

“Jesus and the Children”
Matthew 19:13-15
June 25, 2006: Outdoor Service

What a wonderful day this is out here among all this beauty. Today our focus is on the last window in our sanctuary---“**Jesus and the Children**”. This window was given by friends of Rexine Booth in her memory. The artist was Arthur J. Tatkoski of Albuquerque. The window was dedicated on February 13, 1972.

The window was in honor of the love that Rexine Booth showed to the children and youth of the United Church, this according to the history of United Church by Helen Lindberg.¹

To us here today such an honor is no surprise. Many congregations have plaques, paintings, buildings, or windows that honor those who have taught and nurtured the children. Although this is no surprise to us it would have been to persons living a few centuries ago.

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I had an interesting experience preparing this sermon. I assumed that children were an important part of the church and families throughout much of history. In fact I discovered it was otherwise. Our interest in children, the energy we put into our families, the work we do in trying to be good parents or good extended family, of including children in church---all this is relatively new in western Judea-Christian history.

¹ Lindberg, Helen A., One Body, One Spirit, The Ecumenical Experience at the Church on the Hill, p.84.

In the typical Roman family of the time of Jesus the male father held all legal rights and held all power. A father had total control over the family including deciding whether to put to death any of his children. The Roman father could sell any child at any time for any reason. He also held all the power over his wife, other female relatives living in the household and all slaves. He could punish, banish, denounce, divorce, or execute any and all at his choosing.²

Children have not had a great history. In many early societies children were sacrificed to appease the gods. In Carthage a cemetery was discovered that was filled with 20,000 urns deposited there between four hundred and two hundred BCE. The urns contained the bones of children sacrificed by their parents.³ It has taken eons and generations for the status and treatment of children to improve.

Even in recent history the story of children has not been all that positive. With the industrial revolution inhumane child labor practices grew. In England child labor and the horrific conditions in the workhouses were made known through the writings of persons such as Charles Dickens. In the United States various forms of child labor including slavery, indentured servants and masses of child laborers doing very hazardous work has existed throughout our history. This began to change in the 19th and early 20th century as societies passed laws regulating all labor including child labor. In most of these cases the movement to end child labor and slavery was initiated and pushed by churches.

² <http://www.realm-of-shade.com/RomanaeAntiquae/family.html>. "The Roman Family".

³ deMause, Lloyd, "The History of Childhood As the History of Child Abuse", http://www.primalspirit.com/deMause3-1_ChildAbuse.htm.

As early as 1832 New England unions condemned child labor abuse.⁴ However, local child labor laws were for the most part ignored. In 1904 the National Child Labor Committee was organized by socially active persons. It was not until 1941 when the Fair Labor Standards Act was declared constitutional by the Supreme Court that things truly began to change in our nation. Child labor was prohibited under age 16 with some exceptions. Children under age 14 and 15 could be employed in non-manufacturing, non-mining and non-hazardous occupations outside of school hours and during vacations.⁵

Today there is a growing global problem with child abuse and child labor. The International Labor Organization (ILO) has estimated that 250 million children between ages five and fourteen work in developing countries many in horrific conditions. In some nations four-year-olds are tied to rug looms to prevent them from running away.⁶

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Well what about the bible? Surely children were important in biblical times---weren't they?

It is interesting how rare stories involving children are in the Bible. In most cases the child is incidental to the story. There is the story of Abraham sacrificing his son Isaac---not much of a positive role model there. Then there is the story of the baby Moses being abandoned and set afloat in the River Nile--- sort of a variation on the "Home Alone" theme. The child Joseph is mentioned briefly in that his brothers sold him into slavery. David is mentioned briefly as a

⁴ "Child Labor in U.S. History", http://www.continuetolearn.uiowa.edu/laborctr/child_labor/about/us_html.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ <http://hrw.org/children/labor.htm>. "Child Labor".

child in a story where Samuel identifies him as the future king. The best and almost only child story is the story of Samuel and Eli where the boy Samuel receives the call of God. That is a great story about a child.

The New Testament is not much better. In two gospels there are birth stories about Jesus but the focus of the story is on Mary, Joseph, shepherds, and the wise persons from the east. There is a brief story of a young Jesus in the temple and then this text in Matthew (and Mark and Luke) of Jesus welcoming the children. There just are not that many stories involving children in the Bible.

What about advice and teaching about family values or raising children? Contrary to all the books, videos, tapes, seminars, and sermons there is surprisingly little in the scriptures. Most of the advice that is drawn upon comes from the Book of Proverbs which is a practical, folksy guide to all sorts of things including raising children.

I chuckled when I looked up the texts on one website that presented itself as the “Seven Keys to Raising Godly Children”. The advice was not that bad except the author did what so many do---he started with his conclusions and sort of attached bible verses to make it look as though his ideas came out of scripture. Under his section on discipline he agreed with the Proverbs text that one should “use the rod” but I wonder if he actually read some of his other texts cited to support strong discipline. One was from Deuteronomy 21:18-21---from the law---that gave parents the right to kill stubborn or rebellious children. I doubt if that would hold up today.⁷

⁷ www.biblestudylessons.com. “Raising Godly Children: Bible Principles for Parents to Follow in Family Training”.

I found web sites that argued both sides of the discipline issue from biblical texts. Again my impression is that much of the advice is good but the process was finding texts to justify an already held viewpoint rather than the other way around.

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Today one finds a lot about children, books FOR CHILDREN, books about children, books on parenting and much of this contains some excellent advice. J. Ann Craig writes for the United Methodist Women on “Children of the Bible”. She writes, ***“Children were often inserted into the Bible stories as objects to make the point to adults. Even our favorite stories about children who became great leaders, such as Moses and Jesus, were written long after the fact to make a strong case for their leadership. ‘But’, we might ask, ‘what’s wrong with that?’ Nothing is wrong with using children as object lessons, but children are also interesting people and have their own perspective. Children’s view of life is often overlooked because it is assumed that ‘they don’t understand’ or ‘they don’t have enough experience’. Yet engagement in a child’s life can lead to an additional level of relationship with children---and with texts written about them---that can be rewarding.”***⁸

Today one finds the church inclusive of children, supportive of children, building buildings for children, and staffing for children. **All this is a refreshing change from most of our history.**

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⁸ http://gbgm-umc.org/umw/mission_studies/Childrenofthebible/Introduction.htm.

All this may have begun with that simple incident recorded in Matthew, Mark, and Luke in which Jesus gathers the children and blesses them. In **Mark 10:13-14** when the disciples rebuked people who were bringing children to Jesus (and the Disciples were acting as they had been raised—not being mean), Jesus rebuked the disciples and said ***“Let the children come to me, do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God.”***

In **Mark 9:33** and following Jesus puts a child on his lap and uses the child as an example. Jesus was countering the argument among the disciples over who would be the greatest in the kingdom. Jesus, using the child, said, ***“Whoever receives one such CHILD in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me.”***⁹

Matthew shares a similar story in **Matthew 18**. Here Jesus says, ***“Whoever humbles himself like this CHILD is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”***¹⁰ Luke has a similar story in **Luke 9:46**.

Joanna Dewey in the book Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Commentary¹¹ writes,

Mark presents another paradox: the way to true power in God’s realm is the opposite of what the world recognizes as power. God’s realm is a place of service, “diakonia”. This is ordinary service---waiting on table, taking care of children.....The twelve men are called to do women’s work. The Markan Jesus (she goes on) immediately gives an example: he places a child in the midst of the Twelve and instructs them that to receive a child in his name is to receive Jesus and the God who sent Jesus. In ancient society the child was not a symbol of innocence or purity of heart.

⁹ Mark 9:37

¹⁰ Matthew 18:4

¹¹ Cramer, Robert Nguyen, “Jesus and the little children”, <http://www.bibletexts.com/glossary/little-children.htm>. Reference is cited from Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Commentary, edited by Elizabeth Schussler, Fiorenza NY, Crossroad, 1994, page 490 in Joanna Dewey’s commentary on Mark 9:30-37.

At the bottom of the hierarchical structure, the child was most easily and perhaps most often exploited. By making the child the symbol of the one to whom service is rendered, the narrative makes explicit that service is to be given to those with less power in society not those with more.

This brings into focus the radical nature of Jesus who time and time again moved beyond the barriers and walls of his time to include people who were powerless and excluded. Jesus may not have agreed with their lifestyle or actions---but Jesus said that God loves all people.

Jesus set the goal---the standard when he was inclusive of Samaritans, persons of other religions such as Gentiles, persons who had been socially ostracized, enemies, persons labeled by others as “sinners”, outcasts, women, and children.

It is we who have resisted the gospel---it is we who only in recent history have given women equal status. Please note that the church is still in disagreement over this issue. The recent election of a woman as bishop of the Episcopal Church is stirring controversy as many still believe that women have no role as church pastors.¹² It was not until the 19th and 20th century that women were recognized and given the right to vote, that labor laws were passed protecting women, and that women’s equality has become normative. However, in many parts of the world and within the west this is still controversial and the forces to take us backward are still present. So even though Jesus practiced

¹² Bannerjee, Neela, “Woman Is Named Episcopal Leader”, New York Times, June 19, 2006, found at <http://nytimes.com>. From the article, “Some critics were quick to focus on her sex, asserting that her election was an affront to others in the denomination who oppose the ordination of women. They described it as further evidence of the church’s drift from the shared beliefs of the greater Anglican Communion.”

inclusiveness and many in the early church held women and men equally it took centuries for this idea to nurture and grow.

The same is true of children. Jesus once again embraced and lifted up the powerless and taught that children were to be welcomed and valued in the kingdom of God. We celebrate today the ministry to children, the contribution of children and the window that honors them.

In closing sometimes children can provide us some insight into ourselves.

“A little boy in church for the first time watched as the ushers passed around the offering plates. When they came near his pew, the boy said loudly, ‘Don’t pay for me Daddy, I’m under five!’”¹³

“A little boy was overhead praying: ‘Lord, if you can’t make me a better boy, don’t worry about it. I’m having a real good time like I am.’”¹⁴

“The preacher was wired for sound with a lapel microphone, and as he preached he moved briskly about the platform, jerking the mike cord as he went. Then he moved to one side, getting wound up in the cord and nearly tripping before jerking it again. After several circles and jerks, a little girl in the third pew leaned toward her mother and whispered, ‘If he gets loose, will he hurt us?’”¹⁵

“After the church a little boy told the pastor, ‘When I grow up, I’m going to give you some money.’

‘Well thank you,’ the pastor replied, ‘but why?’

‘Because my daddy says you’re one of the poorest preachers we’ve ever had!’”

AMEN

¹³ <http://the.honoluluadvertiser.com>.

¹⁴ “Sunday School Humor” http://www.jaredstory.com/church_children.html.

¹⁵ Ibid.