

For Our Children's Sake

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Third Presbyterian Church
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Mark 10:35-45

James and John wanted to be the teacher's pets. We all know that kid, don't we - the one who's always angling for special recognition, for special favor - a complete "suck-up," and that's a technical term, as my preaching professor used to say. You might even remember who that was in your classroom. She always wanted to be the line leader. He always wanted to take the note to the main office. She always wanted to pass out the papers. He always wanted to erase the white boards.

On their way to Jerusalem, James and John hurried past the other disciples and asked to be seated right next to Jesus in glory - one at his right hand and one at his left. James and John wanted special treatment. Who doesn't? Who doesn't want access to the halls of power? Who doesn't want the best seats in the house? Who doesn't want to sit in first class? Who doesn't want to stand in the express line at Disney World? I remember when our family visited there some years ago, because of my husband Brad's employment at the time, we got to walk right in to the front of the line at Test Track in Epcot, as many times as we wanted, no matter who's waiting at the back of the line. I liked that. A lot.

James and John wanted to be seated elbow to elbow with Jesus in glory. They were ready, they said, to drink the cup he drank, and be baptized with his same baptism. But Jesus has a habit of turning the conventional on its proverbial head. Be careful what you wish for, James and John: you want to be great? Be a servant of all. Move to the bottom rung of the social ladder. The back row of cattle class (I mean, coach class), 10-inch-wide middle seat that doesn't recline, tray table missing, right next to the lavatories.

It's now the third time in Mark that Jesus has said it. To be great in God's kingdom, be a servant. To be first, be slave of all. Like Jesus. Serve those who are last to the table, if they ever get there, and if they do, find the meal is over and the table's already been cleared.

The words are simple, yet challenging when put in conversation with today's observance of the Children's Sabbath, (known locally as Children's Interfaith Weekend) – where thousands of faith communities around the country focus on improving the lives of children and their families, especially those in poverty.

I attended an event Friday that featured the release of the 2015 report card on "The State of our Children" in Rochester. Permit me to share a few of those statistics. Since the year 2000, Rochester's child poverty rate has grown from 38% to 55%. More than 80% of city school students qualify for free or reduced price lunch. Only 64% of city children are ready for school when they enter kindergarten. 30% of kindergarteners through third graders are chronically absent. 7% of third graders received a passing grade on their English language assessments; 9% of fourth graders did so in math.

Those statistics are more than numbers; they are God's children. Or as Lindner says, they are "photographs in God's wallet."¹ Every child who misses school, every youth who doesn't have enough to eat, every child who doesn't have a safe place to live, every youth that hangs out by

¹ Eileen Lindner, *Thus Far on the Way: Toward a Theology of Child Advocacy*.

the local Boys and Girls Club even as shots ring out – they are all photographs in God’s wallet. That means that for Christian communities, improving the lives of children is more than a moral imperative, it’s a theological imperative; it’s Jesus’ imperative.

I hear and read lots of comments in various community settings, in letters to the editor, in online comments and the like, that go something like this: “If the parents of ‘these kids’ would just take responsibility...” Perhaps there is a kernel of truth in that; I don’t fully know. What I do know is that most parents want the best for their kids, but those who live in poverty don’t have access to the same kind of support network to help them through turbulent times that more privileged families have. Robert Putnam says that supportive adults are “like air bags that inflate automatically to protect against unexpected crashes.”²

Can we be their air bags? Can we put their photographs – the ones that are already in God’s wallet – can we put them in our wallet, too?

Because today is the Children’s Sabbath, it’s a day to lift up the work of those who do that for children in need beyond our walls. Their work is an invitation to all of us: the caring adults who tutor children in our programs at Schools 3, 35, and those who will soon pilot a program at East High; those who serve children in the Upper Monroe neighborhood at the Corner Place. This week Urban Presbyterians Together recognized the long-time Vacation Bible School ministry of Ann McMican, Jack Mould and Barbara by contributing school uniforms in their honor to children in need at school 35. That group also thought about ways to bring urban and suburban children together in summer programming.

At this morning’s Sunday Seminar, we heard the story of Field of Dreams, where community organizations came together to provide a summer urban campout experience for 30 boys at Frontier Field.

Because today is the Children’s Sabbath, we lift up the work of those who minister to the needs of children and youth in this congregation – family members, Sunday school teachers, youth leaders, choir directors, faith partners, chaperones, and more. You heard Susan Fox speak so eloquently about those ministries.

And I know many of you work on behalf of children through your vocations as teachers, as health care professionals, as counselors and social workers, as child care providers, through volunteering and more. We lift up that work, too.

And because today is the Children’s Sabbath, it’s a day we can all take action to help children in some way, even if you think you don’t have what it takes to work with kids. We can all do something very simple, and something that matters – today: sign a letter. Our friends at The Children’s Agenda Advocacy Network are leading an effort with faith communities all around our area to advocate for subsidized childcare and paid family leave to help our children in poverty. When you entered the sanctuary this morning, you should have received a copy of that letter. We invite you to take action today, and if you feel led to do so (you don’t have to if you don’t want to), sign that letter and place it in the offering plate this morning, or hand it to me personally after church. We will get it to where it needs to go. And there will be more opportunities to advocate for children in the coming months through the work of UPT and Great Schools for All.

This work of child advocacy is a unique call to those of us who enjoy privilege. It’s even a ministry, Lindner says – “a ministry of removing stumbling blocks...[removing] the clutter from around the feet of children...Child advocacy ministry is in the name and for the sake of the most

² Robert Putnam, *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis*.

famous poor child in human history.”³ The same child, I might add, who grew up not to be served, but to serve and give his life a ransom for other children, too.

In her theological treatise on child advocacy, Lindner illustrates why it matters. She writes about a time she went to get some maintenance work done on her car, and forgot to bring along material to read while she waited. So she picked up a publication by the New Jersey Department of Transportation that talked about rules for boats – particularly rules for what happens when boats encounter each other in open water. Cars have traffic lights and lanes, she writes, but what about boats? Apparently she knew as much about boats as I do, which is pretty much nothing. Well, here’s what she read:

“There are two kinds of craft. One of them has access to great power. It can accelerate and push its way through the strongest of waves. It can change direction on command. It can even stop on demand. It has great power of its own. The other class of craft is dependent on the forces of nature, wind, tide, and human effort in paddling, or rowing, or maintenance of the sails.

And these two classes of craft are known as privileged and burdened...One class is privileged and the other class is burdened. But get this, now. The powerful boats...are the burdened vessels. The powerful boats that can make their way forward no matter what, under their own power, they are burdened vessels, burdened with responsibility to give way to the boats without power. And the powerless vessels, the ones that are dependent on the vagaries of tide and wind and weather, they are classified as privileged vessels. To them is accorded the right of way, for if the powerful vessels are not burdened with responsibility for giving way, these powerless vessels may not make safe harbor. Imagine that: the powerful boats are burdened, and the powerless are privileged. And when these two kinds of craft meet each other on the open sea, the privileged and the burdened, the powerful are burdened and must give way if the powerless, the privileged, are ever to make safe harbor.”

“Whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For Jesus came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

There’s a song that’s actually been around quite a long time, that I first heard sung by the children’s choir at North Presbyterian Church in Williamsville. It’s a catchy little song called Magic Penny. Maybe you know it. *Love is something if you give it away, Give it away, give it away. Love is something if you give it away, you end up having more. It's just like a magic penny, Hold it tight and you won't have any. Lend it, spend it, and you'll have so many. They'll roll all over the floor.*

May there be room in our hearts and in our lives to love all the children in our community. And who knows - we might just have to get a bigger wallet. Amen.

³ Eileen Lindner, *Thus Far on the Way: Toward a Theology of Child Advocacy*.