



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

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A Stephen Ministry Congregation

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Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

October 7, 2018

“The Children”

(Mark 10:13-14)

Rev. David K. Groth

"People were bringing little children to Jesus to have him touch them, but the disciples rebuked them. When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, 'Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.' And he took the children in his arms, put his hands on them and blessed them." (Mark 10:13-14).

Every day, everywhere, by everyone...

Collect: Merciful Father, Your patience and loving-kindness toward us have no end. Grant that by Your Holy Spirit we may always think and do those things that are pleasing in Your sight; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

Digging around in the ruins of an ancient Egyptian city, about 120 miles south of Cairo, on the west bank of the Nile, archaeologists came upon what was apparently the town dump. They discovered a letter written in June, in the year 1 B.C. It's one of those archeological treasures which gives insight into a time very long ago. The writer of the letter (named Hilarion) is a laborer who had traveled with some companions up to Alexandria to find work. He's written this letter to his wife who is pregnant. He writes, "Know that we are even yet in Alexandria. Do not worry if they all come back (without me) and I remain in Alexandria. I urge and entreat you, be concerned about our son and if I should receive my wages soon, I will send them to you. If by chance you bear [another] son, let it be. If it is a girl, cast it out. You have said, 'Do not forget me.' How could I forget you? Therefore I urge you not to worry" [Jesus, John Dominic Crossan, p. 62-3]. He's concerned for his son and very tender to his wife. Not so much, however, to his unborn child. "If it is a girl, cast it out."

What does that mean? It means to take the infant outside someplace, set it on the ground, and walk away. Someone might pick the infant up and raise it as a slave. Usually, however, they simply died of exposure.

If by chance you bear a son, let it be, that is, let it live. If it is a girl cast it out--to die. Even after all these years, that's just horrifying, isn't it?

At the time, boys were valued for their labor. After they married, they stayed home and earned money for the household income. They also had defensive capabilities. They were arrows in their father's quiver (Ps. 127). Girls on the other hand couldn't earn wages, so they were expensive to keep. They had little defensive value, and upon marriage would simply leave the household. So the man writes, "If it is a boy, let it be. If it is a girl, cast it out."

The custom was widespread in the Mediterranean world. An infant was a nothing, a non-person, it had no rights until the father accepted it as a member of the family. If he chose not to, for whatever reason, the infant was “cast out” or “exposed.” It was a way to deal with the sickly children, and children with disabilities. It was a way to deal with undesirable children born of rape or incest, or the child born at an inconvenient time, or children of the wrong sex. “If it’s a girl, cast it out.”

You think that ever happens today? Last year it happened some 600,000 times in America. You see, we’ve made the decision that an infant is not a person until it has travelled those eight inches from womb into the world. So long as it’s still in the womb, an infant is a nothing, a non-person with no legal rights. If there’s a chance the child has special needs, or comes at an inconvenient time, or is of the wrong sex, it is perfectly legal to terminate that pregnancy, which is a euphemistic way of saying ending the child’s life.

Some of you might be thinking I’m dabbling in political issues and pastors shouldn’t do that. Abortion is not a political issue. It is first and foremost fifth commandment issues, and probably a first commandment issue too. Let me explain.

In the Wall Street Journal on Wednesday there was an article about a couple trying to have a baby through in vitro fertilization. They really want a baby with blue eyes. For whatever reason, they’re fixated on that. In vitro fertilization is already being used to cast out embryos with potential medical disorders. That’s a practice that’s long been accepted. It’s already being used to cast out embryos of the wrong gender. (At first that was controversial; now that too is acceptable.) Eye color pushes the debate further, and geneticists can now predict eye color with 90% accuracy. In a group of five embryos, one is likely to have blue eyes, and the rest can be “cast out.” A New Jersey company offers to test embryos for eye color for \$400 a piece. They’re also working on predicting height now. Soon, they think they’ll be able to predict academic potential. Fertility clinics are

already getting requests from people who want to know if it's possible to select embryos with an aptitude for music, or athletic ability.

Adam and Eve wanted to be like God. Hasn't this also crossed the line into eugenics, where we determine who's worthy of life and who's not, and then we sort and cast out those we view as unfit? Is it good and right that the wealthy will have access to designer babies? Won't these kinds of decisions feed into the awful discrimination that's already out there?

“If you bear a son, let it be. If it's a girl, cast it out.” That letter was written one year before the birth of Christ. That is, this kind of brutal sorting and culling of life was already going on in the world when Jesus was born in Bethlehem. The values and customs of his own Jewish people were different. In Jewish culture, children were highly valued, regarded as a blessing of God, a gift no matter their sex or appearance or attributes. The Jews did not abandon or expose children; they treasured them. But the Jews were a minority in the ancient world. Later, as Jewish Christians took the church of Jesus Christ out into Gentile lands, one of the questions they would struggle with was what to do with the children, particularly the infants who were “cast out” and exposed. That's the cultural background for one of the most memorable stories in the New Testament --Jesus and the children.

Mark says Jesus came into Galilee teaching and preaching about the Kingdom of God. His reputation was growing as were the crowds following him. What he said and how he said it was like a breath of fresh air. And he punctuated his message with stunning miracles prompted by love and compassion for the sick and the elderly and the unclean.

In the meantime the authorities in Jerusalem--political and religious--are beginning to take notice, and they don't like it at all. They are motivated for a lot of reasons to maintain the status quo. So they cook up a plot to discredit Jesus and maybe even get rid of him. They send the

Pharisees and Sadducees to badger him, to ask tough, embarrassing questions, and to set theological traps in his path.

Meanwhile, the crowds around him are growing larger. Sick people are pulling at him, blind people are calling out to him, the aged and the crippled are being carried to him. It's going on night and day. Then, in the midst of all this, these men from Jerusalem have come, and have been pestering him for days. "Why are you eating with sinners, Jesus? Why don't your disciples wash their hands, Jesus? Why are you ignoring our Sabbath laws, and visiting the homes of outcasts and allowing unclean women to be seen with you? And tell us, good teacher, about the law-- what about divorce, for instance? Is it lawful?" Just then some parents decide to bring their children to him. They want Jesus to touch them and bless them.

It's a chaotic moment. The disciples see it all unfolding and try to protect Jesus. Mark says they "rebuked" the parents. They say something like, "What do you mean coming here like this? Can't you see he's busy? Give the guy a break. Come back later."

Jesus sees this, and is indignant, which we often forget is a strong word for angry . . . on the front edge of livid. Jesus is indignant; not with the parents; certainly not with the children; not even with the Pharisees and Scribes, but with his disciples. They don't get it. They don't understand. The children are the point. At this moment nothing is more important to Jesus than the children. He's not interested in arguing with the Pharisees about divorce. He wants to be with the children. "Let them come" he says. "Don't hinder them." (Parents, did you hear that? Don't hinder them.) "Let them come to me. The Kingdom of God belongs to them."

And then I see him sweeping his gaze, looking at all those adults working so hard at their religion, looking into the eyes of the Pharisees and Sadducees and into the eyes of his disciples, all those men hammering away at their religion, and he says "Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive

the kingdom of God like a little child shall never enter it." Infants cannot do anything to earn salvation. It is a gift, but one infants seem to receive a little easier than adults. And then Jesus deliberately, quietly, gently, lovingly, and with all the authority and power and love of Almighty God in him, "took the children in his arms and blessed them."

Historians say this was the official way that a father of a new born infant showed his acceptance of the child: with body language. By taking the child in his hands, a father was designating that child to life rather than death. He was accepting the child into his family rather than turning his back on the child so that it would be cast out and exposed.

When the disciples and crowd saw Jesus taking the infants and children into his arms, they knew they had just learned something very important about God, something very important about children, and about life, and how sacred it is. They figured they'd better get out into the streets and start picking up the unwanted babies. That's what they did. The whole idea of adoption into a family as a son and daughter is ours. The building of orphanages until an adoption can be arranged – that also began with the earliest Christians. It was one of the earliest Christian social service ministries. . . caring for unwanted children.

Now, let's bring this home to our current context. In America today, abortion is not only legalized; not only normalized, it is positively embraced. It's thought of as a solution, a way to get rid of the undesirables. When you hear that word solution, are you thinking what I'm thinking?

You know, abortion was practiced even at the time of Christ, crudely, with poison and with simple instruments, and the Early Church was seamless in its opposition to abortion. They argued about a lot of things in the Early Church; they didn't argue about abortion. On that they spoke with one voice. The reformers of the church, Luther and Zwingli and Calvin . . . they fought tooth, claw and nail about a lot of things. They didn't fight about abortion. One voice. Pastors in the LCMS today quibble about a lot of things. Abortion is not one of them. One voice.

Well I could go on and on, but something else needs to be said now. I know some in this room have had an abortion, and I want you to hear very clearly the following: Christ died also for those who have had an abortion. Christ died for those who were complicit in an abortion. Jesus died for those who shrink from our duty to speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves. Jesus died for those who have become confused or persuaded by the rhetoric of the culture rather than the clear and authoritative Word of God. Let it be said again, that if you have had an abortion, or are complicit in its normalization, if you have confessed it and repent of it, then hear again this promise from God's Word 1 John, "God is faithful and just and has forgiven your sin and has cleansed you from all unrighteousness" (1:9).

The pastors of the LCMS today, we fight about a lot of things, but we don't fight about this: "The blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us of all sin" (1 Jn. 1:7). All sin.

When it comes time to receive forgiveness, that's not the time to hammer away at your religion. That's the time to relax in the strong arms of Jesus, like an infant, and let him hold you and love you and forgive you. Everyone else in our text was working so hard at being religious: the Pharisees who were hammering away with their questions about orthodoxy, the Scribes probing his theology, the crowds pushing, clamoring, and shoving to get close to him, the disciples frowning, scolding, protecting. It seems the only ones available to Jesus, the only ones quiet enough, weak enough and humble enough to receive his blessings were the infants and children. And so quietly, gently, with the authority and love of Almighty God in him, "he took them in his arms, laid his hands on them and blessed them."

So it is when you and I stop trying so hard and simply rest in his presence, it's when you and I stop worrying about what we've done, (or whether we've done enough), but come empty handed before him to eat and drink; it's when you and I have nothing to offer him: it's when we are most like infants, that God can find a way to give us the Kingdom of God.

“Let the little children come to me; do not hinder them, for the Kingdom of God belongs to them. And he took them in his arms and blessed them.” Thanks be to God.
Amen.