

“It is the Children”

A sermon delivered August 15th, 2010 at Foley UMC, by Dr. Lance Moore.

Deuteronomy 4:9-10

“Only be careful, and watch yourselves closely so that you do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them slip from your heart as long as you live. Teach them to your children and to their children after them. Remember the day you stood before the LORD your God at Horeb, when he said to me, “Assemble the people before me to hear my words so that they may learn to revere me as long as they live in the land and may teach them to their children.”

Proverbs 22:6 (KJV):

“Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old, he will not depart from it.”

Psalms 78:1-6:

“O my people, hear my teaching; listen to the words of my mouth. I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter hidden things, things from of old—what we have heard and known, what our fathers have told us. We will not hide them from their children; we will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the LORD, his power, and the wonders he has done. He decreed statutes for Jacob and established the law in Israel, which he commanded our forefathers to teach their children, so the next generation would know them, even the children yet to be born, and they in turn would tell their children.”

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You could finish this sentence in any number of ways:

“It is the children... who are our future.” “It is the children who most need our attention and help.” “It is the children who are our most important treasure.” “It is the children who most need us to teach them spiritual and empirical education.” All statements are true, and they are true because Jesus said as much and they are

true because the first twelve years of life mold us and set a pattern that tends to persist for a lifetime.

Jesus stated in Mark 10, “Suffer the little children to come unto me” —which means “be patient and allow the children to come to me.” It is an oft-cited example of Jesus’ love for the least and littlest in our world. But it is by no means the only time Jesus expressed his concern for children. In Mark 9, Jesus had also embraced a child in his arms, and healed another boy of convulsions; in Mark 5, he raised a little girl from the dead; in John 6, when his disciples were trying to dismiss a young boy, Jesus instead turned his attention to the lad and used the little boy’s lunch to feed a multitude; in John 4, Jesus healed a centurion’s young son. Clearly, Jesus placed great value upon children and wanted the best for them above all else. He warned us sternly that if we cause children harm, it would be better if the Mafia gave you a pair of concrete shoes and threw you off the Brooklyn Bridge!

As adults, we sometimes get amnesia about our childhood. We forget both the joy and the ordeal of it, and we deny the immense importance of both children and of childhood. Childhood is short in time but eternal in consequence. Poet Walt Whitman wrote, “There was a child went forth every day. And the first object he looked upon and received with wonder or pity or love or dread, that object he became.” Genetics aside, I think children are a blank slate or empty sponge—but only for a twinkling, because from the moment they emerge from the darkness of the womb into this bright world, they are wide-eyed, pricked-eared, and open-mouthed, swallowing reality in great, thirsty gulps.

The longer I live, the more counseling I do, the more convinced I am of how important, and fragile, are the childhood years. I believe 90% of one’s personality, and 50% of one’s destiny, are

determined in the first 12 years of life. For good and for bad, most of what we are as adults was shaped by childhood. I remember pretending I was a preacher when I was 7 years old, with my friends as the congregation sitting in the park. That very same year, I also heard the Beatles, fell in love with rock music, and started strumming a ukulele. And my earliest memories are where my brother and I would make up fantasy stories and tell each other stories. We'd sit down and say, "Let's think a story." And so those three things pretty much tell you who I am today: a preacher, a guitarist, and a writer. Just from my first seven years of childhood. I'm also proud to be a parent, but I guess we all learn how to be a parent from the start, even if you did not have parents, you had guardians or grandparents taking care of you. So we OUGHT to know how important it is for a child to feel loved and nurtured and taught.

Some of you have never been biological parents. But all of us do indeed have children, hundreds of them! Every child in this church is waiting for a good word from you. 200 years ago, Joseph Joubert wrote, "Children have more need of *models* than of *critics*." Children need encouragers. Children need Sunday school teachers, VBS workers, choir helpers, nursery workers, and more. You can, and should, make a difference in the life of a child. The late Fred Rogers, of the TV show "Mr. Roger's Neighborhood," wrote these words: "The roots of a child's ability to cope and thrive, regardless of circumstance, lie in that child's having had at least a small, safe place in which, in the companionship of a loving person, that child could discover that he or she was lovable and capable of loving in return."

But there is a more disturbing message in this sermon: while the first twelve years of life can be the fountainhead of great achievements and joys as adults, the converse is that in those same childhood years, we may bear greater burdens and experience scarring traumas vastly more terrible than what we face as adults.

Children live in a land of giants, where every problem and fear is bigger than they are. In this sin-ridden world, children are often the primary victims of evil abuse and economic injustice.

The Bible teaches that before the age of twelve, children are innocent. A five-year-old is an innocent victim of his parent's poverty. That is inarguable. Thus, Christians have a huge responsibility for the welfare and health of every child. In today's Scripture, the old-English word "suffer" was used by the King James translators to mean "allow, permit" the children to come unto Jesus. But there is something fitting in the modern meaning of that word. "Suffer" is exactly what millions of children do in our world today. And clearly, Jesus challenges us to do what we can to alleviate that misery and suffering. Society has a duty to the poor, especially when it comes to children.

People complain about government "welfare," but the government giveaways to the ultra-rich, to Wall Street and multi-nation corporations is a thousand times what is given to poor children. Right now, hundreds of wealthy companies are sheltering their assets in overseas banks and dummy Caribbean corporations—avoiding taxes, avoiding corporate responsibility, all the while exploiting child labor in the Third World for pennies an hour. Do you know why so many of the goods sold at Wal-Mart are made in China? Because Red China does not enforce protective child labor laws. And the executives of these corporations have built for themselves multiple, lavish mansions and palaces. Woe be unto those who made their wealth by extracting it from the hides of little Asian children. Woe be to anyone whose greedy, selfish, over-indulgence has been paid for by the back-breaking work of hungry children! These are the words of Jesus, not mine: "I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me. Then they will go away to eternal punishment...." (Matthew 25:45-46)

Hear the facts if you can bear it. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, nearly one-fourth of the Alabama's children are living in poverty—over 250,000. Of the 50 states, Alabama is ranked in the bottom 10 for low birth-weight babies, teen birth rate, and unwed mothers—and dead last for infant mortality rate.

Worldwide, 177 million children are malnourished. More than 100 million children in the developing world are without access to basic education. 1.2 billion people live on less than a dollar a day. Every day in the developing world, 30,000 children die from mostly preventable and treatable causes such as diarrhea, acute respiratory infections, malaria and malnutrition. [Source: [www.bread.org/hungerbasics/international.html](http://www.bread.org/hungerbasics/international.html)]

We don't like to hear these sad facts. In our comfortable affluence, we would like to continue under the happy illusion that if we just take care of our "own" children, we're doing our part. The statistics tell us that it is not enough to simply raise our own children. Jesus makes it clear that those who have been richly blessed have a Christian duty to bless others, especially the poor. I won't quote you a single verse to prove that assertion. You must read the entire Gospel, because on almost every page, Jesus trumpets the cause of the poor, the least of these and, by implication, the children.

I do not give you this as an empty challenge without some tangible means for you to respond. The first way you can and should respond is to share your wealth through a *tithe*, an offering given to God and God's Church. Another way to respond was mentioned earlier in this sermon: be an encourager and teacher to children right here among us. Keep your eyes and ears open; the Holy Spirit will show you opportunities to help children.

Finally, let's all be encouragers for those who work with and teach

our children. We have the Joy Center daycare right here, which is a ministry of this church that you and I sometimes forget to support. We have Sunday school teachers, and public school teachers, that we need to give regular kudos and encouragement to. In honor of our teachers, I share with you the following illustration that was sent to me this week:

“Dinner guests were sitting around the table discussing life and work. One man, a wealthy CEO, decided to explain the problem with education. He argued, “What’s a kid going to learn from someone who decided his best option in life was to become a teacher?” To make his point, he turned to another guest and said: “You’re a teacher, Bonnie. Be honest. What do you make?”

Bonnie replied with a smile and a twinkle in her eye: “You want to know what I make? Well, I make kids work hard. For kids who are doing their best, I make a C+ feel like the Congressional Medal of Honor. I make kids sit through 40 minutes of class time when their parents can’t make them sit for 5 minutes without an iPod or video game. I make kids think. Wonder. Question. I make them apologize and take responsibility for their bad actions. I make them read, read, read. I make my students stand and say the Pledge of Allegiance. Then, when people try to judge me by how much money I make, with me knowing money isn’t everything, I can hold my head up high and pay no attention because they are ignorant...You want to know what I make? I **MAKE A DIFFERENCE**. What do you make, Mr. CEO?”

Friends, when it comes to children, I hope you make a difference!

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