

October 17, 2004/National Observance of Children's Sabbath

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### Children As Spiritual Leaders

Psalms 119:97-104 *I have more understanding than my teachers, for your decrees are my meditation...I understand more than the aged for I keep your practice.*

Jeremiah 31:31-34 *I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts.*

2 Timothy 4:1-5 *...proclaim the message, be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable.*

Luke 19:15-17 *'Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.'*

Today is the National Observance of Children's Sabbath, proclaimed by the Children's Defense Fund and observed by churches, mosques, synagogues and temples throughout the country this weekend. This morning I want to talk about children, but not in terms of the conditions of children's lives in this country. If we are seriously concerned about children, we will know enough already to know that children in our society are in trouble. We politically justify the killing of thousands of children in our wars on Iraq and Afghanistan, while refusing to exercise in our own society the truly spiritual values of caring for those in need. Millions of children in our country are without health care. One in six children live below the poverty level. This is not a time to be proud of our country. As I watch the presidential race, I want to say a curse on both houses, for no one is telling the truth about children or is seriously committed to saving the lives of children. Kaye ran across a quote recently from Doug Oldenburg, who had a part in this church's earlier life and ministry. Doug says that we as a nation love the idea of children, but we do not love children.

The Masai people of Africa have a greeting. Instead of saying, "Good day. How are you?" they ask, "How are the children?" They know that if the children, ALL the children are safe, healthy, and cared for, then the society is well. We need to ask daily: How are the children? No just my own. Not just those in my neighborhood or city or nation, but all over the world. What new policies might emerge if we asked that question daily? What missions might emerge in us if we asked that question? To center on children and their well-being is to lay a firm foundation for the world's well-being.

But what I really want to say this morning has to do with children themselves, who they are and why it is so crucial that we listen to and be in community with children.

### On Task and On Message

Paul writes to Timothy that he is to be persistent in his proclaiming of the Gospel of God's redeeming love in Jesus Christ. He is to keep working with it regardless of whether his circumstances are favorable or unfavorable. "Proclaiming the message" is not just talking about the faith but living it from the inside out. The Gospel isn't just for times when things are going smoothly but for all times, especially when things are painful and challenging.

A week ago at the Festival Center children's program, we were just finishing our "feast," what we call snack time. A young man came in the front door. He had been in before. He is obviously troubled and, from his affect, probably using drugs. We always talk and he asks for a prayer, then goes out the door.

When I returned from talking with this young man, Kyasha, one of the children, asked who it was. I told her it was someone who sometimes comes by. "Is he bad?" she asked. There was much behind this question. But I said, "No, I don't think he's really bad. I think he's just..." I struggled for the right words. "He's off task," Kyasha said. Off task. It took me by surprise, these words she had learned from school. Being "on task" is staying focused on your work, doing what you are supposed to be doing. How interesting and delightful that she would describe someone like that troubled and lost young man as being "off task"! I have thought about it every day since then.

Then Tuesday night at our mission group meeting at the Festival Center, Don Morrison led our worship. He read the 2 Timothy passage and then talked about being "on message." Being persistent. Keeping at it. I thought immediately of Kyasha's comment about being "on task." That's really what we are to be about. Staying on task, staying on message with our lives as followers of Christ. Living our lives with meaning, focus, and faithfulness. Keeping ourselves centered in the Good News of God's love in Christ so that we are grounded in and living out of that Good News.

Children have much to teach us if we listen to them. Kyasha's observation was insightful and wise. She lives in a world where there are many who are "off task." But so do we. Her comment was not a judgment. It was a compassionate assessment of things. We get off task. We wander away from living as deeply and meaningfully as we are capable of. We need to help, encourage, and even challenge one another to stay on task, to be on message whether conditions are favorable or unfavorable.

For those committed to an intentional life of discipleship, to working with the inward and outward journeys of faith, this is an important reminder. Where we often get off task is with the inward journey. We may be doing lots of good things, but if we are not taking the time to work with our own spirits, to grow spiritually, and to remain open to the presence and leading of the living God, we become stagnant, resistant, and miss the deep joy that comes from knowing our lives unshakably grounded in God. This is most crucial in the unfavorable times, when things are not going well, when there are stresses in our lives, when we are filled with worries, anxieties, and fears that we are not facing and understanding. When we are taking the time each day for silence, prayer, and inner listening, when we are becoming more aware and understanding of our own inner life, not just when things are going well and we feel like praying, then we are able to draw from the deep well of God's love when we most need it. And we are able to live and work with hope when everything seems to speak against hope.

#### Everyone Will Know God

Our reading from Jeremiah is a turning point in the prophet's message and ministry. The destruction of Jerusalem has happened. The Exile is complete. Now Jeremiah hears a new word from God. God is going to create a new relationship with us. God's word and law will be implanted directly in our hearts. No one will have to ask another about God, for all, from the youngest to the oldest, the least to the greatest, will know God in their own hearts. And this includes children.

Here is the difference between religion and faith. Religion is the outward stuff—the laws, the ideas, the structures. Faith is the inward reality that is the goal of religion. With us here, it is the relationship between spiritual disciplines and the living, vital relationship with God that the disciplines can help us awaken to. The goal is not the disciplines themselves but our coming alive in our relationship to God and the living Christ.

We are created to have this immediate and vital relationship with God. But things happen to us in life that get in the way, that distract us from what is most real, and that lure us off task, off message, away from our primary relationship with the living God. This is why it is crucial that we have a relationship with children. In many ways, children are closer to God than we are. The Augustinian concept of "original sin," that humans are born into sin and separateness from God, is not only unbiblical, it doesn't match up with experience, with what we know. If we pay attention to children, if we listen to them, and are open to them, we realize the truth of Jesus' teaching that the kingdom of God belongs to children. God's spirit has been poured into the hearts of children. If we do not stay close to children, learn

from them, and become like them in that openness of the heart, we cannot enter the kingdom.

This is not idealizing children. It is not romanticizing childhood. It is simply hearing what Jesus says about children and looking at children in a new way, as our teachers, as those who can lead us into God's realm. Children are not "blank slates" upon which we are to write. They are not passive lumps of clay to be formed by us into our own images of what is right and true. They have their own wisdom, their own connections with God. They have much to offer us. And if we enter into community with children, respecting and listening to them, then we find more wholeness in our lives. Then if we truly live and act for the sake of children, we are healed of our self-centeredness and the destructive patterns of life that now threaten all people and the earth itself.

Children have a direct and simple insight into reality, including the reality of God and God's love. They have faith, though they don't express it in adult ways, in the kinds of religious language we use and often get lost in. Children know about the kingdom of God. It belongs to them. And they can lead us to it.

When Kaye and I left Indiana, the children of the church gave us a going away party. It was the best going away party I've ever had. There were games and songs and coloring and cutting and pasting. And lots of those treats that I am no longer supposed to eat! After the party, Kaye showed me a card that Katie, one of the children, had made for her. I've brought it with me today. I want to pass it around now for each of you to see. Just be very sure I get it back or Kaye will have my head! When Katie handed the card to Kaye, she said, "This is for you. It's the kingdom of God." Have you ever seen the kingdom of God? Katie sees it. For her it is very real. And children like Katie can show it to us, can help us believe in it, and together with children, we can all enter that kingdom, that new way of life, where we each know God in our hearts and live from those hearts, whether the times are favorable or unfavorable.

God of all children, we pray that today we might draw near to children. Let them be our teachers and leaders. We pray that we might know this day that we don't have to ask each other who you are. We can know you in our own hearts. We can be like children. We can enter your kingdom and live in it, now and forever. Amen.