
Sermon
The Rights of Children

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Hope Unitarian Church
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First Reading: Matthew 2:11-18 (NRSV)

On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, "Out of Egypt I have called my son."

When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

"A voice was heard in Ramah,
wailing and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
She refused to be consoled,
Because they are no more."

Second Reading: A portion of Janusz Korczak's *Declaration of Children's Rights*:

The child has the right to love.

The child has the right to respect.

The child has the right to optimal conditions in which to grow and develop. We demand: do away with hunger, cold, dampness, stench, overcrowding, overpopulation.

The child has the right to be himself or herself.

The child has the right to make mistakes.

The child has the right to fail. We renounce the deceptive longing for perfect children.

The child has the right to be taken seriously.

The child has the right to be appreciated for what she or he is.

The child has the right to desire, to claim, to ask.

The child has the right to have secrets.

The child has the right to respect for his or her possessions.

The child has the right to education.

The child has the right to resist educational influence that conflicts with his or her own beliefs.

The child has the right to protest an injustice.

The child has the right to respect for his or her grief, even though it be for the loss of a pebble.

The child has the right to commune with God.

The child has the right to die prematurely. The mother's profound love for her child must give the child the right to premature death, to ending his or her life cycle in only one or two springs for not every bush grows into a tree.

Sermon

It is difficult to avoid being around children in a church. They are a part of our service once a month and on each and every Sunday one can just walk downstairs and you will find rooms full of them. Often times we hear them during the service. Children are loud and noisy and wonderful. But you know that. And I like it because I associate children with everything that is good and beautiful and wonderful.

There is something that is so good about children. Something so innocent. Something so full of the very essence of life. Several years ago I wrote a meditation about children. Part of it goes like this.

I remember.

I remember seeing a new life for the first time.

I remember the moment of recognition of the potential that is a new life.

I remember eyes full of curiosity looking up at me out of the depths of a new soul.

I remember writing words - words that were sparks struck off me by the sudden turn of a head, the wink of an eye, and the flash of a smile:

Blue eyed wonder;

Tiny hands and feet;

Joy of my heart, love of my life.

and these words, too,

Cartwheels, head over heels,

Elvish grin and tossed hair,

 You stole my heart.

I remember the meaning and purpose of life every time I see a newborn baby.

I remember that life is its own purpose.

As I look back at my words I think that's what children are about. It's why we need to have children around us; to remind us that life is its own purpose. It's why I believe every church has a special mission to children.

Children, of course, aren't perfect. Anyone who says they are hasn't changed enough diapers. But with all their faults, with all their imperfections, children remind us of our own potential and they give us the promise of tomorrow. But they are more than

just the promise. Our children will not create tomorrow on their own. We mold and shape our children. By no means do we completely control who our children become, but we have a profound influence on the process – for better or for worse.

The story of the magi is a reminder to me of how people all too often deal with children. Although we think of the story as a 'Christmas' story, it isn't. To begin with it is not factually true and it's not set at Christmas time, but at some time afterwards. All such stories are literary devices that follow the a standard literary formulas used by Hellenistic biographers to indicate that the person they are writing about is an important person. During the first century if you had gone down to the local bookstore and browsed through the biography section you would have discovered that the biography of every famous person began with a story of their miraculous birth followed other miraculous – or at least exceptional and unusual - events. No one at the time would have believed the stories to be literally true. It was only hundreds of years after the fact that people began to think they were literally true.

But the story of the slaughter of the innocents is true. It's not true because Herod slaughtered innocent children. That's a fable. It's true because it is a story that is all too true of human behavior –, the common every day practice of abusing or even slaughtering innocent children. And the reason Herod killed the children in the story is much the same reason that similar events happen today. The answer is in the story.

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Rachel weeping for her children;
She refused to be consoled,
Because they are no more.”

The author needed the children to die because he wanted the prophecy to be fulfilled. They were just means to an end. They were things – not people, but things to be used.

We like to think that we are far more advanced, that we would never allow innocent children to be used as means to an end. But it happens all the time. When Michael Jackson was a child his father used him as a means to make money. And a few days ago following Michael Jackson's death his father's first instinct was to use it as the opportunity to announce that he and a partner had started a new record label. That is the world in which we live, a world in which children are just a means to an end.

We live in a world where children are gunned down in schools and abused in their homes. I wouldn't even attempt to keep track of how often there are news reports of children being abused. And ours is a world where children are used as pawns in bitter divorces. It is also a world in which children die in war. Sometimes they are killed deliberately, other times they are just collateral damage – a bizarre euphemism for the death of innocent people. And it is a world in which healthcare for children is rationed.

Recently I have seen a number of advertisements and statements from politicians suggesting the horrors that await us if we adopt a public health insurance option. They present several bogeymen to frighten people into opposing health care reform efforts. One of the most popular of such bogeymen is the idea of healthcare rationing. Let the government become involved in healthcare as they are in every other industrialized country in the world and we will have government bureaucrats deciding some people will receive care and others won't. There's just one problem with the whole argument. It's based on an outright lie. We already have healthcare rationing. We ration healthcare today on the basis of economic and social standing and the rationing decisions are made by bureaucrats. But they aren't government bureaucrats, they are insurance company bureaucrats. And the decisions they make aren't based on the desire to maximize the availability of healthcare or to provide it to those who need it the most. Their decisions are based on how to maximize the profits of the insurance industry. And who suffers the most? It is the children. That is why there are forty-five countries in the world where the infant mortality rate is lower than in the United States. Even Cuba has a lower infant mortality rate than we do. And the primary reason for that is because we have decided as a culture that a sick child is an opportunity for private profit.

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I am not so naïve as to believe that we can have a world where children never suffer. I am not so naïve as to believe that any health care system will be perfect. Ours is a world of limited resources. Sometimes children will die, sometimes the innocent will suffer. But the ultimate naiveté would be to believe that we can't do better for children.

Janus Korczak is as eloquent a voice for the rights of children as I have heard. He was a Jewish Pole born in 1878 and one of the best known and most beloved citizens of Poland. Korczak dedicated his life to children and their children's rights. He wrote children's books. One of his stories - *King Matt the First* - is said to have been as well known and beloved in Poland as *Peter Pan* and *Alice in Wonderland* are in the English speaking world. Before World War II he had a radio show for children broadcast throughout Poland. He began a progressive orphanage movement. He operated not just a Jewish orphanage, but a Catholic orphanage as well. In a country where anti-Semitism was the rule, he transcended religious differences. Most importantly, he was first and foremost a man who was a champion of children.

When the Nazi's invaded Germany he became the caretaker for almost two hundred children in the Warsaw Ghetto. His pre-war prominence did not earn him any special favors with the Germans. At one point he was arrested and placed in a jail with the most hardened of criminals, many of them murderers. Conditions were brutal and only the brutal were likely to survive. Korczak was in poor health and in his sixties. But the

prisoners, when they realized it was the doctor from the children's radio show, prepared a pallet of straw where he might rest. No one raised a hand against him. He was released and rejoined his children in the Warsaw Ghetto.

In 1942 the Nazis decided to eliminate the Ghetto. On August 6, 1942, Korczak was with his children as they were herded into a train bound for the death camp at Treblinka. Korczak understood what was happening. Korczak had many gentile friends. They had offered to bribe the Nazis, to hide him in safety, but he refused to leave the children saying, "You do not leave a sick child in the night, and you do not leave children at a time like this."

In the end Korczak was unable to protect his children. He failed. He was just a man. He did not have great physical strength. He could not stop the Nazi's. He could not overcome twenty or twenty-five guards. All he could do was stay with the children and comfort them as best he could because it was the right thing to do; because it was the moral thing to do. He and the children died at Treblinka.

You could say that Korczak failed. But I think the true failure would have been if he had not tried – in the face of the certain knowledge that he would fail – to protect the children. Good does not always triumph. We should celebrate success, but we should also remember that the proper measure by which we should be judged is the quality of our effort.

A few years ago I heard John Dominic Crossan speak about the theology of atonement. Crossan is the world's leading expert on the latest quest for the historical Jesus. He explained to his audience that the theology of atonement says God sacrificed his only son, Jesus, to atone for the sins of the world. Jesus, in the theology of the orthodox world, was without sin, he was innocent. As such he was the ultimate sacrifice of the innocent. But this was not a sacrifice made by Jesus. It was a sacrifice of Jesus by God. What a profound difference, Crossan observed, between the person who sacrifices himself or herself for another; and those who sacrifice others to appease or justify themselves. In this century, Crossan went on to say, we have come to understand the idea of crimes against humanity. But, says Crossan, the idea that God would sacrifice the innocent to appease God's own anger should be understood as a crime against divinity.

There will always be those who will eagerly sacrifice children for their own needs. That will never change. But I believe we can look within ourselves and commit ourselves to never again tolerate the abuse of children. We will not always succeed, but it will point us in the right direction. It might erode and undermine those voices which are so eager to sacrifice others. It might cause us to say no when someone tell us we must destroy a village in order to save it. It might cause us to say no when someone tell us we must win the election at any cost. It might cause us to confront the complex realities of issues such as homelessness and healthcare. We may still be embarrassed and uncomfortable with the reality of mental illness and addiction, but we will have surrendered a theological justification for looking the other way. And it might cause us to insist that children not be used as means to an end.

New children are born every day. Shouldn't we proclaim – shouldn't we believe -- as Sophis Fahs has urged – that every day a child is born is a holy day? Shouldn't we

fashion a theology that proclaims the right of every child to love; the right of every child to respect; the right of every child to be himself or herself, to be taken seriously, to be appreciated, to desire, to claim, and to ask. Shouldn't we demand the right of children to sacrifice themselves, but not to be sacrificed?

AMEN.