

Rev. Karen Graham – Church of the Redeemer  
October 4, 2009  
World Communion Sunday; Children's Sabbath  
Mark 9: 33-37; 10:13-16  
Welcoming the Children

Perhaps you can relate to this comment another pastor makes in his sermon: "When I was a boy, drugs were something you got at the drug store, coke was a soft drink, and crack was the sound of a baseball meeting a bat. Not so anymore."

Not so anymore. The Children's Defense Fund backs up this assessment with these statistics. Listen:

\*12.8 million children in America, or 1 in 6, are poor, the majority living in working families. The burden of poverty falls disproportionately on minority children, with 1 in 3 Black children and 1 in 4 Latino children affected compared to 1 in 10 White children.

\*9.4 million children are uninsured.

\*Only 3% of eligible infants and young children are enrolled in Early Head Start.

\*More than 8 of every 10 Black and Latino fourth graders and almost 6 out of every 10 White fourth graders in our public schools cannot read at grade level.

\*Almost 900,000 children each year in America are abused or neglected, one every 36 seconds. 40% of these children get no services at all after the initial investigation. Each year more than 800,000 children spend time in foster care. On any given night, 200,000 children are homeless – 1 in 4 of the homeless population.

\*A Black boy born in 2001 has a 1 in 3 chance, a Latino boy a 1 in 6 chance, and a White boy a 1 in 17 chance of going to prison in his lifetime.

Based on November 2008 numbers for the state of Ohio:

\*A child is born into poverty every 16 minutes

\*A child is abused or neglected every 13 minutes

\*A child dies before his or her first birthday every 7 hours

\*A child or teen is killed by gunfire every 4 days.

Now, with these stark and sobering figures in your mind, hear again the words of Jesus: "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it."

"Let the little children come to me."

One of the churches I served has beautiful stained glass windows depicting familiar Bible stories. Jesus blessing the children is one of them. And I imagine most of us can close our eyes and bring to mind some piece of artwork depicting this scene. It's a sweet scene, isn't it? Jesus and the little children. Jesus loves the little children, we sing. All the children of the world. And we love our children, too, don't we? Who doesn't enjoy it when our children come up here – to sing, to dance, to play their musical instruments, to sit here with me or Corbin for a message? Some of my favorite experiences as a pastor are experiences with children – the things they've said and done, the things we've shared together. And what a joy, what a holy privilege it is for me to baptize a baby, to confirm a youth. I can't imagine a church that doesn't love children. I can't imagine a church that doesn't welcome children.

Yet -- do we have enough Sunday School teachers this year? No. Have more people volunteered for nursery care since we eliminated the paid position in July? No. Are enough people helping Brenda and Denise with Education Committee responsibilities? No. We say we love our children....But.

And that's always the problem. Everywhere. Not just here. We want things to be different....But.

We want more children here....but.

But what?

We don't have enough time to help.

We did it back when our kids were little. Now it's someone else's turn.

We can't compete with big churches that have more to offer

We don't have enough children to make it worthwhile

Their parents should bring them to church.

And so on.

Well, guess what?

There are hungry children in our neighborhood.

There are children in our schools who need help with their homework.

There are children in our community who need a grandparent's time and attention.

There are teenage boys and girls who need adults to listen to them, and to show them how to cook and clean and mow the lawn and fix a flat tire and garden and balance a checkbook and iron a shirt and fix a leaky faucet.

There are children in our community who think "Jesus Christ" is just a swear word.

There are children in our community who don't know what it is to be loved by a human parent, let alone a divine one.

And these are the children we are called to welcome as a church. Not just our own children. Not just our own children.

At the InterAct meal on Wednesday, there were 27 children from the church's day care program. They'll be there again when we return on the 5<sup>th</sup> Wednesday in December. Already some Redeemerites are thinking about what else we can do for those children -- will you join them?

Squire Lovelace, Jr. works at Broadway UMC as its Outreach Coordinator. Broadway offers a number of programs for at-risk families and children. There's a volunteer opportunity in our bulletin today – and I'm sure there are others. Will you help?

We have the Heights Youth Club right here in Cleveland Heights. They're always needing volunteers. Their web-site requests adults who can interact with boys and girls in these areas of interest: Art, Cooking, Dance, Drama, Managing Money, Martial Arts, Music, Photography, Sewing, Debating. What can you do?

Patrick Mullen is the Director of Reaching Heights, an organization that works to support our local schools and to connect the community with the schools. Reaching Heights also provides volunteer opportunities, including tutoring. How about it?

We lovingly call Secret, Candace, Thomas, and Alexis our Cedarbrook kids. That's because they live on Cedarbrook, and they are neighbors of the Hollands. But there are South Taylor kids, and Meadowbrook kids and Silsby kids, too. And Canterbury and Scarborough and Dellwood kids. Clarendon kids. Princeton, Queenston, and Kingston kids. Fairfax kids. Bradford kids. Lee Road kids. There are children in our church's own neighborhood who could use a bit of love and attention and help from Church of the Redeemer. Where do you live? Are there children on your street? Do you know them – do you know their parents? Are you willing to offer to bring them with you to church some Sunday? Maybe to get something to eat. Maybe to hear a story about Jesus. Maybe to find out how much God loves them. Maybe just to know that there is a place here where they are welcomed, and where they matter.

Marian Wright Edelman, president of the Children's Defense Fund speaks plainly in her piece titled "Let All the Little Children Come."

Let all the little children come unto me and forbid them not,  
for such is the kingdom of Heaven, Jesus said.  
He did not say let only rich or middle-class White children come.  
He did not say let only the strapping boys but not the girls come.  
He did not say let only the able-bodied children come.  
All the children He bade come.

He did not say let all my children or your children or our friends' children or those in our families and neighborhoods and who look and act like us come.

He did not say let only the well-behaved nice children come or those who conform to society's norms.

He did not say let a few, a third, or three-fourths come -- but all.

Jesus said let the little children come and forbid them not, for such is the kingdom of heaven.

(Marian Wright Edelman, National Observance of Children's Sabbaths Manual, 2008, p. 107).

That's enough to say for today. The best sermon is always a lived sermon, anyway. So do not hinder the children. Feed them. Teach them. Protect them. Care for them. Love them. And Welcome them --- into your hearts and lives. Into our church. Into the arms of Jesus. Let them come. Amen.