

Sermon Proper 23B

Wendy D. Cliff

October 11, 2015

St. Stephen's, Belvedere

[Job 23:1-9, 16-17](#)

[Psalm 22:1-15](#)

[Hebrews 4:12-16](#)

[Mark 10:17-31](#)

I find the choice of commandments Jesus lists in the passage from Mark today to be very interesting. One in particular stands out because it's the only one not prefaced with "you shall not." Jesus says, "you shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not bear false witness, you shall not defraud." But the last one is stated in the affirmative: "honor your father and mother." Honor your father and mother.

What happens when it's not in your best interest to honor your father and your mother? All this talk about using inclusive language for God – not calling God "he" or "father" is about much more than a feminist agenda; it's also about recognizing that for some people, they had a father who beat them or molested them, so praying to that image is unacceptable. Calling God "she" can be equally problematic – what if your mother was a drug addict, or told you you were garbage, or could never be counted on to feed you?

This is the case for the children I encounter in my ministry with Braid Mission. As some of you know, when I'm not serving 25 hours a week here at St. Stephen's, I serve with the Revs. Chris Chase and Rebecca Edwards at Braid Mission, a church plant that serves youth in foster care, primarily through training and supporting adult mentors who agree to meet

for one hour a week with a foster youth. I promise you, every one of the over 1,000 children in foster care in San Francisco and the close to 100 children in foster care in Marin County, every one of them has experienced Job's lament requesting to vanish into darkness because the despair was too much to handle. Every one of them has echoed their own version of Psalm 22 by saying, "why have you abandoned me?"

Actually, the truth is, those children don't say those words. They are so grief stricken and traumatized; they can't express that vulnerability for fear of more pain. After they've been taken unexpectedly from their homes where they've been told they have 5 minutes to put all they care about into a black plastic garbage bag and being sent to a stranger's home, they often retreat into silence. And we know that when that silence gets bottled up, it most often gets released in violence – towards themselves or others. [Tell Story]

They might stay in a foster home for a few days or weeks or months; they might eventually go home to their parents, but we know that most of them will ultimately end up either on the streets, or become one of the growing number of human trafficking victims, or end up in prison. San Quentin sits just 4 miles away, as the crow flies. 70% of the inmates there are products of the foster care system.

Not a single one of us in this church will heal the trauma that these children have suffered or be able to fix their broken family systems. But God does something every day to remind us of what we can do. Marian Wright Edelman, the founder of the Children's Defense Fund, loves to share this quote,

"When God wants an important thing done in this world or a wrong righted, God goes about it in a very singular way. God doesn't release thunderbolts or stir up earthquakes. God

simply has a tiny baby born, perhaps of a very humble home, perhaps of a very humble mother. And God puts the idea or purpose into the mother's heart. And she puts it in the baby's mind, and then – God waits. The great events of the world are not battles and elections and earthquakes and thunderbolts. The great events are babies, for each child comes with the message that God is not yet discouraged with humanity, but is still expecting goodwill to become incarnate in each human life.”¹

We are going to baptize a Keira, Michelle Larsen's granddaughter, Keira, in a few minutes. Every time we hold a baptism, it's a reminder that God hasn't given up on us. And every baptism is also a reminder that we need to enact our faith. We make promises to God, our faith community, and the newly baptized. Those promises mean that if and when any child has to do what Jesus indicated as having to “leave their house or brothers or sisters or mother or father,” we are ready and willing to become their new community, their new family, their new mothers and fathers and sisters and brothers, offering them God's abiding love. Do we have to give up all our wealth to do that? Maybe. But at the very least, the wealth we have to give up is anything and everything that keeps us from being Christ in the world; anything that gets in the way of our showing God's love to those in need. We aren't all meant to become foster parents, or even mentors to foster youth, but we can influence the lives of children with our faith.

¹ Edmond McDonald quoted from the “Presbyterian Outlook” in *Guide My Feet: Prayers and Meditations for Our Children* by Marian Wright Edelman (New York: Perennial, 2000), 7.

When I met a few weeks ago with a group of parishioners to talk about why we have a Sunday School and what their hopes and dreams are for it, one thing they mentioned was the desire for children to “learn something ‘good’ that sticks, in order to deal with a ‘crisis’ or any difficulties throughout life.” This is exactly what we hear in the Letter to the Hebrews today when that community talks about approaching God with “boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” We want what children learn in our Sunday school to hold water when times get tough, to provide a life preserver when they are drowning in pain or doubt like Job. And this is where honoring your mother and father comes back in.

Research shows that the strongest influence on a child’s faith life is not Sunday school, not a priest, not a youth leader. No. Those things are definitely important and we need to do them, but listen to the top 7 influences on a child’s faith development²:

1. A mother who models the faith
2. A father who models the faith
3. Regular dialogue with a mother on faith/life issues
4. Regular dialogue with a father on faith/life issues
5. Regular dialogue on faith/life issues with another adult who’s not a parent
6. The experience of regular reading of the Bible and family devotions in the home
7. The experience of service to others with a parent as an action of faith

So I ask you: What single action can each of us take today to be an example for our children or the world’s children that is a model of our faith

² “Seven Dynamics of Faith Development,” from *Passing on the Faith: A Radical New Model for Youth and Family Ministry* by Strommen and Hardel, St. Mary’s Press, 2000.

in God's abiding love and healing? Is it time to volunteer to be a Sunday school teacher for your own child, or to become a mentor for a youth at St. Stephen's or even Braid? Or maybe you can send a birthday card to a foster child through Braid. The first thing I know we all can do, however, is pray for the children and youth of the world. So please join me by turning to page 829 in your *Book of Common Prayer*. Let's pray together prayer number 47 for Young Persons:

God of Love, you see your children growing up in an unsteady and confusing world: Show them that your ways give more life than the ways of the world, and that following you is better than chasing after selfish goals. Help them to take failure, not as a measure of their worth, but as a chance for a new start. Give them strength to hold their faith in you, and to keep alive their joy in your creation; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*