



CHILDREN'S SUNDAY

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, January 17, 2010

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Lection - Lamentations 4:2, 4, 10 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v.2) The precious children of Zion, worth their weight in fine gold—how they are reckoned as earthen pots, the work of a potter's hands! (v.4) The tongue of the infant sticks to the roof of its mouth for thirst; the children beg for food, but no one gives them anything. (v.10) The hands of compassionate women have boiled their own children; they became their food in the destruction of my people.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

In some ways, to have a designated “children’s Sunday” suggests that children do not normally play a prominent role in Sunday worship services in many African American congregations. For instance, we do not have “adult Sunday” because adults are already a core constituency of any worship service. Thus, on this Sunday, we affirm the presence and involvement of children in the Church in an age when many children are being abused and neglected. On this Sunday, the Church says children matter to us and to God by having children play a vital role in the service. Children are in leadership on this day and have voice—singing, praying, ushering, reading scripture and poetry, creating artwork, and testifying, etc.; they are present in a very visual and aural/oral way. They are not silenced and are visible, because they have gifts and worth as shown by their involvement. They are a crucial component of the Church. They are not dismissed out of worship to their place (e.g., children’s church or Sunday school) but they are given a place in the space where God’s people worship, affirming that they too have worth just because they are created in the image of God.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Lamentations 4:2, 4, 10

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

I was nurtured in a loving home by a mother and father. I was the last child, the baby. I was given attention and affirmed over and over again. As I look back, this experience is a gift from God because all parents or guardians are not like mine. There are some parents who are perpetual punishers. I don’t mean a periodic spanking. I mean ongoing black and blue abuse of little black innocent bodies. A beating becomes a “beating up.” When someone does this, a child is viewed as subhuman and not worthy of human respect.

The National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) reported an estimated 1,530 child fatalities in 2006 due to abuse or neglect. This translates to a rate of 2.04 children per 100,000 children in the general population. The younger they are, the more vulnerable they are. The tiny ones are mostly terrorized and it is one or both parents who are responsible for about 76% of these cases.¹ Because of these statistical facts, my heart breaks as a parent. To think that of the 1.39 million people involved in forced commercial sexual exploitation 40–50 % are children baffles and angers me.² Why an innocent child? They have worth and are wonderful gifts from God.

What these statistics show us is that Jesus may love the little children of the world, but some humans demonstrate by their actions that they do not. Children need advocates to say “Stop the abuse,” because children are “worth their weight in fine gold.” We must lament the fact of child abuse and in doing so cry out with deeds with love for children.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

The Hebrew poet of Lamentations is crying out with grief as he copes with a crisis. At least he cries out and does not remain silent. He expresses his grief in five poems and this is what we should do in regards to child abuse—grieve and do it loudly. The poet mourns the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BC. It is a total disaster; thus, he laments for “the precious

children of Zion” who were once “worth their weight in fine gold” (v.2). The city is desolate and there is much anger. God is questioned because of this reality but in the middle of the book, the poet confesses that the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases (3:22-23). However, in chapter 4, a clear picture of the catastrophe is painted. There is no sense of love from God and no obvious love for the children.

The fall of Jerusalem has been devastating to many parties. Children are thirsty and hungry (v.4). No one shares a drink or food. Everyone is out for themselves. Even the previously wealthy and noble classes are experiencing a lack of nourishment (vv.5, 7-8). And worse yet, “compassionate women” boil their own children for a satisfying meal (v.10). Helpless children are devoured by hurting people in exile. Life is so bad that even the compassionate ones become uncaring cannibals. Children, who were at the bottom of the social pyramid, end up at the bottom of someone’s stomach. If this isn’t abuse at its worst, I do not know what is. Some may debate the historical accurateness of these verses, but what the poet does is depict artfully and imaginatively the psychological state of those who were living in these disastrous times. Life was death for many, especially children. Life was no “crystal stair”³ and was a serious scare for innocent children. They had no power and were being devoured. They were obviously viewed as worthless creatures.

Today, children continue to be abandoned in garbage dumpsters and left to die, produced but not cared for and devoured and consumed for others’ own selfish purposes. They did not ask to come into this world, and if they are brought into this world they must be cared for and loved as children of God. We must teach them the words of this poem, “I hear the angel say, ‘I am God’s child’.”⁴ They should not be begging nor boiling (vv. 4, 10). “Rough side of the mountain” times will come, just as in Lamentations, but children should not be sacrificed on the altar of our suffering. They are God’s creation and are of worth, created in the image of God like every other human being. In addition, when children cannot receive appropriate healthcare, education, or nutrition, they are also being neglected. They may be breathing, but they are dying, when we mistreat them physically, psychologically, emotionally, and spiritually. How can we do this when they are “worth their weight in fine gold?” How can we do this when they are “God’s children?”

The lamenting poet demonstrates what can happen when we forget that children are golden. He is truthful and honest in his depiction of disaster. By doing so, he implicitly encourages us to give voice to our contemporary plight and the abuse of children. This is a great resource in times of crises. We can name the painful reality but then we must cry out for those who have been silenced and mistreated. The treatment of children then and now should tear us apart and lead us to protest against any form of child abuse and neglect, for these are “God’s children.” That in itself gives them worth.⁵

Challenge

God created children and they are worth their weight in fine gold. They are God’s creation. We must cry out against child abuse and neglect. If we lament child abuse, we

are saying we love children. If we do not lament it, we are culpable for the abuse. Children are precious in God's sight and we are called to treat them as such.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details in this passage include:

Sounds: Children begging for food; the screams of children being boiled;

Sights: Gold; earthen pots; thirsty infants with tongues sticking to the roofs of their mouth; women's hands as they devour children;

Smells: The smell of the flesh of boiling children; and

Textures: The smooth texture of gold; the grimy feel of pottery being made; and the comforting feel of the hands of compassionate women.

III. Sermonic and Liturgical Suggestion

A helpful resource about children and for children is Marian Wright Edelman's Guide My Feet: Prayers and Meditations for Our Children. Harper Paperbacks, 2000. Some of the prayers and meditations may be used throughout a sermon or could be used throughout other aspects of the worship service for this day. Other works by Edelman may also be aids for reflection as one prepares for this special children's Sunday.

Notes

1. For more statistical information about child welfare, see see U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Child Welfare Information Gateway. Children's Bureau/ACYF online location: <http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/fatality.cfm> accessed 5 October 2009. One organization that is doing significant work in the area of child welfare is The Annie E. Casey Foundation. For more about their online location: <http://www.aecf.org/OurWork/ChildWelfarePermanence.aspx> accessed 5 October 2009
2. For more facts on children internationally please see see UNICEF's online location http://www.unicef.org/media/media_35903.html accessed 5 October 2009
3. For this poetic reference, see Langston Hughes' poem "Mother to Son."
4. This is a refrain in the poem "I Heard the Angel Say I am God's Child" written by my father, the Reverend W. Byron Powery.
5. I am thankful for the insights of David J.A. Clines, Emeritus Professor at the University of Sheffield, for his reflections on this passage. For his work, see <http://www.shef.ac.uk/bibs/DJACcurrens/Lam.html> accessed 5 October 2009