experience the theological and cultural betrayal of their lives. In a time of extreme emotional crisis when the Messiah is needed, we often keep children away from Jesus. Every sexual predator in a black church knows that Jesus' little black children are fair game. Come work with our children. No questions asked. In the eyes of our little ones, Jesus is the pastor. What would Jesus do now?

The impulse of the first century parents described in our lection is not unlike the impulse of parents today. Parents want their children near Jesus. Parents want their children to be touched by the things of God's kingdom on earth. They want their children healed by the man from Galilee, and the only way they know how to do this is to bring their children into the safety of Jesus' loving embrace. What parent in the first century would have ever suspected that the need of a child would be treated as an inconvenience by Jesus' disciples?

Our lection, Luke 18:15-17, is nestled between two passages that address presumptuousness and arrogance in people who hold positions of spiritual authority. In the preceding pericope, Luke 18: 9-14, Jesus warns listeners not to think that they are more righteous than others simply because they can be obedient. In the end, the sinner tax-collector is justified and the self-righteous Pharisee who tithes and fasts could not be justified. He was mistaken to presume that he was greater in God's sight than he was in actuality. The lesson is clear, a correct lifestyle does not guarantee us that God will attribute righteousness to us. In the pericope that follows our lection, Luke 18:18-30, a rich ruler is troubled to learn that following the Ten Commandments perfectly has not earned him eternal life. To be perfect, he must give all that he has to those who are poor. The rich ruler acts righteously, but like the Pharisee, it is not attributed to him as righteousness.

The passages that frame our lection are parables that serve to strengthen the chastisement actually given to Jesus' disciples who saw parents bringing children to Jesus and "sternly ordered them not to do it." The Lucan author is leading us to draw a similar conclusion here as in the preceding and following passages: being a disciple of Christ is not the way righteousness is measured, and living righteously is not how one obtains eternal life. **Our ability to treat the welfare of those left out as equally important as our welfare is the measure of righteousness.** If the righteous Pharisee is not justified (Luke 18:14), and if the obedient rich ruler is not guaranteed eternal life (18:22), who then is admitted to the Kingdom? Each pericope in this tri-partite lesson on God's impartial judgment provides an answer. The people we typically mistreat and exclude will inherit eternal life:—sinners (Luke 18:9-14); children (Luke 18:15-17), and poor people (Luke 18:18-30).

Jesus' care for little children is in the middle, of these lessons. This is our hermeneutic clue that the cause of children is central to Jesus' teaching. Those least able to defend themselves, Jesus has come to defend and give his life for (Luke 18:31-34). Between

sinners, children and poor people, children are least able to defend themselves from the presumptuousness and arrogance of spiritually self-righteous people. A child's total dependence on a just and merciful God is a characteristic that Jesus considers worthy of emulation and respect. If an adult does not emulate godly child-like qualities, then that adult "will never enter" the kingdom (Luke 18:17). We can celebrate that a child-like faith that shows no partiality will lead us into God's eternal kingdom. Jesus welcomes the child, he prefers children, whether youthful children or aged children, it is the heart of a child that he wants to cultivate within us.

Consider a child unfettered by the baggage of abusive adults and a neglectful community. What qualities might such a little child have that we need to emulate? Isn't she quick to forget an offense that occurred on the playground on a previous day? Doesn't she seek, seek and seek until she finds what is sought? Doesn't he love those who spank him? Isn't he ashamed when he discovers that he is wrong? Doesn't he try to do better the next time? Doesn't he play with anyone who wants to play? Doesn't she share her princess dress with her friends? Doesn't he pick the lonely new kid in town to be on his team?

As adults on the receiving end of adult privilege, Jesus is demanding a lot by expecting us to emulate children. Yet, how much more are our little ones inclined to emulate us if we can recapture the child-like spirituality of our youth that adult crustiness has eroded or buried?

Celebration

With God all things are possible (Luke 18:26). We must conclude with hope that it is also possible to turn what could be a hypocritical moment on Children's Sunday (if we continue to neglect children) into a Kingdom moment by transforming our houses of worship into sanctuaries of safety for our children. We can celebrate that from this day forward, no child in need of protection and safety in God's Kingdom on earth, will find adults who look out only for each other and "sternly warn" parents not to bring their children with their concerns. We can celebrate that in the wake of many church scandals we have the capacity to develop church policies that require adults who work with children to be screened. Just as Jesus protected children, so will we on each and every Children's Sunday and every Sunday in between. After all, the kingdom belongs to people like them (Luke 18:17). Jesus loves the little children!

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details in this passage include:

Sights: Children rushing toward Jesus; parents bringing infants to Jesus; disciples fussing about children getting in the way; and

Sounds: Jesus rebuking his inner circle; and children laughing with nervous relief as a grown-up, Jesus, comes to their defense.

Suggested Resources

- Articles, books and training on How to End Sexual Abuse in the Church:
Faith Trust Institute online location: www.faithtrustinstitute.org
- Background Check Support for Churches: online location:
ChurchBizOnline.com
www.churchbizonline.com/backgrnd_checks.htm
OxfordDocumentManagementCheck.org online location: www.oxforddoc.com

(These are examples of help available not an endorsement of these particular services by the commentator, the lectionary team, the lectionary director, Vanderbilt University, Hope for Life, Inc. or the Lilly Endowment).