

God's Children are Our Children

A sermon preached by the Very Rev. James A. Diamond at Christ Church Cathedral, Cincinnati, Ohio, on Sunday, October 8, 2006.

We celebrate Children's Sabbath in two weeks and by all rights this sermon ought to wait until then. But the end of the Gospel today and the events of the past week compel me to say something this morning about children. We begin, of course, with Jesus' partiality to children. The DaVinci Code notwithstanding, we believe that Jesus did not have any children of his own. But we know that he cherished children very deeply and did not consider them a distraction that diverted him from the task at hand. Children were indeed a deep and profound focus for him. Whether or not we are biological mothers and fathers we are all parents because God's children are our children.

That is a very appealing intellectual concept: all of God's children are our children. Jesus did not pose that to us as something for the head, not even a nice emotion for the heart but as a way of living. So how do we care for the children among us?

Let me begin with a story that most of you witnessed a number of months ago right here. There was a man who came to church with his four young children. Anyone who is a parent knows that four young children in church are going to be a handful. They are going to get our attention. But in this case, the youngest child, a toddler, began to scream and yell and we all pretended she was not there. Everyone looked around or looked at somebody else. Finally, mostly because I am a dad but also because I care and may be a little braver than most, I went down and picked up this child and held her. There was no magic to that. She simply needed to be held. But I had hoped that the message to the congregation would be that this is *our* child, not that child who is making noise and disturbing me. Thereafter, any of you would feel empowered to go and take care of a child in distress.

I learned sometime later that the message you received was if a child is in trouble - the Dean will take care of it! That was not the message; nor was the message that one of us in vestments, clergy, the choir, or the lay Eucharistic ministers would take care of crying children. Let me be clear: I wanted to say to you that when one of our children was in distress that any one of us could have picked her up. You, who are parents, know what it is like to be in church with a child who does not want to be there. You know how embarrassing it is, how you want to creep down low in the pew but the child will not let that happen. All of God's children are our children and if there is a child among us who is distressed, we are all called to help that child. Do not wait. Go and do it.

How do we care for the children in our society? I will look at education, poverty and protection but I begin with the late, great Margaret Mead. Some of you will not remember her but she was a great Episcopalian and an anthropologist. In one of her last series of addresses, she talked about the fact that in our time, there would be two distinct groups of people, those who had children and those who did not - for a variety of reasons. In Margaret Mead's opinion we only become real citizens, engaged citizens, when those

two groups are interwoven and work together. She gave us a way of testing that thesis. Where is the nearest crosswalk to your house and how safe is it to cross the street? Everyone with a young child knows the answer to that question but all of the rest of us, if we are to have this co-operative child care and to take our children seriously, need to know about these basic concerns.

Now let us look at Margaret Mead's thesis translated into education. What is the quality of the local public school closest to where you live? Do you know the answer? Would you find out the answer because it is so critically important to the life of children?

We express our priorities partly in the way we spend money. Here in the United States we think nothing of plunking down eighty billion dollars to fight a war in Iraq but when it comes to a local school levy, we splice it and we dice it and we try to get it just as low as we can. We spend one dollar on education for every five dollars on the military. All God's children are our children and they deserve better.

In the United States we have children, about fifteen million children who live in poverty. One out of every four American children lives below the poverty line in this, the richest nation in the world. Twenty two percent of Americans under the age of eighteen, twenty five percent of children under the age of twelve are hungry every single day. Every day twenty six hundred children are born into poverty and twenty seven children die of poverty. In our homeless population, forty percent are people who are families with children. All God's children are our children and they deserve better from us.

Now let us turn our attention to the protection of children. Seventeen years ago, an organist who worked for me committed suicide and I learned in the wake of his death that he was a pedophile. But what I also learned was that members of my congregation knew that and made sure that I did not find out because they were afraid he would lose his job. Does that shock you? It ought to! Just as you ought to be appalled by how the leaders of Congress dealt with Representative Mark Foley. It is the same issue. If we are serious about protecting our children then we do not allow anything to come between us and our care and our protection for them. All of God's children are our children and not one of us would want our children to be abused.

What does it take for us to be serious about children in our lives? What does it take for them to be a real priority? It takes violence. The violence, the murder committed in our schools in the past two weeks is appropriately shocking to all of us. From Colorado, to Wisconsin, to Pennsylvania, the mayhem in our schools is a sign of our need for moral leadership.

Many of us were particularly distressed by the events at Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania. Perhaps these school murders upset us is because the Amish live such simple, authentically, faithful lives, which leaves them less cynical, less street wise, and therefore more vulnerable than the rest of us. But the real lesson from Nickel Mines is not about the deaths of those young girls but rather the reaction of that entire community. The thirteen year old in the classroom who realized what was happening said to the murderer:

kill me. Let the rest go, just take me. The children who escaped went into a farm yard next to the school; they were frightened but they were prayerful and they were not hysterical. But it is the forgiveness that came immediately from the Amish community that so completely astonished us and touched a very deep chord within us.

It is a rare sign of God's presence when forgiveness can be so freely offered when our children are taken from us. Yet this should not be such a surprise. We who hold up reconciliation as a defining value of our congregation know better than most about the power of forgiveness. We know that Jesus taught us to offer genuine forgiveness even before we hear an apology. What we now learn is that the Amish understand an even deeper aspect of forgiveness, that the healing of all the victims, the surviving children, the families of those who died and those who survived, the community but also the family and friends of the murderer, the healing of all of these victims could not begin until forgiveness had been offered.

At a point in history when religion is used as the grounds for mob violence, suicide bombings, hundreds of partisan deaths and war, a small Christian sect who live in an unadorned Christianity and shun attention quietly step onto the world stage and show religion to be the grounds for forgiveness and reconciliation. The Amish see Charles Roberts, the murderer of their daughters, as one of God's children whom they forgive. In this we see what real moral authority is and how moral leadership works. We have every right to be astonished but if you are going to be overwhelmed be overwhelmed about the right thing, not the Amish themselves but the power of God in Christ working through them.

God did not will the deaths of those young girls. God is surely abiding with them and their families and friends. What God is doing is actually for the rest of us. There is grace even in such tragedy and that grace is for us. We who share the horror of the death of God's children, our children, that day in Nickel Mines receive, in the forgiveness offered such a moving example of absolute trust in a Christ centered faith, an opportunity to grow closer to God ourselves. And also to understand, anew, what it means to receive the kingdom of God as a child. Amen.

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