

Draw Near to Children, Draw Near to God

*Rev. Mark Seifried - Based upon Mark 9:30-37; James 3:13-4.3, 7-8a
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Congregational UCC*

I've shared with the congregation my belief that when we name a situation – a demon, if you will – that we take away the power it would have over us otherwise. There is no easy way to talk about one subject that I'll preach on this morning, so I implore your pardon if I make anyone too uncomfortable. I believe that the subject is important for us to talk about as a church. Because this congregation has outstanding programs for children and follows Church Safe policies, we have to revisit the subject periodically. We must always be vigilant in protecting our children. My message today is as much a challenge for us to look out for those at risk, as it is a caution parents and the church in their expectations for their children.

Today's gospel lesson struck me personally and not just because I love children and their attitudes toward life. For several years I ministered to a convicted sex offender – someone considered the “lowest of lows” by our culture. He spent time in prison because he was sexually inappropriate with teens. When I first met him he told me that he was cured. I could only half-heartedly believe him. There is no proof of a cure for pedophilia, but there can be healing. This man had spent four years in therapy, made amends with his victim's family, and put safe guards in place to protect both himself and children he might come in contact with. He was deeply remorseful after his release from prison. He complied with the systems our communities have necessarily put in place to protect children. He was required by law to register as a sex offender. He was required to inform his employers, neighbors, and any civic organization with which he volunteered of his crime and rehabilitation. Most employers would have nothing to do with him. He was a church musician – a very gifted one at that – but too big a risk for most churches. Some churches offered him a position after they heard him play the organ and saw the magic he could do with their choirs, but withdrew the offer after the proper boards and committees had time to discuss the ramifications of his presence in the church.

Before I go any further, I should tell you that this is the first time I have shared this story publicly. I have been afraid that no matter how I present it that some folks will think I condoned his behavior. In reality, the opposite is true. I am repulsed by the thought of anyone who takes advantage of children or abuses them. I call myself a pacifist, but I am not really in the true sense of the word. I know that I could not restrain myself if I witnessed someone abusing a child and would inflict bodily harm to prevent a child being abused. As a pastor, I've had to minister to too many adults who are still struggling with wounds inflicted many years prior. Beyond my professional life, I also have friends who are scarred by abuse inflicted upon them as children.

Although I have never been a victim of childhood exploitation, we are all victims because society suffers with the real victims. I have learned much by knowing people in such situations. I think that one of the reasons the Roman Catholic Church struggled with this issue for so many years is that the church has been mired in tremendous fear of speaking the truth. Moreover, I believe there is a huge sense of guilt among the church hierarchy that caused paralysis for many years. The church had systems in place that set pedophiliacs up for their atrocities – inadequate supervision of priests for instance. Ministry is never an isolated enterprise and must be owned by the community. We especially need the wisdom of other adults when ministering to children. The problem is deeper than that, though. People don't just wake up one day and decide to be sexual deviants. It begins in childhood and it must be owned by the culture if there is to be any improvement in the situation. Parents and churches must be careful in the ways they relate to children. Prevention is the best medicine we are taught.

My experience with adults who are inappropriate with children is that they were stunted in their early development. They weren't allowed to play with children their own age. As children, they were expected to act like adults. They were shamed for exploring their bodies as children and never were given a chance to witness healthy sexual role models. Most adults with a healthy sense of sexuality were raised in families who either spoke about healthy relationships and – or modeled them for the children.

It is not a coincidence that a culture whose doctrine says sex is intended solely for procreation has the highest incidence of sexual deviance.

This goes beyond religion. Places with low esteem for any sexual expression are rampant with deviants. Statistics show that the more sexually and socially conservative the community, the higher the rate of sexual transgression will be. For example, Nashville, TN, the home of the Southern Baptist Convention, has more sex shops than New York City. It is not ironic that conservative bastions have more sex offenders reared in their communities than the rest of the world. Fear drives malfeasance. Terrorists come from families and communities mired in fearful living.

We wonder how this happens. All world religions have faith and love at the heart of their teaching. Distortion of the faith through selfish ambition is a factor here. The question that was raised in our scriptures from last week is a question we are asked again today: As Christians, will we act from "wisdom from above" or will we act from fear, bitterness and selfish ambition. James tells us that the wisdom of God is "pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy." In other words, if one responds to another with wisdom, there is no room for bitterness, competition or fear. If one is craving power, conflicts emerge and social disorders are imminent. Some disorders are chemically induced, but some are not. Some come from a distorted sense of self.

Jesus knew this. And so, in the gospel lesson, we hear about a dispute among the disciples to determine who is the greatest among them. Mark recorded their actions stemming from their selfish ambition for all to see. The least we can do is learn from their mistakes and avoid doing the same. In the typical pattern of Mark, Jesus' prediction of his death is followed by a particularly embarrassing example of just how completely the disciples fail to "get it." All of the disciples manage to demonstrate both envy and selfish ambition. Scripture first says, "they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him" (Mark 9:32). Then as a cover up for their ignorance, the disciples devote their energies to arguing who among them is the greatest. Jesus tries to convey the message more clearly: "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all" (Mark 9:35).

While the disciples could have been *that* clueless, we must wonder why Mark has placed this same pattern of ignorance after each prediction. In the end, his idea of the perfect disciple is not among the 12 at all, but a blind beggar we meet in Mark's chapter ten (10:46-52). The disciples are blinded by their own agendas and cannot see what lies before them.

Our families and churches are sometimes like this. Mark reminds us that proximity to power and privilege is not always an asset; it is from last place that we can see most clearly. That is why Jesus holds up a child as an example. Children are rarely in places of power and privilege.

According to Jesus, children get it. Children act from awe, wonder and discovery more than any other emotions. Granted their exploration sometimes brings them into harms way, but usually not. Usually they find a world that responds to them with love. Usually they find healthy adults with wise answers to their questions. Usually they find that when they help others, their sense of self, their sense of goodness and righteousness increases.

That is what we have seen in our churches over the years. Churches like Townsend Congregational who welcome children are churches who encounter God because the adults appreciate the awe and wonder of the young ones. Churches who welcome children are less focused on etiquette and sometimes enjoy a little unruliness. People return to churches as adults where they were welcomed as children. They avoid churches where they were hushed or required to pretend they were grown-up. Children who were scorned and unwelcome act out when they become adults. Some continually attempt to go back to their childhood. Because they can't reverse time, they relate to children with unfortunate conduct and experiment with distorted behaviors. In most cases this could have been prevented if they were treated differently and just allowed to be child-like when they were young.

While we need to protect children from harm and provide safeguards for them, we need to welcome their childishness. They have insights into our world that are invaluable. Out of the mouths of babes comes the wisdom of sages and prophets. At a gathering of children from the United Church of Canada, youth workers listened to children talk about God and the church. The following wisdom comes from that gathering of sages:

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We are the children – children at a British Columbia Conference of the United Church of Canada.

We are the children of the church.

We are the church of tomorrow but we are also the church of today.

*We feel a part of the church: when you ask us to take part,
when we get praise for doing something, when we are called by our
names,*

*when we are invited to take communion (with you),
when we are sharing the load of ministry.*

*We do not feel a part of the church when we are not taken seriously,
when we are ignored, when big words are used, and we don't
understand them,*

*when we are asked to be "cute" for you,
when you call us by our brother's or sister's names,
when we are not invited to do the things we can do.*

*We are fun, enthusiastic, energetic, creative, warm, caring, smiling
people.*

We can help you play and enjoy yourselves.

We are competent and we are your future.

We need you because: You have answers,

*We need your examples, we need your care and support,
and of course we need your money.*

You make the group, we join.

We are all a part of the cycle. Soon we will be adults too

*We want you to know that we care about the problems of this world
And we want to help.*

Believe in us as we believe in you!

Together we will make a family that can help to heal the world.

As we welcome the little ones, let us be assured that we also welcome Jesus and

**the One who sent him to show us the way
of new life. Amen.**