

Children's Sabbath: Etching God's Law on Our Hearts

A sermon preached by the Rev. Canon Joanna C. Leiserson at Christ Church Cathedral, Cincinnati, Ohio, on Sunday, October 21, 2007.

“Will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”

Imagine being one of the poorest of the poor in the world around you. Imagine being powerless because of your status in society, being dependent totally on the power and the sense of fairness of others for your well-being or even for your very survival. In Jesus' time, this was the status of the widow—if you are a widow, you cannot inherit your husband's property, so upon your husband's death you have lost not only your spouse but also your place in society and your means of support. There is no one to defend you or protect you, no social welfare program, no equal opportunity employment, no right-to-work laws. And if somebody treats you unfairly, your only hope for justice is a fair-minded judge who is willing to lift up the powerless at least as much as he would bow down to the powerful.

But how frustrating it is when your only recourse to justice is a judge who doesn't seem to care about justice. How easy it would be, to give up and just accept the fact that when you are being treated unjustly, “this is the way things are,” because the way things are, the person who is supposed to protect you and your interests just doesn't seem to care. I think that many of us have experienced this kind of powerlessness when we have tried to take a problem to a large company and have confronted an endless bureaucracy that seems cleverly designed to foil your every move. Now there is powerlessness in the face of power. If this is what you are faced with all the time, WOULD you find faith on earth that you will ever be heard?

In Jesus' time, the widow was the symbol of utter powerlessness and vulnerability. She was without voice in her society. In our time, among the most voiceless ones are the children. Although in recent history we have begun to advocate more for the welfare of children, they remain among the most vulnerable in this world, including our own rich and privileged nation. Like the poor widow, children are utterly dependent on the fairness of a social system for their welfare and even their survival. And like the poor widow, families who cannot afford health insurance often find themselves trying futilely to coax humanity out of bureaucracy, appealing again and again to get treatment for a sick child, and finding themselves turned away because they don't have the money to pay for their child's health. Imagine what it must feel like, having to calculate the value of your child's life in dollars and cents and coming up short.

The Children's Sabbath, which we are observing today, is an interfaith and ecumenical event sponsored by the Children's Defense Fund. We observe the Children's Sabbath to raise up the needs of children in a society and a world in which children are often overlooked, neglected, abused, ignored, and unheard. This year, the theme is a timely one: to advocate for health and mental health coverage for all children. In this country

alone, we are looking at nine million children without health coverage, unable to receive the medical aid needed for either acute or chronic illness and injury, and without even the most basic life-giving protection that all children need. In the larger picture, we are looking at millions of children whose health is endangered because in their living situation they lack decent food, clothing, housing, education and other basic necessities. Like the widow, we turn over and over again to our leaders for justice. I find it incredible to listen to the endless wrangling about the recently-vetoed children's health insurance bill, and to see how long it is taking to provide coverage for our children, especially when I compare this process with the extent and the speed of our deliberation to wage war.

But God showed us another world, a world of hope for our children. Today's message of hope begins with Jeremiah. "This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel," says God. "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, 'Know the Lord,' for they will all know me." As Christians, we see this new covenant fulfilled in Jesus. At last on earth, in Jesus we had a judge who proclaimed the open arms of God. We had a judge who, in his life and ministry with us, lifted up the poor, blessed the children, and spread a table of plenty for everybody to share. We had a judge who turned power upside down, giving the kingdom to the poor in spirit and the place of honor to the last and the least. And this judge gave us this commandment: to do the same for others—to love others as he loved us, and to serve others as he served us, and to live with God's love written in our hearts.

And today he adds, Keep knocking on the door of justice. Keep praying for justice. Pray the silent prayer of our hearts for the health and well-being of all children. Pray the spoken prayers of our lips, with the gathered assembly of this church, so that our prayers are heard throughout the community and by the judges of this world. And pray with our hands and our lives, to advocate for justice and health for our children in the public and political arena. "Will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night?" When by our prayers and lives we knock on the door crying for justice day and night, each knock will etch God's law a little deeper into our hearts.

Imagine a world in which we truly live as people of God. Imagine a world in which God's law were etched into our hearts and revealed in our lives, by the hourly and daily practice of caring for others, and especially the most vulnerable of our society. If God's law were written on all our hearts, I believe that we would not allow a world in which children die from preventable malnutrition and disease. If God's law were written on our hearts, we would not tolerate a world in which children live in chronic illness because there is no one to treat them. If God's law were written on our hearts, we would not tolerate a world in which families have to decide whether the family eats or a child gets medicine.

Most of all, we would not need to be reminded what it means to know the Lord, that all children of God deserve to be treated with care and compassion, and be given life and health. As Jeremiah says, if God's law were etched in our hearts, we would already know the Lord. You would see Him in the faces of the children.