

“Small Things”

Mark 10:35-45; Hebrews 5:1-10; Psalm 104:1-9,24,35c; Job 38:1-7,34-41
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It is a strange feeling for me to follow my son in the pulpit, but the bottom line is found in Proverbs 10:1, “A wise son gladdens the heart of a father.”

“Now, boys!” My mother’s exasperated exclamation echoes in my memory as she tries to settle her three sons – that could as well be an echo of my wife’s voice, as she tries to settle **her** three sons. Children are our greatest earthly treasure and our greatest earthly challenge. Hear the Psalmist (127:3), “Children are a gift of the Lord.”

“Now, boys!” I do not know the Aramaic, but Jesus must have used something close to that tone as the two disciples, John and James, tried to set him up to give a promise of the right hand and left hand seats – the two most honorable places. The sons of Zebedee were most forthright with their request, and the other disciples were quick to join in the scuffle over the prize like a pack of dogs going after a bone. “Pick me, pick me!” Pride abounded. Are we much different today? Pride itches within us like a bad case of poison ivy. Tell me how much Jesus loves Me! We know we are better than the others...I give more...I do more... I love more... I study more... pick me, pick me. The child in us abides.

I think God focuses us on the small, perhaps because that is all we can handle: faith the size of a mustard seed – extremely tiny, a lost lamb. a perfect pearl, a single lost coin. Jesus is about to give everything he has as a human – to die as a common criminal – so that his friends and all of us might live, and they are pridefully focused on being honored in human terms. Little did they know that the right hand and left hand positions were to be taken by two thieves, one on his way to Paradise, the other...probably not. Caught in a childish quarrel, the disciples missed the gift they might have seen, had they been more child-like in

acceptance of what Jesus said. Here in these verses from Mark we see the immense glory of God interlocking with the small minds of humanity. How often we just do not get it.

Today we are to celebrate Children's Sabbath. For those of you who are not familiar with it, and I had to look it up, too, Children's Sabbath is a national multi-faith event held in October every year. This weekend, we join with thousands of Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Baha'i, and Buddhist congregations around the country to consider, in the context of worship, how our religious faiths call us into action on behalf of children and young people.

Children's Sabbath is sponsored by the Children's Defense Fund, a private non-profit organization in Washington, D.C., that claims to provide a voice for all children in this country, especially those who are poor and struggling with disabilities. Under the leadership of its director, Marian Wright Edelman, the Children's Defense Fund educates the nation about the needs of children and tries to convince our political leaders that it makes sense to invest in children's lives *before* they get sick, or into trouble, or drop out of school, or fall victim to some sort of major family crisis. The Children's Defense Fund is an organization that has figured out how to promote social change from a solid, multi-faith base. (You can probably tell that I took some of these phrases from their PR pages.)

Today's lectionary texts combine to provide us with a Biblical basis for a most serious consideration of the subject of suffering, of what makes suffering redemptive, and of how God is perceived as providing hope through suffering and in spite of the suffering and death of people throughout history and in our own time. I ask you to look over those Bible passages we read here today and think about how they come together. It would take me a long time to pull them all together, so this morning with that as a foregone conclusion, I am focusing on a small slice of that. This morning the Children's Defense Fund has invited us hold in prayer the millions of children in this country who do not have

any form of health insurance - either private or public: one out of every nine kids who are school-aged or younger. I am not going to throw a bunch of heart-wrenching statistics at you now, because as I cross-checked the numbers of deaths from this cause and that cause, I was not brought to God's Word, but to another book written about 50 years ago, *How to Lie with Statistics*.

However, I can assure you that too many children die from negligent or improper use of firearms. I can tell you that too many children die from negligent operation of cars. I can tell you that too many children die from improper and negligent use of parental roles, and I can tell you too many children die from adopting the wrong role models – role models that we have put before them with our purchasing dollars, and that we have neglected to lead them away from through our clear and present behavior.

What *does* God need our help with? Just what *is* God's mission, anyways? As Christians, how does our faith call us into action on behalf of children? What does God want us to do?

God does not want people to be homeless, hungry, or sick. God does not want people to be scared or to feel hopeless about their lives. God wants us to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to those who are captive, to offer sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the Lord's favor to everyone. (Luke 4:18-19)

This is God's mission. This was *Jesus'* mission. As Christians, this is *our* mission, too. We are to minister to Jerusalem, and Judea, to Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. At the ends of the earth, the problem seems huge.

Many countries have agreed to the Millennium Development Goals, with a target of 2015.

* Goal 1: Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger

- * Goal 2: Achieve universal primary education
- * Goal 3: Promote gender equality and empower women
- * Goal 4: Reduce child mortality
- * Goal 5: Improve maternal health
- * Goal 6: Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases
- * Goal 7: Ensure environmental sustainability
- * Goal 8: Develop a Global Partnership for Development

Millions and millions of children die every year in the developing world, many from illnesses for which there are cures. In developing countries where extreme poverty is a way of life, one child in every 10 dies before his or her fifth birthday.

In the worst affected areas, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, HIV and AIDS claim the lives of an increasing number of young children every year. We do not have a cure for AIDS yet, but we do have medicines that can keep mothers from passing it on to their babies during birth. And we have medicines that can help people to live with HIV and AIDS. We just have to get those medicines into the hands of those who need them.

Every year in developing countries where extreme poverty is a way of life, 400,000 children under the age of 5 die from malaria. In those same countries, serious lung infections account for 20% of children's deaths each year. Because many young children in developing countries don't have access to clean water or fresh food, they can get diarrhea and die. People shouldn't die from malaria, or pneumonia, or diarrhea. We have medicines for these diseases, medicines that make people healthy. Bruce Robinson showed us that we know how to dig wells and run pipelines so that people will have access to clean, fresh water. We have insecticides and mosquito nets that will stop the spread of diseases like malaria.

PEVA's Congo initiatives show us we know how to send trained doctors and nurses into places where people are sick.

We know how to reduce childhood mortality. We can ensure that children in every country of the world will grow up to be healthy, productive adults. We just need to work harder. We seem to want to make a difference, but not if it interferes too much with our convenience. I need to get to the grocery store, I have so many things to do, get out of my way...I am late for my appointment, get out of my way, I have to talk or text on the cell phone, or adjust my hair, or change the radio station; stay out of my way. Perhaps the hymn "Where Cross the Crowded Ways of Life" might be more appropriate this morning than those in the bulletin.

I ask each of you to personally consider how much you can do directly to keep our children safe from gunfire. I ask you now, what can you do directly to lessen the probability of a child's death from a vehicle? Where should you be focusing your preventative efforts to be more productive?

God, forgive us our sinful pride that puts us at the center of our lives.

How does our faith call us into action on behalf of children? What does God want us to do?

Because make no mistake: God *does* want us to do something about the plight of children living in poverty, whether it's in this country or somewhere else. Remember the sorting of the sheep and goats in Matthew? The goats weren't active doers of evil...they just omitted doing the right things.

If you are starting to squirm a bit because of what you have heard me say this morning, then I believe that God has stepped into the arena of your life and is starting to take you on. In the week to come, if you find yourself thinking repeatedly about children who live in poverty - or even praying for them - then God is stirring you into action. If you decide to

take time out of your busy week and write a letter to the President about the failure of the children's health coverage bill, or if you spend some time on line reading about the Millennium Goals, then God has given you a little shove and is telling you, "Do something about this!"

There are times in our lives when God does get pushy with us. Many are called, but have you ever wondered why only a few are chosen? Could it be because faith without works is dead? If you claim Christ's sacrifice with your words, maybe that is not enough. If you really claim Christ's sacrifice, you will behave as if you believe in his kingdom, behave as if you are building his kingdom. You will carry the bricks, or mix the mortar.

Simply having faith in God's goodness and love and mercy isn't enough – we have to *act* on that faith. Maybe the work of an agency like the Children's Defense Fund will get your heart pumping. Maybe it is time for you to think about how you can give the children of Denbigh alternatives to risk behaviors by reading a poem to them like some of us did Friday night, or by scoring a basketball game over at Warwick Memorial Methodist, or by watching the line at the slide at Fall Festival, or joining Big Brothers or Big Sisters. Maybe it's time for you to pray for these efforts, if that is all you can do. And if you have come to the point in your life where all you can do is pray, let me assure you, that is enough and it is important.

There is grace and blessing to be discovered when God struggles with us, and we struggle with God. Our reading from Job today was part of one of those stories. Job's life after his tribulations was full of blessing. Remember Jacob, who came out of his encounter with God a changed man - a man with a new identity and a dislocated hip that probably made the rest of his journey with God a little slower and more intentional? His struggle with God opened his heart fully to his brother when they next met..

On this Children's Sabbath, I invite you to think deeply about what a tremendous blessing children are in our families, in our communities,

and in the life and the future of the Church. Consider that our church is always one generation away from extinction. Today's children are that generation. Then consider the severe challenges facing many children on a daily basis in Denbigh, in Richmond, in New York, in the far corners of the earth. Let that awareness sink deep into your heart, and then get ready. This is stewardship season, and we appreciate your tithes and gifts of money. We rejoice in your gifts of time and expertise. Think of the small things that need to be done. Think of the small things you can do. God loves the small. It is where we meet His greatness.