Sunday, October 17, 1993
IF THE CHILD IS SAFE
Matthew 18:1-7

Last spring, our congregation had a weekend dedicated to celebrating children and youth. The title of the sermon was “The Example of a Child.” The text for the sermon was from the Gospel of Matthew, where this story is found. One day, the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?” I’m sure they had an answer in mind when they asked the question and were looking for confirmation of their opinion. But Jesus surprised them when he called a child, whom he put among them, and said, “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name, welcomes me.”

The emphasis of that sermon last spring was on Jesus asking us to become like children in our attitude toward life and toward God. For example, children have an active and creative imagination, which helps them see things that we no longer see as adults. As a result, children are open to new ideas and new ways of seeing things.

Children are also unconscious of rank or race until taught differently. A king’s child will gladly play with a ragman’s child until you tell them it’s not the thing to do.

We are also to be like children in our relationship with God because a child has a deep sense of dependence and trust and is willing to give of themselves without reservation.

No wonder Jesus said, “Unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” I think Jesus meant that you will not even recognize the kingdom of God, even though it is all around you, unless you have the openness of a child. We are to have the freshness of mind that is in a child — the curiosity, the love of exploration, the questioning attitude, and the joy of learning new things. He is also asking us to have the sense of wonder and mystery about life that we find in a child.

But then, in this same story from the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus went on to say, “If any one of you puts a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea.”

So it is that today’s sermon is on this second part of the same story from Matthew’s gospel. It’s about some of the “stumbling blocks” we put before children in our time.

Jesus knew that in any family, society, culture, or nation, if the child is safe, everyone is safe. He also wanted children to be safe for their own good. No one is more defenseless than a child. It has been said that the final test of a society or culture or country is what it does to its children.

What, then, are some of these stumbling blocks that we put before children? Child abuse — sexual, physical, and verbal — is one big stumbling block in today’s world.

Earlier this month, I had the opportunity to hear Marilyn Van Derbur speak here in Lincoln as our community began a year-long campaign to call attention to domestic abuse in Nebraska.

Ms. Van Derbur is a former Miss America who, two years ago, decided to go public with her story of being sexually violated by her father for 13 years, from age 5 to age 18. She never knew when, on a given night, her father might appear in her bedroom to violate her. In Lincoln, as in other places since 1991, she spoke frankly and openly about her horrible experiences.

Van Derbur described her own pain as an incest survivor and the fact that many people questioned her story of being sexually molested by her father. In her case, part of the reason that no one at first believed her was because her father was such a prominent civic leader in Denver. From the outside, the family in which she was raised seemed to be an ideal one. They were upper-middle-class, well-educated, and had plenty of money. There were four children, all girls. All of them were abused in one way or another by their father. He used to keep a wooden dowel above the door to each room so that he could grab it quickly and physically beat his daughters. Sometimes he would grab two of the children by the hair and bang their heads together.

She said that it wasn't until she was 24 that, with the help of a clergyman, she was able to break through and find the source of her pain. Prior to that, she had split her personality into two people — a night child and a day child. She also said it was agonizing to publicly come forward with her story two years ago.

She went on to say that she has suffered uncontrollable crying, memory-induced paralysis, and persistent insomnia. She said, "My father didn't traumatize my childhood; he traumatized my life." Years later, as a mature adult, she finally confronted her mother, but her mother refused to believe her daughter, saying it was all her fantasy. Van Derbur said to us, "If they don't believe me, dear God, who is going to believe a child?" As a mature adult, she also confronted her father before he died, and he admitted what he had done, but he never did understand the harm he had brought to his daughter.

Family violence of all kinds is one of the many stumbling blocks we put in the paths of our children. It's a public health problem. Last year, Lincoln's Rape/Spouse Abuse Crisis Center received 10,000 calls on its crisis line. That was a major increase over the previous year. In addition, there were nearly 7,000 requests for domestic violence services last year in the Lincoln, Lancaster County area.

Police officers know that one of the most dangerous assignments they face is to be called to a home where family violence is taking place. Last week's killing of a police officer in Hastings, Nebraska, is a recent example.

In 1992, Voices for Children In Nebraska, a statewide advocacy organization founded in 1987 and dedicated to removing and preventing as many stumbling blocks for children as possible, published a little book called Hide and Seek, which is filled with statistics on the state of the child in Nebraska. Here are some samples:

There are 44,188 Nebraska households with children under 18 which are headed by a single parent. In other words, single-parent families represent over 20 percent of Nebraska's households with children under 18.

Over 5,000 eligible Nebraska children do not receive "Head Start" education. Fifteen Head Start programs teach and nurture 2,820 children in Nebraska, yet almost 66 percent of the eligible children remain unserved due to lack of adequate funding and lack of accessible sites. Head Start programs and other qualified early childhood education programs, such as our

First-Plymouth Preschool, have proven their effectiveness. Every dollar spent on preschool education saves six dollars otherwise spent on special education, welfare, and law enforcement.

Yet the federal budget in 1992 proposed only $100 million to increase Head Start for one year, while we spent $500 million a day on Desert Storm.

The base payment for a child in Nebraska Foster Care is $7.30 per day. A survey of kennels shows we pay $7.00 to $8.50 per day for our pets. The foster family payment amount is expected to cover a child's room and board, recreation, school needs, transportation, clothing, and allowance.

Violence and injury account for almost two out of three child deaths in Nebraska. Suicide is the third leading cause of all child deaths in our state. Children are almost twice as likely to be victims of murder as the elderly.

Isn't it ironic that a few weeks ago we were all jolted by the shock of the death of three U.S. soldiers who were killed in Somalia, 8,000 miles away, when a U.S. helicopter was shot down? At the same time, in Southeast Washington D.C., about three miles from our Capitol's dome, four U.S. citizens, including a four-year-old child, were shot and killed in a spasm of drug-related slaughter. The Somalia tragedy set off a national debate that culminated in a presidential speech and a change in policy. The killings in Washington D.C.'s Ridge Road area raised eyebrows, then passed from memory. The carnage in our country's cities is becoming so common that we are simply tuning it out.

The stumbling blocks for children are many and varied. Too many of our children today are growing up in an ethically polluted culture where instant sex without responsibility, instant gratification without effort, instant solutions without sacrifice, and getting rather than giving are too often the signals of our mass media, business, and political life.

No parent can shut out completely the pollution of our airwaves and popular culture, which glorify excessive violence, endless consumption, easy sex, and greed, and depict deadly alcohol and tobacco products as fun, glamorous, and macho.

At the same time, we are in short supply of true heroines and heroes in our private and public life. Too frequently, the measure of success in popular culture is how much money one makes and what luxuries we spend it on.

Do you mind if I meddle a bit? One of my biggest disappointments in ministry comes from the fact that in this church, we offer the best programs anywhere in early childhood education all the way up through youth ministry, and yet participation in many of these programs is sporadic.

As an example, in our Sunday morning program for infants through Junior High, over 700 children are enrolled, yet only 450 of these participate at least once a month. Thus, some Sundays we will have 250 children here, and on another Sunday 350, and then on the following Sunday 225. There is no continuity. Religious education is seen by too many families as a part-time activity over which many other activities take precedence. The same is true of public worship for many of our adult members. What kind of example are we setting as adults? We need to build bridges of support rather than erect stumbling blocks.

You see, I believe that the most important work we do to help our children is done quietly — in our homes and neighborhoods, and in our churches. No government can love a child, and no policy can substitute for a family's care along with the support it can receive from the church. At the same time, we cannot ignore the broader social forces that hurt children and their families.

Remember, Jesus taught us that if the child is safe, all of us are safe. He also said that when we love and welcome children, we are welcoming Him. Amen.