

Precious in God's Sight

A Sermon for Children's Sabbath

By Rachel Knuth

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I attended a truly wonderful women's college in the south, where it was quietly understood that when a young lady was going to speak truth to power, she ought to wear a string of pearls. The wisdom being, that you might appear to be proper while saying something radical. So... I brought my pearls today (put on)... and I'm wearing them because this is going to be a social justice kind of sermon—we're talking about lifting up the poor and needy, seeing the oppressed as precious in God's sight. We're talking about children and racism, abuse, and gun violence. And we're talking about these things in the context of our faith. This week there will be Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, Sikhs, Muslims, and Baha'i communities talking about these same issues in their congregations, at their religious services. So in this moment we are part of a larger concentrated effort by people of faith to consider the question—how are the children doing? And this is radical because in many places in our world, children are oppressed, trafficked, and mistreated—it's a reality that is sometimes hard to hear, and often glossed over, especially in churches. So this morning, I invite you to put on your own

metaphorical “pearls” and join me in this journey to see all children as precious in God’s sight.

Psalm 72 is a prayer of hope, that the leaders of the world will be just and fair, that the rulers will protect the poor and needy, and that the oppressed will be seen as precious. Out of this ideal the earth and humanity respond by bursting forth with abundant fruit, grain, and, well, children. This was a psalm that would have been read as a prayer for the royal family at a coronation. The Psalm (in a nutshell) connects care for the poor and oppressed with creating an abundant and beautiful society. But the Psalm begins with a vision of hope, a plea that God will give the king God’s form of justice, and the king’s son God’s righteousness. The psalmist is not some sort of Pollyanna-ish dreamer, hoping for good and nice leaders. No, the author of Psalm 72 uses strong Hebrew words for justice and righteousness. “Mishpat,” means the kind of justice that comes with creating fair standards. It means judging people equally. “Zedekah” is even more radical and forceful—it’s the kind of righteousness that addresses the root causes of inequity, creating fair systems for our world. The psalmist is looking for leaders who will institute real fairness, including the overhaul of oppressive systems. What if we prayed for our leaders to hold such high standards? What if we held our denomination’s leaders, our clergy, and even our selves to such

standards? Could we be bold enough to call upon ourselves to work for justice in our world?

We are fortunate to belong to a congregation and broader denomination that really stand up for children's justice issues in the world. Our congregation participates in the North Bay Organizing Committee, we support the Children's Village, we have many doctors, teachers, parents, and others in our congregation who care for children, and many of our members participate in Habitat for Humanity, Rotary and other service-oriented groups. As a denomination, the United Church of Christ has an entire ministry devoted to justice—if you've never been to the national web site, ucc.org, you can click on "justice" and see all of the ministries our wider church stands for. It's a long list, including literacy, gay and lesbian marriage equality, environmental racism, and many more. All of these programs have an impact on children and their families in places all over the world.

But still, many of us feel powerless in the face of the atrocities we know happen every day.

Each day in America

7 children or teens are killed by guns

1,392 babies are born into extreme poverty
1,837 children are confirmed as abused or neglected
2,857 high school students drop out
16,244 public school students are suspended

We know we must reach out to cherish children, but sometimes the issues feel too big for us to tackle. I heard an interview this week with Nicholas Kristof, of the *New York Times*, and he said, “too often we psych ourselves out [about big causes]. But for *tiny* amounts of money we can help a few children afford to go to school, to buy uniforms, to de-worm them, to buy books.” Such small amounts of money can go quite far, if only we weren’t paralyzed by this feeling that there’s nothing we can do. But really, any small act can make a huge difference in a child’s life—whether we give our time, write letters to our political leaders, or mail a check to a cause we believe in. I remember this commercial from the 80s, maybe you remember it too, it showed a Styrofoam cup. And a voiceover said, “for the price of a cup of coffee, you can make a difference in a child’s life.” Then it cut to images of children in Africa with extended bellies and flies on their faces. I think I remember this commercial so vividly because it seemed like such a small amount of money to spend on a child’s well-being. Even as an elementary-age child, I knew that a cup of coffee didn’t cost that much. As Edward Everett Hale has

said, “I am only one. But still I am one. I cannot do everything, But still I can do something.” We just need to choose the one small thing that we are going to do. Personally, I feel strongly about gun violence and children. I have found that after the Newtown tragedy, I almost can’t bear to hear about the horrendous stories of children harmed by guns. Somehow I always imagine the children in the news to be *my* children, and I feel this powerful sense of dismay in my gut, and I think *it doesn’t have to be this way*. Toddlers, elementary age children, young teenagers, senior high schoolers, are all victims of gun violence—*every day*. So I signed up with *Parents Against Gun Violence*, an advocacy group. I wonder, what will your issue be? Do you get that feeling in your gut when you think about child trafficking or sexual abuse or child poverty or the education of girls? Maybe you’re already acting on your beliefs and supporting the rights of children?

On Friday, Malala Yousafzai, a 17 year old from Pakistan, was summoned from her Chemistry class in England to learn that she had just won the Nobel Peace Prize. Malala knew from a young age that she wanted to change the world. At the age of 11, she began speaking out for the rights of girls to go to school. In defiance of the Taliban, which controlled the territory in Northwestern Pakistan where she lived, she said publicly that she wanted to become a

doctor. Then one day when Malala was 14, the Taliban came for her. They stopped her school bus, terrifying all of the children on board, and shot her twice in the head and neck. At the time, a Taliban spokesman confirmed that Ms. Yousafzai had been the target, calling her crusade for education rights an “obscenity.” Miraculously, she survived the attack. She has become a symbol of moderate Islam and continues to be an advocate for girls and education in Pakistan, although it is too dangerous for her to live there now. Malala recently sat down with President Obama and told him that what her country needs is not drone attacks, but teachers—because “you can kill a terrorist, but you can’t kill terrorism” with a bomb. Malala is only 17 but she is making a difference in the world, despite all obstacles in her way. I wonder why some people act in the face of oppression, while others are stymied by it? We can all take inspiration from people like Malala.

Really, large-scale systems change does not happen overnight. To dismantle the systems that permit racism, child exploitation, or poverty takes time, through generations. I think we have the opportunity to move in a more positive direction, toward kindness and compassion to others—and each generation can influence that just a little bit. These gentle nudges grow over time, and the hope is that each passing year society becomes a little kinder. I know

Children's Sabbath is supposed to be less about our own children's ministry and more about the issues facing children around the world. But I can't help but ask how we can be raising our children to be altruistic, kind, and to do justice? We may be raising issues affecting children, but how exactly are we raising our children? Because I see the two as intricately connected. We can do our part, but creating a more just society is an intergenerational activity! There are simple things we can do with our children and grandchildren, our nephews and nieces, that will instill values of caring and compassion. We can choose children's books where the characters show kindness. We can be wary of stories where the bulk of the story is spent discussing mis-deeds or where language is disrespectful. We can tell stories from our faith that involve sharing, kindness, and striving for goodness. We can involve children in our church's homeless ministries, do service projects (not just at holidays). We can practice kindness in our homes—where perhaps chores are done, not for an allowance (although that might be nice), but because children have something to contribute to the household. We can limit media, t.v., and video games, and pay careful attention to content. These are a few, small ways we can raise children who will strive to create justice in their world. We have precious children in our midst, and they are the next generation of justice-makers.

As people striving to follow the ways of Jesus, we cherish our sweet children, as well as the children of our planet. When we dip the bread into the cup, we remember Jesus, we remember our ancestors, we remember each other, we re-member our broken world, and we feel that there is no separation between all of these and God.

In their book *Recipes for Social Change*, Bernard Glassman and Rick Fields write, “the Zen cook cooks for others because he or she sees that the separation between self and other is illusory.” We are part of the giant ecosystem of life. And in response to this, we find ourselves called into service, called to help when others around us are suffering—because when someone else is hurting, so are we.

Children’s Sabbath is a moment when religious people take a worship service to consider doing what is right to care for children around the world. Yet, I wonder whether we really need to wear our metaphorical pearls to talk about justice for children? Doesn’t it seem rather ordinary to say we should cherish children? But it’s the awareness of children that are marginalized, whose lives are shaped by terrible oppression, that we lift up today. May we live into the dream set by the ancient psalmist, to dismantle oppressive systems

and replace them with justice so that “righteousness [may] flourish and peace abound.” Amen.

Benediction: As we go out into the world, hear these words from Joshua: “Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.”
Amen.

Opening Sentence:

Kailash Satyarthi, co-winner of the Nobel Peace Prize this week for his work to end child exploitation:

"If not now, then when? If not you, then who? If we are able to answer these fundamental questions, then perhaps we can wipe away the blot of human slavery."