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“Worshippers in Training”
A Sermon by Joseph S. Harvard

Genesis 1:26-27; Matthew 19:13-15; 22:15-22

October 19, 2008

This is Children’s Sabbath Weekend at First Presbyterian Church. We are extending the observance through this next week. Marilyn will close it next Sunday with a sermon involving children of our congregation.

This tradition began seventeen years ago when Marian Wright Edelman, who heads the Children’s Defense Fund, asked congregations all across this country to come together on the third weekend in October and remember and give thanks to God for our children and to think about our responsibilities for raising them as children of God.

On this Children’s Sabbath Weekend it is fitting for us to baptize a child, Mary Ellis Merritt. Nothing that we do signifies our attitude toward a child like the sacrament of baptism. It is a sacrament, a sacred moment, in our lives when we believe the grace and presence of God is evident to us in a special way.

There are two sacraments in the Presbyterian church, holy communion and baptism, but life is full of sacramental moments. None surpasses the moment in baptism when we claim that the child is not only a child of her family but she is a child of God, claimed by God in the waters of baptism, marked by the cross as the sign of God’s deep and abiding love for her and all of us. This child is initiated into the community of faith with the promise that we shall love and nourish her throughout her life. It is also a reminder that just as Mary Ellis is precious in God’s sight so are all the children because they too are made in the image of God.

The passage from Genesis that Joseph read for us earlier says it over and over again. When God decided to make human kind we were made in God's image, in God's likeness God made us all.

There are two passages from Matthew's Gospel that illuminate this theme for me. The first is Jesus telling his disciples not to forbid the children from coming to him: "Suffer the little children to come unto me," Jesus said, "for of such is the kingdom of heaven." Jesus' comment sounds so embracing, so warm and fuzzy, but we know from the culture in which Jesus lived that it was controversial. Children were often discarded by their parents.

Jesus is affirming the worth of every child; "red, yellow, black and white," as we learned to sing in Sunday school. They are all precious in his sight. "Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world." We love children and are grateful for their presence among us. But do we value all God's children? Take a look at the statistics on the flyer in your bulletin this morning. Look at how many of the children in North Carolina are living in poverty, "20% in Durham County." They get caught up from an early age in a cycle that leads from the cradle to the criminal justice system. There are ways that you and I can be involved in making a difference in the lives of our children in Durham. We can affirm what God said in the creation story. "All children are made in my own image" and what Jesus affirmed when he asked the children to come to him, "Suffer the little children to come unto me." Children's Sabbath is designed for us to consider the value of all children and the plight of all children, and what we are called upon to do to affirm their dignity as children of God.

Let's dig deeper as to how we might nourish our children. I am fascinated by the story of Jesus being questioned about taxes. It reminds me of the political debate we have been exposed to recently. Jesus is asked a question intended to catch him and to expose him as an imposter. We know it is a trick question because in the fifteenth verse of Matthew 22 says that they were out to get him. They say flattering things about him: "We know you to be a self respecting person, someone who respects all people and loves to tell the truth." The undercurrent of what they are saying is. "O.K., mister truth teller who never shies away from controversy handle this hot potato." The hot potato is the question about taxes, should the Jews pay taxes?

Jews resented paying taxes to the occupying Roman Empire, but not to pay was viewed by Rome as rebellious. It was a hot potato. Look at how Jesus

responds. He asked to see a coin, “Whose image is on it?” he asked. “Tiberius Caesar, the son of the divine Augustus and high priest.” The image of the only one in the Roman Empire that was to be worshipped and served above all others. Then Jesus says to them, “Render unto Cesar the things that are Cesar’s and render to God what belongs to God.

Jesus had turned the tables on them by taking a political question and suggested that it was not simply a political controversy about not paying taxes. It was a question of whom did they worship? To whom did they belong? To whom does the world belong?

Every Jewish child learned before they were able to walk the first verse of Psalm 24:

The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness there of, the world, and those who dwell there in.

You know the one thing we do for our children is to teach them about worship. We have a class for them “Welcoming Children the Lord’s Table” Judy Pidcock is one of the teachers. During the first part of worship, our younger children are in a class on Godly Play. Bet and Dewey Lawson have prepared a wonderful guide to the symbols of our faith. Every Sunday we have a little bag that we give our children with guides to help them in worship. We are blessed by their presence.

One congregation wrote on their worship bags: “Worshippers in Training.” I like that because all of us are “Worshippers in Training.” Whom do we worship? It is an important question in these difficult times. What are we worshipping these days: money or security? Robert Bellah was raised by missionary parents in Japan and is now a respected sociologist who practices his faith. He wrote the book, *Habits of the Heart*. He suggests it is time for us to affirm our faith. It is time for us to take a spiritual look at the system we have created – a look at the consequences of our greed – our worshipping other gods. He suggests the stock market should open with a prayer instead of a bell. Faith communities should go to the polls to give expression to our faith. He suggests remembering verses like, “Suffer the Little Children” – “When you did it to one of the least of these you did it to me.”

Jesus continues to ask us, “Whom do you worship? Who are you teaching your children to worship?”

Dr. Carlyle Marney was a Baptist preacher who taught at Austin Presbyterian Seminary in Texas. He was one of the great leaders of the church in the South. He became pastor of the Myers Park Baptist Church in Charlotte for a number of years, and was a courageous prophet and preacher among us. He used to say with tongue and cheek, “God does not come to church every Sunday,” he would continue, “When you are God, you don’t have to come to church every week. But we need to be here week after week because we need to be reminded week in and week out who and whose we are. Some Sundays when we least expect it God, the Eternal One is going to show up and walk right down the center aisle maybe as a little child or as a homeless person, or someone you have known for a long time. We need to come here with our children to be trained in worship. We need to practice seeing the image of God in every face.

Sometimes when we come we will find it is our children who teach us how to worship. Tom Long, a Presbyterian minister an outstanding preacher and teacher of preachers, wrote an article on the practice of being more inclusive of children in worship. One congregation liked it and called him to tell him so. He was pleased and then they said, “We want you to come demonstrate this for us.” “Oh,” he replied, “that was only an article.” But he accepted the challenge and along with the church educator they planned a service for the fellowship hall with families at table doing intergenerational and interactive things – it had an appropriate sermon and hymns. It looked great on paper.

Tom said that it was a disaster. Everything went wrong that could go wrong. Parents were frustrated, babies crying, children fidgeting and screaming. It was chaotic. At one point seeking to restore order out of chaos, Tom stood in the middle of the congregation raised his hands and proclaimed, “The Peace of Christ be with you” – to no avail. He repeated it with a little success. The third time, he had gotten their attention. “The Peace of Christ be with you.” There was silence until a young girl’s voice was heard to respond, “It already is,” Tom says her response made him shiver. She gets what it means to worship God. In a room full of uproar and chaos, even in the middle of a world in turmoil she knew that the Peace of Christ is already with us!

She gets it. Let us come together as worshippers in training to get it. Amen.