Sunday, October 19, 2003
HOPE FOR THE CHILDREN
Micah 6:8; Matthew 18:1-7,10

Sometimes when you ask a question, you get an answer that surprises you. The disciples asked Jesus, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” I believe they hoped he would say, “You, my disciples, are the greatest.” Instead, he took a little child, placed that child in the middle of their circle, and said, “Unless you 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 welcomes me.” Then he added this surprising statement: “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 sea.” For special emphasis, he said, “Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones; for I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven.”

Here and in other Bible stories, it is obvious that Jesus had a special love for children in the same way that the God he revealed has a special love for children. He knew that in any family, society, culture, or nation, if the child is safe, everyone is safe. No one is more defenseless than a child. It has been said that the final test of a society, or church, or culture, or nation, is what it does to its children. That is what makes physical and mental abuse of children, and the sexual abuse of children by parents, priests, teachers, ministers, or any other adult, so horrible.

These various abuses are all examples of the “stumbling blocks” that are put before children in today’s world. You need not look any farther than what is happening in our own State of Nebraska for more examples. A recent front-page story in the Omaha World-Herald by Jeremy Olson and Karyn Spencer gave details of the tragic deaths of 10 children during this present year. According to the story, in at least six of the cases, authorities had been warned that the children might be in danger. In total, 71 children have died because of abuse and neglect since 1999, and some of these deaths were not reported.

Because of these deaths this year, and others in prior years, and because of many other incidents of child neglect and abuse (what Jesus called stumbling blocks), Governor Mike Johanns has appointed a special task force to investigate what can be done to better protect children who are in danger of being abused and killed. This is a positive step in the right direction. This is not a partisan political issue. The problem exists throughout this country and has been decades in the making. Providing protection and hope for our children will take our best efforts.

Another positive step in the right direction in Nebraska took place in 1982, when the State Legislature established the Foster Care Review Board as an independent state agency. One of our church members, Barbara Heckman, has been a member of this State Foster Care Review Board for many years and is presently its chair. She has also served on local foster care review boards.

I talked with her this past week, and she gave me a wealth of information about what is happening to our children in this state and what more needs to be done. She said that there are now over 6,000 children in foster care in Nebraska. On any given day, between 1,150 and 1,400 children age five and under are in foster care in our state. These children are in foster

care due to serious medical, physical, or emotional neglect, physical abuse, parental substance abuse, in-utero drug or alcohol exposure, and/or sexual abuse. All of these types of neglect and abuse of children take place in all social classes — the wealthy, middle class, and the poor. Because of abuse and neglect, how many more children need to be in some kind of foster care is unknown.

The bad news is that for very young children under age five, research shows that abuse and neglect can permanently damage a child's brain and alter its development. Some of this damage can never be repaired.

Another part of the problem is that for children under the age of five, abuse and neglect often take place without anyone being aware of it. When a child enters school, or if they have the opportunity to go to preschool, good teachers are observant and qualified to identify a child who may be a victim of abuse in the home. However, the younger child often has few observers outside the home on a daily basis to note any signs of changed behavior that might signify abuse.

I was surprised to learn that Nebraska has the highest per capita number of children in foster care of any state in the country. It's good news because we have taken steps to get children into a safe environment. It's bad news because there is such a large need for children to be in foster care. We have not done nearly enough in the area of prevention, and there is still a big need for more foster care homes.

What worries me also is that too many of our children who are being brought up in good homes are being influenced by a culture outside the home that rewards greed and guile and tells them over and over again that life is about getting rather than giving; that life is about being served rather than serving. We live in a time that too frequently defines success by consumption rather than by service, vision, and concrete action.

No doubt there was a time in years past when most of the knowledge and influence of the world at large was selectively filtered through parental values and churches to the children.

If you had lived on the frontier on a homestead without radio, television, the automobile, cell phones, or the internet, as a kind of isolated family, then certainly you were the main and only influence on your children, good or bad. But this is no longer true. Now, more than the immediate family or extended family is affecting you and your children. Parents who are trying their best to keep out some of the corrupting influences of the wider culture find it difficult to do so in today's world.

Therefore, if you are really concerned about your children and the other children around you, you will also be concerned about the direction and health of the community in which you live and society as a whole.

Lest you misunderstand, I am not at all de-emphasizing the importance of a strong and healthy family. Parents need to be good role models more than ever. You need to set good examples in morality, ethics, and giving.

At the same time, I have a lot of hope for children because of the steps our government and other volunteer organizations are taking and because of what I see this congregation doing. Our early childhood education weekday program, which includes what we used to call "Parents Day Out" and our "First-Plymouth Preschool," is continually serving 300 to 400 children, and

we could double this enrollment if we had the space and the money. During any given period of time, up to 30% of the children who participate in our program are on tuition assistance. They come from single-parent homes and from homes where the parents cannot afford to pay the full tuition. Some of these children are from foster care homes. Other children have serious problems and need all kinds of special attention. There are so many “miracle” stories I could tell you about how the lives of these young children and their parents have been changed for the better. Many of these stories of success are so remarkable that I’ve asked Nancy Rosenow to put together a little booklet of what’s happened in the lives of these children and their families. We need to get this story out.

Add to this our Sunday morning church school classes, our Wednesday evening program for children and young people, our Doves Choir, Hope Choir, our confirmation program, our youth program, the youth orchestra, and the string ensemble, and you will discover that we are very busy removing stumbling blocks from children and helping them grow into responsible, healthy, compassionate adults.

We are trying our best to do what Jesus asked us to do: to welcome children in his name, to let each child know that he or she has been created in God’s image and can experience the love of God through the people and programs of this congregation. We do this because we know that parents alone cannot completely shield their children from the pollution of our airwaves and popular culture, which glorifies excessive violence, endless consumption, easy sex, and greed, and depicts deadly drugs as fun and glamorous.

On the bad news side, there is not only a shortage of places where babies and children who are not yet old enough for public school kindergarten can obtain quality child care when needed, but also a lack of prevention programs.

There’s an old African saying that states: “It takes a village to raise a child.” A few years ago, some political leaders made fun of this statement, some even suggesting that it implied some sort of “socialism.” It could be interpreted that way, but that’s not the original meaning of the statement. When our State Legislature enacted laws to set up the foster care review boards, and when Governor Johanns appointed the special task force to recommend ways we can improve our care of children, these actions reflected the “village” concept — that it takes a whole community to protect and nurture its children.

Our Christian faith, with its Hebrew heritage, has always taught that we are responsible for each other. In the Biblical tradition, it is understood that the raising of children was the responsibility of the larger community, in addition to being the primary responsibility of the immediate family. Many times this kind of support is done through churches and various volunteer community agencies, and at other times it takes government action.

As Christians, we can take pride in the fact that the first schools in this country were started by churches. Churches also initiated programs for the retarded and the first hospitals.

We acknowledge our community responsibility for helping parents in the upbringing of their children every time a child is baptized here. As a congregation, we state: “On behalf of the whole Christian Church, we now receive this child into our love and care. We promise we will uphold these parents in the fulfillment of their vows and provide for all children full opportunities for Christian growth and nurture.” We are affirming that more than the immediate family is necessary. That’s why we provide Sunday and weekday church education programs, confirmation classes, and other programs for children and youth.

We realized long ago that more than the immediate family is needed. The main reason for the founding of public schools in this country was for the purpose of better educating young people. It's to the benefit of all of us to have educated citizens. It helps with employment, and it is necessary for our form of government to survive.

Fortunately, we recognized many years ago that the nurture and education of children is far too complex and too important for the immediate family to do alone. Even those parents who are committed to "home schooling" and do a good job have formed associations for group activities, and there are publishing houses that provide good curriculum materials.

As more parents are working outside the home, we've had to add weekday childcare and preschools to aid families. The most recent statistic that I could find showed that almost 75% of children in Nebraska live in households in which both parents or the single parent works outside the home. Childcare arrangements vary — some are very good, and some do more harm than good.

So today, as we celebrate children in our church and in our wider community, I invite you to help in whatever way you can to remove any "stumbling blocks" that keep children from becoming healthy, responsible, loving human beings. There is an insert in today's Order of Worship suggesting ways you might want to be involved, in addition to what you do in supporting the work of this congregation in its ministry to children. Amen.