

Life Worth Living 5: Children

Mark 7:24-37 by Patty Friesen (Sept 8/24)

In today's gospel reading, Jesus has gone to the Mediterranean coast in what's now modern day Lebanon and I will use the modern day context of Arab speaking Lebanon for us to understand how shocking this encounter between a Jewish rabbi and an Arab woman would be today as it was then. Jesus went to Lebanon for a holiday and to be alone but his star power has drawn attention and a local woman asks him to heal her daughter. Jesus seems to enjoy this social inappropriateness and challenges her, saying, Let the children eat first, for its not fair to take the food from the children to feed the dogs. The woman says, Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs. Her reply shows that she is able to engage the intellectual challenge posed by Jesus 'saying better than his own disciples do. This form of oral combat requires an ability to respond with a saying of equal power.

Her response uses the ambiguity surrounding the term dog to turn the demeaning metaphor used for modern Arabs or Gentiles by first century Jews, to her advantage. While it would be wrong to feed the dogs food that the children need, everyone knows that dogs are permitted to eat what the children drop under the table. This retort reverses the prejudices on both sides of the debate. It was not easy for a Lebanese woman to approach a Jewish teacher for help. Yet her love for her child had brought her across boundaries of gender, religion, and ethnic origins. The miracle is the overcoming of prejudice and boundaries that separate persons. The exchange with the woman points toward the future in which Arabs will be included along with Jews and their faith will bring them salvation. The Jesus who healed her child would never turn

away those who seek help. It is a double scandal that Jesus loses an argument to an Arab woman, but then equally scandalous that he heals her daughter, who as an Arab child is the lowest of the low in first century Palestine.

Roman authors convey little information about ancient world children prior to adolescence. Childless Romans who needed heirs commonly adopted adults rather than children. Our social conventions about children are so radically different from those of antiquity that we do not react with the surprise that Jesus would heal children. Although we may be annoyed when children become disruptive in public places, we assume that even young children have individuality and dignity. Some interpreters have suggested that these gospel stories in which Jesus heals children made it possible for children to be accepted in the early Christian church, as it says in 1 Tim 4:12: Do not let anyone despise you for your youth.

In modern times, for those of us who do not have children or grandchildren around, seeing children at church is one of the reasons we come to church. I am thankful for the children who come to church who bless all of us with their humour and talents in reading and singing and playing musical instruments. I loved it when before a service one Sunday, one of our children confessed in all seriousness that she threw up before coming to church. I told her I was sorry to hear that and that I sometimes felt like throwing up before coming to church too. I loved it when another child asked me in all seriousness who made God. Did God make God? That's a very good question I said. I'm still stumped by that question of who made God. And who isn't charmed by curly headed Alexander running around church talking about fuel trucks. We just have to help

him learn how God is like a fuel truck – filling us up every day so we can vroom, vroom through life.

I'm super-proud of the way we try to support children and parents at church. 10 years ago we made children and youth ministry our #1 priority and we followed up through the hard work of our Education Committee, hiring 3 stellar youth ministers and volunteering our time as Sunday school teachers, mentors and financially donating to send kids to camp and Rosthern Junior College.

How can we support church parents and children more? Amanda Held Opelt shares the stress of parenting in Holy Unhappiness, "Parenting did not come instinctually to me. I didn't have much experience with kids - had never been a babysitter or worked in the church nursery. I thought being a parent would end my anxiety but only increased it - how was I going to keep this creature alive? I feel embarrassed that motherhood is so hard for me, that I struggle to engage my children with energy and creativity.

In the spectrum of human shame, "mommy guilt" is perhaps one of the hardest to shake. Maybe fathers feel that also. Shame, for me, usually seems rooted in the idea that there is always something I should be doing that I'm not, something I should be being but am not. Shame tells me this is not good enough. I am not good enough. Some perfect version of myself and my parenting awaits me in the future, if only I can find it.

I have to trust that there is grace in this season, that the pressure of parenthood may call me into a haggard but holy life. I cannot assume that the life I want is waiting for me just around the corner - when I am finally able to sleep through the night, when

the kids are at last able to buckle themselves in the car and clean up their own messes. Life is now. I am worn thin because I am offering myself to a million, mundane, beautiful and wholly necessary demands of a four year old and one year old. The Bible tells me that I am no failure and that parenthood has been arduous from the beginning with Adam and Eve and Abraham and Sarah, Jacob and Rachel, Mary and Joseph.

This week the US Surgeon General Vivek Murthy issued a warning that parenting is a risk to public health. This announcement however, did not come as a surprise to most parents! A recent study by the American Psychological Association revealed that 48 percent of parents say most days their stress is completely overwhelming, compared with 26 percent of non-parents. Murthy said in the New York Times, “When I became a parent, a friend told me I was signing up for a lifetime of joy and worry. The joys are indeed abundant, but as fulfilling as parenting has been, the truth is it has also been more stressful than any job I’ve had. I’ve had many moments of feeling lost and exhausted. So many parents I encounter as I travel across America tell me they have the same experience: They feel lucky to be raising kids, but they are struggling, often in silence and alone.

Parents who feel pushed to the brink deserve more than platitudes. They need tangible support. That’s why I am issuing a surgeon general’s advisory to call attention to the stress and mental health concerns facing parents and caregivers and to lay out what we can do to address them. It begins with fundamentally shifting how we value parenting, recognizing that the work of raising a child is crucial to the health and well-being of all society. This change must extend to policies, programs and individual actions designed to make this vital work easier.

In the past few years we have made progress, expanding access to early childhood education, maternal health programs and a mental health crisis hotline for kids and adults. We have much more to do, however, to make parenting sustainable. This means bolstering financial support for families, including child tax credits. It also means ensuring all parents can get paid time off to be with a new baby or a sick child, secure affordable government supported child care when they need it and have access to reliable mental health care for themselves and their children. Having safe, affordable before- and after-school care programs, predictable work schedules that allow parents to plan child care and workplace leadership that understands the complex demands on parents can help immensely. Safe playgrounds, libraries, *churches* and community centers can give children places to play and learn and also serve as valuable settings for parents to gather and build social connection. (NYT August 29, 2024)

Chief Medical Officers in Saskatchewan, Dr. Nazeem Mujahardine and Dr. Corey Neudorf found the same results in the University of Waterloo study that access to day care can help to “level the playing field” for all children. Although early childhood education and care benefits all children, much of the evidence suggests that the largest benefits flow to children from the most disadvantaged families...good childcare can compensate, at least partially, for a disadvantaged home life.” (2,6. Early Childhood Care in SK, University of Waterloo study).

I’m super proud that we’ve got some church folks doing the hard work to start a daycare in Osler to benefit all commuting parents in the valley. Wherever they find a home for Osler Community Daycare, even if it’s not here at church, I’m proud that the idea started here at church. Even if we can’t afford to host them as a church and even if

it isn't an "official" project of the church, I'd love it if we could emotionally and spiritually and individually financially support the effort and volunteer time of those involved in this start-up effort. This includes Matthew Braun, Marlene Campbell, Erica Doucette, Kaytee Edwards Buhler and some stellar retired teachers like Lynn Driedger-Enns and Pat Bodnar. Wherever Osler Community Daycare finds a home, I'd love it if we could put our name on the project as Osler Mennonite Church: proud founding partners along with the Government of Saskatchewan.

If not the daycare itself, maybe we can host a before and after school program of the daycare with less renovation, building impact and financial risk. Everyone is welcome to stay for the semi-annual meeting after coffee at 11:15 and hear where the church is going and how we want to support it. You don't have to be a member to stay and discuss but here's an invitation to membership to join us officially this fall because we need you as we do creative wrestling with our building use and community relevance this next year. We recall Jesus' suggestion that the way we treat the youngest and least, not just our own, but all children in our larger community, is a good measure of our discipleship.

Let us pray...Thank you God that throughout scripture, you remind us of your value of all children, newcomers and citizens, non-parents and parents. Keep forming us into your likeness, that we may love you more by loving others. Amen.