



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School
1611 E Main St., Watertown, WI 53094

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost October 12-13, 2019

“Don’t Drop the Children”

(Deuteronomy 6:5-9)

Rev. David K. Groth

“You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates” (Deut. 6:5-9).

*Every day, Everywhere, By Everyone,...sharing
the grace of the Good Shepherd.*

Collect: Almighty God, You show mercy to Your people in all their troubles. Grant us always to recognize Your goodness, give thanks for Your compassion, and praise Your holy name; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

My brother Andy recently sent me an article from the New York Times about a peculiar rite of passage that happens in the Netherlands. It's the tradition known as "dropping" (NYT, 7/21/19). In the dark of night, parents take groups of children, generally pre-teens, and deposit them in the middle of a forest. The kids are expected to find their way back to base. It can take just a few hours. It can take the whole night. Usually they're given a compass, a flashlight, water, but not much more. They are *not* allowed to use a smart phone. It's meant to be a challenge. To make it more difficult, parents will blindfold the children on their way to the dropping, and drive in a few loops to scramble their sense of direction. And yes, sometimes, things go awry. Sometimes search parties have to be called in. But the tradition continues. Droppings are such a normal part of Dutch childhood that many Dutch are surprised when asked about it. They assume it is common in every country. Why wouldn't you drop your kids in the middle of the forest at night?

By the way, when my mom read the article, she let my brothers and me know that, there were times when she wanted to drop us off in the middle of a big forest . . . "but without a compass" she added. (I'm confident she was thinking about Andy and Paul!)

This tradition of dropping kids in the forest at night got me thinking about American parenting habits. We don't even allow our kids to have the run of Watertown neighborhoods anymore, so it's unthinkable to imagine them wandering around lost in a forest, at night. And yet, I submit we have our own dropping tradition. We won't drop them off in the middle of the Kettle Moraine, but we do it all the time in terms of the religious landscape. We deposit our children in the dark wilderness of this world and expect them to figure it out for themselves. They've got to find their own way, we say, but we don't even give them a light or compass or life-giving,

life-sustaining water.

It's not that we don't love our children. I know we do, but I believe we allow lots of other things get in the way of religious instruction. They take higher priority. Good Shepherd School parents: you've not yet met your responsibility for teaching the children the faith simply by sending your kids here to get their religious instruction. It's not enough. It's not enough because you are still their most important teachers. They're watching you, learning from you whether they need to take all this religious stuff seriously. So, in a way, religious instruction is always happening in your home whether you want to do it or not.

Theologian Paul Tillich defined religion as simply "one's object of ultimate concern." So by this definition there are no nonreligious people, because all people have an object of ultimate concern, even if it's just themselves, their own comfort, their own happiness. Even atheists have an object of ultimate concern. So, in one way or another, we're always teaching religion to our children. It's just a matter of what happens to be your object of ultimate concern, and, as you know, that can be just about anything.

Our text mandates us to teach the faith "diligently to your children, and talk of it when you sit at home, and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up." When you sit, walk, lie and rise. That is, daily living presents the opportunities to talk to our children about what God has done for us. If the church gets one hour per week, and culture has the other 167 hours, how can we compete? We cannot. But you can. So God's Word urges parents to teach the faith "diligently to your children." "Diligently" is an important word there. Don't leave it to accident or chance or convenience. Don't delegate it to others. Don't abdicate the responsibility, because there are any number of spiritual forces in the world that will gladly fill the vacuum we leave behind in our children.

There is another impediment to Christian education in our country. Somehow, we got the silly notion in our heads that it is best to teach children to respect all the world religions, and then allow them to make a decision for themselves when they get older. It sounds so good on paper, so sophisticated and open and progressive. Anything more than that is considered brainwashing,

we think, and somehow disrespectful.

A few years ago a young man from the Bronx named Ethan Metzger was being taunted by one of his classmates. The classmate accused Metzger of having been religiously “brainwashed” by his parents. He told Metzger, “You don’t pray to God because you want to, but because your parents made you think you have to. You don’t keep any of the laws of your own free will; your parents just made you feel guilty if you didn’t keep them. Your parents brainwashed you your whole life . . . but they were just imposing restriction upon restriction; you don’t [even] have any real conviction of your own. You don’t really know anything about anything.” Wow. Somebody’s bitter about Christian education.

Metzger’s reply was interesting. He admitted his classmate had a point. He had been brainwashed . . . into having respect for other people, for their belongings, for himself. He had been brainwashed . . . into thinking he should treat others as he wanted to be treated. He had been brainwashed . . . into standing up for someone who was being picked on. He had been brainwashed . . . by parents who spoke of love and faith and character and hope. Even worse, Metzger added, his parents had done all this by setting an example.

It’s not brainwashing to teach a child she was created by a loving and wise God, a God who knit her together in her mother’s womb. It’s not brainwashing to remind your young man in college to treat young women with the highest respect, because that’s what she deserves and that’s what God would want. It’s not brainwashing to teach your young granddaughter she is incredibly special because she has a Savior, Christ the Lord, who knows her, loves her, has plans for her, died for her to redeem her. We need to teach our children and grandchildren, by word and example, so they, like Mary hold fast to the one thing which is needful, rather than like Martha, get distracted by all the things that are not important. We need to give our children priorities so that they say like the apostles did, “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29). We should object not just when children are abused or neglected, but also when they are given nothing more to live for than the goal of being happy, or when they are taught there’s no meaning in life other

than the meaning they assign it. We should object!

As Christians, we cannot afford to be cavalier about the religious instruction of our children and grandchildren anymore than we would be cavalier about our little ones playing in traffic, or handling firearms, or taking medicine.

So the Dutch have the tradition known as “dropping”, but unfortunately, we do too, and ours, frankly is far more dangerous. There’s far more at stake when we drop our kids into the dark religious landscape of the world without any kind of compass or light or water.

The Good News is our Heavenly Father has not abandoned us to the darkness. He didn’t drop us into the world and expect us to figure it out for ourselves. If he had, we’d all be lost, in a hopeless sort of way. Instead, the Father dropped his Son into the darkness of this world, and he is the light, the light of the world, and he lights up the Way home to the Father because he is the way.

But the darkness has always hated the light, and has always wanted to extinguish the light. And they did. Remember when Jesus died on the cross how darkness covered the land. It seems our enemies of sin, death and the devil had won the victory over the light of the world. But then on the third day, the light shown again, never to be put out again.

Please realize the darkness still hates the light. One of the greatest myths of American Christianity is if we just tweak how we present the Gospel, if we just change the worship services so they’re more kid-friendly, or more entertaining, people will fill up the churches. No they won’t. You know why? Darkness hates the light.

Still God provides the light for us. Psalm 119, “Thy Word is a lamp for my feet and a light for my path.” That light is available right here for us and for our children. It teaches of a God who loves your children more than you do. Earlier I said “we cannot compete with just one hour a week” and that’s true. But you can *with God’s Word*. Far from putting a blindfold on us, God’s Word takes the blindfolds off us, so we can see the truth. Far from scrambling our sense of direction, God’s Word is our true North Star.

Finally, you recall Paul Tillich's definition of religion is simply one's object of ultimate concern. By that definition, it seems Jesus made you his object of ultimate concern. When you have an object of ultimate concern on your heart you're willing to do just about anything for it. And so with you on his mind and in his heart, Jesus went to the cross and laid down his life. He did it for you because you were his object, his child of ultimate concern. He did it for your children and grandchildren. For those of us who are hands off when it comes to teaching the faith, he let his hands be driven through with nails. For those of us who designate to others the teaching of the faith, he designated himself the Sacrificial Lamb, the scapegoat who takes away the sin of the world. For those of us who abdicate our responsibility, he took responsibility.

He doesn't drop us off in the darkness. We were born in that darkness; it's our natural home. But he stands as the light of the world and says, "Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to them." Amen.

