

**St. Paul's Lutheran Church, Muskego, Wisconsin**

**February 2, 2020**

## **Culture Shift: When Children Became People**

**Matthew 19:13-15**

*Then people brought little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and pray for them. But the disciples rebuked them.*

*<sup>14</sup> Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these." <sup>15</sup> When he had placed his hands on them, he went on from there.*

This weekend we begin an "Historical Apologetics" message series. "Apologetics" refers to a defense of the faith. The goal of apologetics isn't to reason someone into faith in Jesus, but rather to deal with some of the issues that might keep a person from even listening to the Christian message.

Today the Christian faith is often viewed negatively. But a study of history reveals that when Christianity becomes the dominate faith in a culture, you see positive cultural shifts.

Over the next few weeks we will look at the following cultural shifts:

- When Children Became People (Feb 2)
- When Women Became Precious (Feb 9)
- When Men Became Sacrificial (Feb 16)
- When Work Became Worship (Feb 23)

The title for this week's message comes from the book *When Children Became People: The Birth of Childhood in Early Christianity* by O.M. Bakke.

The title is shocking isn't it? Haven't children always been "people"?

A study of the Old Testament shows that wasn't the case. In Leviticus 20, Moses commands the Israelites not to join in worship of Molech, the god of the Ammonites. It involved sacrificing their children to this god. What would move a parent to do such a thing? Fear of this god? A hope to manipulate this god to hear their prayers? When the Israelites moved into the promised land about 1400 years before Christ, they were moving into a culture that did not see children as infinitely precious.

In the centuries after Jesus came, the church was living in another culture that did not value children. The practice of "exposito" was common. In the Roman world, the paterfamilias, the head of the family, controlled life and death decisions over their family. The paterfamilias could decide that this child had a birth defect, or that the child was born during a time of bad omens, or that it was the wrong gender (girls were not valued like boys), or simply that they couldn't afford another mouth to feed. So they would "expose" the child, similar to someone leaving a baby at the door of a hospital. Only, when a child was exposed back then, it could be exposed to simply die, or to be picked up by someone who would raise the

child to be abused in horrible ways as a thing, not a person. And even in Roman times, abortion was practiced to be free from an unwanted child.

So what changed?

The culture of the Old Testament believer was in stark contrast to the pagan culture around it. The Old Testament believer confessed, “You created my inmost being, You knit me together in my mother’s womb” (Psalm 139:13). The Lord, the Savior God, the Creator, also created that child who was being formed in her or his mother’s womb.

You see children as infinitely precious people in the words of Jacob in Genesis 33. When his brother Esau asks about all the people around Jacob, Jacob answers: “They are the children God has graciously given your servant” (Genesis 33:5). Children are a gift that parents received by grace, not earned or deserved.

The precious nature of children is evident in our psalm for today:

<sup>3</sup> Children are a heritage from the LORD, offspring a reward from him.

<sup>4</sup> Like arrows in the hands of a warrior are children born in one’s youth.

<sup>5</sup> Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them (Psalm 127:3-5).

This view of children is counter-cultural. Even the disciples saw children as unworthy of our Savior’s attention. “People were ... bringing babies to Jesus for him to place his hands on them. When the disciples saw this, they rebuked them” (Luke 18:15).

Jesus had to teach the disciples God’s view of children. They were members of God’s kingdom. In fact, Jesus holds up children as role models of humble faith. “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these” (Matthew 19:14).

What changed so that children were viewed as infinitely precious? First, the heart and mind of individual Christians changed. What Paul says about people in general is also true of the Christian view of children:

“From now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!” (2 Corinthians 5:16-17)

First the individual Christian’s view of children was impacted by God’s view of children. As they lived out that love of children, they began to impact the society around them. Bakke in his book quotes the church fathers who call Christians to put away the pagan practices of exposito and abortion. The church continued to be impacted by the heathen society around them. But gradually as Christianity became a dominant force in the culture, the culture began to see children as infinitely precious, worthy of our protection, worthy of our highest efforts to care for them and train them.

I believe that there is a cultural lag. I see it not only in my preparations for this message, but also as I am preparing for next week’s message that women became precious. The Christian faith becomes the predominant faith in a culture. The culture, even among those who do not believe, begins to follow the lead of the Christian view of children. But as the Christian faith begins to wane in cultural influence, Christian values continue to remain for a time, and then gradually begin to decrease and become distorted.

The culture that we live in is a beneficiary of Christianity. Children have become infinitely precious. As a culture we are willing to pour resources into the protection and education of our youth. But as the Christian faith begins to lose its place of influence in our culture, there appears to be a distortion of the Christian view that children are precious. The distortion is that children are becoming the rulers. We are forgetting another fact about children. Not only are they infinitely precious, they are also infinitely evil.

Now I meant that phrasing to be shocking. But it is important for us, if we are going to be the best place for children to grow, to remember this fact. They have inherited a sinful nature from us. Children do not need to be taught to be selfish. It comes naturally to them even as it did to us.

This is also part of a Biblical worldview of children. Just as we believe that our Creator God creates and forms the child in the womb as a gracious gift to children, we also believe that they are conceived and born, no longer in the perfect and holy image of God, but in the sinful image of their parents. In Genesis 5, Adam was created in God's image, but the son he had after the fall into sin was conceived and born in the likeness of his sinful father.

This is what King David confesses in Psalm 51:5:

Surely I was sinful at birth,  
sinful from the time my mother conceived me.

What does that mean? King Solomon makes the point in Proverbs 22:15:

Folly is bound up in the heart of a child,  
but the rod of discipline will drive it far away.

Dear parents and grandparents, uncles and aunts, God calls upon us to see the children around us as infinitely precious. But he is also calling upon us to see them as infinitely evil just like us. It is frightening to see adults giving in to children and allowing them to make major decisions in their lives. It is also frightening that even we as Christians are failing to recognize that the greatest danger that our children face is not that they have no friends, or they don't excel in sports or music or school. The greatest danger is that we fail to appreciate their evil sinful nature that will lead them away from Christ.

I have to be honest. How can it be that we allow our children to decide if we will go to church on a weekend? Or how can it be that we tacitly agree – sports or music or some other activity is more important than worship. Every time you chose not to be here in worship, you are teaching your children that they really don't need to continue to hear God's word their whole life long.

How are we as Christians being influenced by the unchristian culture around us? How are we allowing a caricature of the truth that children are infinitely precious lead us to forget that they are also infinitely evil just like us and that their greatest need is for them to see how important your relationship with the Savior is.

Children are infinitely evil. That sounds awful. But I am just saying that if we don't remember the power of sin in their lives, we will not appreciate the final point of the message. That they are infinitely redeemed!

I appreciate King David's words in Psalm 25:

Remember, LORD, your great mercy and love,  
for they are from of old.

Do not remember the sins of my youth  
and my rebellious ways;  
according to your love remember me,  
for you, LORD, are good.

Lord Jesus, let us be a culture shifter, first in our own families, and then in the world around us as we share this good news that our God remembers us according to his forgiving love.

*“Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.”*

Let us daily be asking, “Do I remember that my children are infinitely precious to my Savior? Am I in anyway hindering them in their relationship with Jesus? Am I letting them know that there is absolutely nothing more important to me than that they experience the Savior’s loving embrace?”

Our God has entrusted these precious, redeemed souls into our care. Again we turn to King Solomon for inspired wisdom: “Discipline your children, for in that there is hope; do not be a willing party to their death” (Proverbs 19:18). At the same time, we heed Paul’s admonition: “Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord” (Ephesians 6:4).

Dear brothers and sisters who have children in your home, you have a very difficult calling. By God’s grace, I trust that you see your children as a precious gift from God. I pray that you remember that they are infinitely evil just like you. Spiritual death is always lying close, looking to destroy them. You have the difficult task of saying “no” to their sinful natures over and over again. Yet you are striving to walk a fine line. You don’t want to “exasperate” your children, frustrating them with the feeling that they are never accepted and loved.

As I think about your calling, there are three things I want you to remember:

1. We as a congregation are here to help you. Kids Club, Confirmation classes, our Christian education system. We are here to help you, but not to replace you. You as mother and father are the most important people in your children’s lives so that they understand they are infinitely precious, infinitely evil and sinful, and also infinitely and perfectly redeemed by their Savior.
2. You will fail in this high and holy calling. Jesus had to rebuke the disciples because they missed the mark and hindered the children. Because you are sinful parents, you too will need to hear the rebuke of the Savior, perhaps given through a sermon like this, perhaps through a parent-teacher conference, perhaps your conscience condemning you. Don’t be surprised. After all, you are infinitely evil just like your children.
3. You too are infinitely redeemed. The best gift you can give to your children is to daily claim the forgiveness of sins that Jesus won for you. Just as you bring your children to baptism, you go back to your baptism every day. Remember that you are clothed, not in the sinfulness of the disciples, but in the perfection of Jesus. Paul says, “All of you who have been baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ” (Galatians 3:26). Go back to your baptisms daily and hear your heavenly Father speak to you as he spoke to his Son Jesus. “This is my daughter, this is my son, whom I love. In her, in him, I am well pleased.” Be daily students of God’s Word for yourself, don’t let a week go by where you are not here in God’s house to be encouraged. Claim your status as redeemed children of God. As you do, your children will be watching and learning that they too are infinitely redeemed.

Finally, for all of us, there are two thoughts that I want us to remember. This weekend we are introducing the Thirteen 22 Society, based on Proverbs 13:22: “A good person leaves an inheritance for their children’s children.” Children are precious. Much of our ministry focuses on helping parents care for their children. They are worthy of our sacrifices to improve our ministry to them.

Secondly, I want to speak to the many Christians present who are concerned especially about their adult children, who are making decisions that are leading them away from Christ. Remember the story of the lost son in Luke 15. A son rejects his father and his family. He runs away. He wastes his life. But he remembers the love of his father, and eventually he comes to his senses and comes back. And there is the father looking for him and then rushes out to meet him. Dear friends, your adult children are also precious to our Creator God. Yes, they are infinitely evil just like us. But remember that they are infinitely redeemed. Let us pray that the Holy Spirit will work in their hearts through the remembered Word. Pray that we might be images of our heavenly Father, waiting for them, loving them even though they reject us. Let us never stop praying that the powerful Creator Spirit would work in their hearts and bring them back to their Savior because they are infinitely redeemed – precious to you but even more precious to our Savior. Amen.

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## My Next Steps to Be a Culture Shifter

- **Dig Deeper:** If you would like to explore the impact of Christianity on our culture’s view of children, purchase the book *When Children Became People: The Birth of Childhood in Early Christianity* by O.M. Bakke. This is a revision of his doctoral thesis.
- **Meditate on your part in building Christian culture:** How am I showing that children are precious to me? Where have I stood in judgment over children and ignored my own sin? Where have I failed to consider children precious enough to discipline them in love? Have I given up on a child as a “lost cause”?
- **Be Encouraged:** Children are precious to our Savior. The Holy Spirit can and does work miracles in our children’s hearts. Purchase the book *Change of Affection: A Gay Man’s Incredible Story of Redemption* by Becket Cook to read a story of the Holy Spirit’s mercy and power.

## GroupWork

1. What's your favorite childhood memory?
2. Read Leviticus 20:1-5.
  - a. What do you think would motivate parents to sacrifice their children to Molek?
  - b. Compare those possible motivations to the reasons that a person might consider an abortion today.
  - c. How can you as an individual or a small group be an answer to some of those fears or concerns so that we help shift our culture to an unborn-child-protecting culture?
3. Read Luke 18:15-17.
  - a. Why do you think the disciples tried to shoo the children away?
  - b. What could you or your small group do to help small children to grow into a close, loving relationship with their Savior?
4. Read Luke 15:11-24.
  - a. How might this parable encourage a parent who has a wayward son or daughter?
  - b. What can you learn from the father about how to react when we see adult children making ungodly decisions?
5. Close by breaking up into small groups of three or four. If you feel comfortable, share the name of a child for whom you request prayers. Take turns praying for each child that your group partners have mentioned.