Sunday, October 22, 1995
ALL MY CHILDREN
Luke 18:15-17

All My Children is the name of a television “soap opera” that has been on the air for over 25 years. As far as I can remember, I’ve never watched even part of an episode. Because the title of the sermon today is the same as the name of this soap opera, last week I asked some colleagues who regularly follow the program to describe it to me. I inquired about the overall storyline, the recurrent themes, the morals of its characters, and the picture of life it presents.

They told me that no one on the program ever seems to work at a regular job, yet they have plenty of money. Most of the children in the story are not sure who their parents are because marriage vows are not taken seriously. There is little to admire in the ethics of the characters in the story. People cheat, lie, and are unfaithful to each other. Greed and selfishness are the predominant themes that run through the lives of the people in the story. There are no heroic characters, no good role models. A strong religious faith is not a motivating force in any of the characters’ lives. Overall, the program presents a picture of life that is lived on the surface, without regard for the damage done to others. There is little about people working together in a cooperative fashion to build a better community.

Is this in any way an accurate portrayal of life in our time? What does it say, particularly in how we raise our children in today’s society?

The portrayal of life in All My Children is at least partially accurate. This past August, there was a revealing article in The Wall Street Journal on this subject. The author was Andrew Peyton Thomas, an assistant attorney general for Arizona and the author of the recently published book, Crime and the Sacking of America: The Roots of Chaos.

Mr. Thomas begins his article by referring to the Susan Smith case. She is the mother who confessed that she drowned her two children by letting her car roll into a lake with her two sons strapped in the car seats. Here’s part of what Mr. Thomas wrote:

“The public reaction to Susan Smith’s infanticide has been harsh, and diabolical crimes such as hers deserve nothing less than the sentence she received. Yet there is something more to this popular response that deserves attention. Susan Smith has become something of a scapegoat for a society that wishes to think, despite growing evidence to the contrary, that it cares for its children every bit as much as previous generations did and that crimes such as Mrs. Smith’s are an oddity rather than a forerunner of many more such tragedies.”

Mr. Thomas went on to say, “Susan Smith’s atrocity is still another sign that America is suffering a great and historic cultural decay.” According to Mr. Thomas, “the essence of America’s social discontent is selfishness.”

“Nobody is comfortable discussing this quality, for everyone possesses it, by virtue of human nature, to varying degrees. It was utter, monstrous selfishness that led Susan Smith to drown her two sons: her stated desire to be rid of her children so that her love life would be less hindered.”

All of us are aware that there is a constant struggle between the selfishness designed to preserve the individual and the social instincts that preserve the species. There is always a

necessary tension and balance between the two. However, when society, through its values, social pressures, and legislation, actually alters this balance on the side of self-centeredness, all kinds of problems emerge.

Mr. Thomas maintains that “self-centeredness and its related vices — crime, illegitimacy, child neglect — are exploding in America because, after centuries of Western philosophy devoted to the purpose, Americans are glorifying extreme individualism beyond healthy limits, and beyond anything ever experienced by another national culture.”

“When a society decides that its individual members should live for themselves, maximizing their wealth and pleasures at the expense of even their children, then such a society must expect all manner of unkind consequences.”

“Violent crime, the most extreme form of selfishness, has provided the most spectacular evidence of this resulting social breakdown.”

Now listen to this, again from Mr. Thomas: “Nationally, the white juvenile crime rate is now growing twice as fast as the black juvenile crime rate. The FBI has noted that juvenile crime rates are now soaring not only among ‘minority youth in urban areas,’ but also among ‘all races, all social classes, and lifestyles.'”

“In Arizona, for example, the governor’s Office for Children has estimated that for all white males in metropolitan Phoenix between the ages of eight and seventeen, 38.9% will have a criminal record before they turn eighteen. Between 1955 and 1991, the violent crime rate among white Americans of all ages rose nearly 250%.”

Mr. Thomas goes on to say, “Consistent with the values that guided Susan Smith, the popular response to these trends increasingly is simply to write off a generation of neglected, troublesome children by expanding the death penalty to juveniles and marching them off to the gallows. It is much more difficult to look within ourselves and find there the roots of this crisis of the heart.”

William Raspberry, a newspaper columnist writing on a related subject, said, “One of the most remarkable phenomena of our time is the persistence of the belief among those in power that we can coerce people into decent behavior if we only make punishment tough enough. We keep imagining that the problem is that young people aren’t frightened enough, so we keep toughening criminal sanctions to the point where our national incarceration rate is the highest in the Western world. The real problem is that our young people are not hopeful enough.”

According to Mr. Thomas, “These trends are mostly due to the voluntary, self-interested breakup of the family... If we care about our children as much as we say we do, then we must at least acknowledge that white illegitimacy rates are now growing at more than double the rate of growth among blacks.”

Extreme self-centeredness is rampant. The common answer for many is to appeal to individual rights (career choice, sexual freedom, etc.). Rights, of course, are the classic intellectual haven for self-interested conduct. But few children seem to be misled by such explanations. They see that looking out for number one, as evidenced in the materialism and sexual self-indulgence of the age, has become one of the guiding principles of adult society.

How can we who claim to follow the Christian way counteract these forces? Mr. Thomas believes that only religious faith can begin to solve our problems. Let me quote him one more time: “Only a strong and positive religious faith can help matters. It has a unique ability to compel self-denial and to instill the moral commands that deter bad behavior when the police officers leave the scene.”

According to our Christian way, as taught and lived by Jesus, there are two things we need to instill in our children, but first, they need to be lived by us. They are self-denial and love. Life is more than self-indulgence. It is a series of obligations to be fulfilled as honorably as possible, with occasional interludes for moderate self-indulgence.

Jesus said, “Let the children come to me, and do not stop them.” We don’t on purpose stop children and young people from learning the joy of fulfilling obligations and not always putting themselves first, but children are quick to imitate the way we live.

We who profess to follow the Christian way need to not be afraid to go against the culture of greed and selfishness.

I don’t know about you, but I worry about children and young people of all classes and races who are drowning in the meaninglessness of a culture that rewards greed and guile and tells them that life is about getting more than giving. We live in a time that too frequently defines success by consumption rather than character, a culture that values things, style, packaging, and publicity over substance, vision, service, and concrete action.

In our own congregation, Christian education and regular participation in worship are seen by too many families as a part-time activity over which many other activities take precedence. In addition to what our church offers, we who are parents need to do a great deal of “home schooling” in living the Christian way. You can do this by reading your children appropriate Bible stories and showing by your example that your religious faith is an integral part of your everyday lives. It’s one way of fulfilling the promises you took on behalf of your child or children when they were baptized.

Today, in the 10:30 a.m. service of worship, we had an infant baptism. The parents of the child being baptized are asked to make some very solemn promises. They are asked, “Do you promise, with God’s help, by your life and teaching, to lead this child toward an understanding of the Christian faith and into following the way of Christ?”

It’s also been the practice in this church for the minister who officiates at the baptism to write a letter to the child being baptized that is to be opened by that child when he or she reaches their 12th birthday. Here’s part of what that letter says:

“On this beautiful Sunday morning, your father and mother came to the church bringing in their arms a fine baby girl. It was my very great privilege to baptize you in the name of God our Creator, Christ our Savior, and the Holy Spirit. Your parents, in this way and in prayers and vows, dedicated you to God and themselves to rearing you in the Christian way of life. Today you are no longer a little child but a young woman twelve years old. Heretofore, your parents have been making decisions for you. From now on, you will increasingly be making them for yourself. The most important decision you will ever make is the kind of life that you are going to live. I hope you will definitely decide to be a follower of Jesus Christ; that you will let his life be your model and that you will follow his teachings. It is my prayer that you will be one whose life is governed by love for God and for all human beings; one in whose life race prejudice and

greed do not reign; one who treats all people as brothers and sisters and who is a Christian in all relationships. I also hope you will become an active member of the Church of Jesus Christ. If you will make this kind of decision, your life will have a beauty and power that can come to you in no other way."

A little over two years ago, I read a short book entitled The Measure of Our Success: A Letter to My Children and Yours, by Marian Wright Edelman. She reminds all of us that "it is the responsibility of every adult — especially parents, educators, and religious leaders — to make sure that children hear what we have learned from the lessons of life and to hear over and over again that we love them and that they are not alone."

Because that book was written in the form of a letter to her children, it inspired my wife and me to write a letter to our children and their spouses, all of whom are now parents. We told them that our letter to them was prompted by Ms. Edelman's letter. I want to conclude this sermon by reading you part of that letter in the hopes it will inspire you to write a letter to your children, whatever their ages.

Here's part of what we wrote: "First of all, we want you to know that you are loved by us and by God, not for what you do, or don't do, or look like, or own, but simply because you are a gift of a loving God. As parents, we often forget to tell you this. No matter what your achievements are in life and however proud we are of them, they have no bearing on your intrinsic value or on our love for and acceptance of you as a person. No awards can ever rival the countless little and big joys you have given and continue to give us."

"Just as parents help shape children, children help shape parents, and you have helped us to grow. We thank you for being so helpful and forbearing. We hope that most of your childhood memories will be positive and loving. What we owe you as our children is our best effort to be persons worth emulating and to send through our lives a message to the future we hope you will find worth transmitting to your children and grandchildren. You are already outstanding parents to your children. Continue to love them unconditionally and enjoy them."

"Above all, 'So live that you wouldn't be ashamed to sell the family parrot to the town gossip,' as Will Rogers said years ago." Amen.