



# FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“HOW ARE THE CHILDREN?”

Scripture Lessons: Matthew 18:1-9

*This sermon was preached at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina, by Dr. Daniel W. Massie on Sunday, October 4, 2009.*

While this is World Communion Sunday and brothers and sisters in Christ from grass huts to grand cathedrals are coming together around the Table of the Lord as an expression of our unity in Christ, I have decided to focus in worship today on the plight of children in America and throughout the earth. To focus on children when the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper are being administered seems quite appropriate to me. As Presbyterians we believe that these two sacraments are not only gifts from God but also invitations to respond on behalf of God's most vulnerable children. We are reminded of our covenant commitment to God and to one another.

When an infant is baptized we promise to care for and nurture her into the covenant life of discipleship. At the Lord's Table we are all fed together, young and old, as God's children and are challenged not only to feed upon the Word symbolized in bread and wine but to follow the Word incarnate and to obey the Word recorded. Caring for children within the church family and outside of any church or any family is one way we fulfill our promises taken at baptism and demonstrated at the table.

This idea to focus on children on this World Communion Sunday began to germinate a few months ago. It started really when John Pasch, one of our choir members who spends part of the time in Santa Fe, NM recommended an anthem that was sung by the choir at the First Presbyterian Church in Santa Fe, where he also participates. The piece of music was entitled “The Prayer of the Children” and our choir will be singing it today as a part of worship. The story behind its composition is as poignant as the anthem is beautiful.

Kurt Bestor was serving as a missionary in Serbia during the 1970's. He lived and worked among different races and religions in that war torn country --- Serbians, Muslims, Croatians, Christians Orthodox, Catholic, and other. At one point he was working in a hospital caring for the children who had been so devastated by this war that was not their own. One day he went to a neighboring village to get supplies and while he was away the hospital where he worked was bombed and completely destroyed. All of the innocent children he had cared for were killed in that bombing.

When Bestor returned to the United States, he was inspired to write a song in tribute to the children, to the innocent little ones who suffered the most from that tragic conflict, a civil war that pitted Serbian and Croatian families and relative against one another and Muslims and various kinds of Christians against one another as well. As with most wars, it did not decide who was right but only revealed who was left --- and many of the young, the innocent, the poor, and the vulnerable proved to be the primary victims and casualties of that conflict. And so, to combat his own sense of hopelessness Bestor composed the melody and the lyrics of “Prayer of the Children” which helps us to identify with their plight and their pleas.

“Prayer of the Children” – Andrea S. Klouse

Can you hear the prayer of the children on bended knee,  
In the shadow of an unknown room?  
Empty eyes with no more tears to cry,  
Turning heavenward toward the light.  
Crying, “Jesus help me to see the morning light of one more day,  
But if I should die before I wake, I pray my soul to take.”  
Can you feel the hearts of the children aching for home,  
For something of their very own?  
Reaching hands with nothing to hold on to,  
But hope for a better day.  
Crying, “Jesus help me to feel the love again in my own land,  
But if unknown roads lead away from home,  
Give me loving arms, away from harm.”  
Can you hear the voice of the children softly pleading,  
For silence in their shattered world?  
Angry guns preach gospel full of hate,  
Blood of the innocent on their hands.  
Crying, “Jesus help me to feel the sun again upon my face!  
For when darkness clears, I know you’re near, bringing peace again.  
Can you hear the prayer of the children?”

It was not long after John’s letter that I was reminded that the Presbyterian Church has joined with other denominations in declaring 2001 – 2011 The Decade of the Child, a time when God’s people are to focus on doing what we can to protect, nurture, and to care for the youngest among us, in this country and beyond. The hymn that we sang a few moments ago is actually the hymn that was selected as the winner of a hymn competition for this Decade of the Child.

Surely there can be no question but that the Lord God has a passionate and vested interest in children and expects the same of his people. Stories abound in the Bible praising those who risk their own lives in order to safe guard the lives of innocent children, from the Egyptian midwives named Shiphrah and Puah in Exodus 1, who defied Pharaoh’s order and refused to destroy the male children being born to the Hebrew mothers during Egyptian captivity, to Mary & Joseph and the Wise Men who refused to be a part of King Herod’s plan to slay all the boy babies at the time of Jesus’ birth. The parents fled and the Wise Men refused to return and report back to Herod. When the baby Jesus grew up and became a man and initiated his ministry he was a tireless advocate for children and warned those who would harm them or put stumbling blocks in their paths, or cause them somehow to go astray or to fail to find the life God intended for them.

Now I know some of you must realize that the “little ones” referred to in Matthew 18 refers, not just to young children, but to new and immature Christians who have recently come to faith. But there is no question but that Jesus loved, welcomed, guarded and valued children.

I wonder if the same can be said of us and of other adults throughout the nation and the world. I know statistics do not tell the whole story and can be distorted but neither can they be ignored. Here are just some that suggest to me at least that our little ones are in jeopardy:

- Around the world approximately 50 million births go unregistered each year.
- Over 1 million children are trafficked world wide each year, many purposes for sexual exploitation.

- It is estimated that approximately 250,000 serve as child soldiers around the world.
- Well over 100 million children world wide have no school to attend.

Closer to home in the U. S. there are other statistics:

- Over 5,000 unaccompanied children are detained each year by immigration and naturalization services.
- Because of poverty, malnutrition and neglect, there is an increase in the numbers of low birth weight infants, which also adds to the number of infant deaths and disabilities.
- There are an estimated 906,000 children who are victims of abuse and neglect every year in the U.S., and our local newspapers reports new cases almost every week.

While extremists on both the right and the left seem determined to push their own agendas when it comes to health care in America, surely the majority of reasonable people in the middle should be able to push for a health care system in this country that provides both health and hope to its citizens, and especially the young. Clearly what we have in place now is riddled with inequity, injustice, and greed. A new study suggests that 11.5 million kids end up without medical care for at least part of the year. Surely God's people cannot stand idly by and do or say nothing. Just since the beginning of this 110<sup>th</sup> Congress some 1 million children have been born without health coverage. Ever 47 seconds a child is born lacking health coverage and sometimes there are fatal consequent.

An article in this past Wednesday's Post and Courier reported that 17.4% of South Carolina residents have no health insurance. And since the poor tend to have more children than people of wealth, I would have to assume that the percentage of children whose families cannot afford or even find health insurance because of pre-existing conditions is even higher. And I refused to believe that the people of South Carolina are content to allow this circumstance to continue.

In Kenya among the Masai people the traditional greeting acknowledges the high value the tribe places on the well being of children because they ask, "And how are the children?" Even tribe members without children are greeted in this matter. And their traditional and expected response is, "All the children are well." Would that all the children were well in the world and in our own country, even in our own church. Frankly I worry about how we are nurturing even our own children and grandchildren. I frequently question the priorities and commitments of too many young parents today.

Are we doing an adequate job of preparing and equipping children to be knowledgeable, responsible, disciplined members of both the church and the larger society? Are we passing on and sharing the faith that we claim to profess? The church can provide wonderful resources like our family resource guide prepared for each family in First (Scots). We can offer Sunday School classes and Kirk Club programs, but if our parents don't require their children to participate and if they don't reinforce Christian beliefs and a Christian lifestyle at home, then we ourselves are guilty of putting stumbling blocks before the little ones. Our very apathy and ineptness when it comes to the Christian faith can cause our own children to go astray. And we must do better if the church or the nation are to survive in the generations to come.

For example, are you as parents and grandparents teaching and training your children about generosity? Are you modeling generosity and discussing it in you family? If our children develop generosity as a habit of heart when they are young then they are far more likely to be generous and responsible adults, within the church and the community. So let me encourage parents and grandparents here today to sign up for one of the two forums scheduled for October 21<sup>st</sup> & 28<sup>th</sup> and

learn how you can better guide your children and God's children in this critical area of the Christian lifestyle. If they do not learn from us they are unlikely to learn at all.

Some of you may remember that for a children's sermon last year I gave \$10 to each child who came down for our Time for the Children and told them they were not to spend the money on themselves but they were to use the \$10 to help other people. I also asked that they report back to me how they had invested their money serving others in God's name. There were 33 children that came down the isle that Sunday. I remember because I pulled out \$330 from my own pocket. But how many of those children proved to be accountable and responsible? I don't know but I do know this: only 3 of the 33 reported back to me what they had done with their funds. But is that a child problem or a parent problem? I think I understand somewhat better how the Lord feels when he gives us so much and tell us to use it wisely and responsibly, not just in meeting our own needs, but helping to meet the needs of others.

So, how are the children? If we cannot say with the Masai's and mean it that "all the children are well," then let us redouble our efforts at home and abroad, as Christian disciples and also as responsible citizens, and work to see that stumbling blocks are removed and stepping stones provided for all of God's children. And "Woe" to us if we are part of the problem and instead of the solution.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of Holy Spirit. Amen.