Sunday, October 17, 2004
ALL OUR CHILDREN
Luke 2:41-52

"ALL MY CHILDREN" is the name of a soap opera that has been on television for more than 35 years. Because I don't watch the program, I'm not sure where the title comes from or how it is related to the plot and story line. When I asked some people who have watched the program on a regular basis to describe the characters and the action, they told me that no one in the story seems to work at a regular job, yet they have plenty of money. Many 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. People cheat, lie, and are unfaithful — these are the dominant themes. There are no heroic characters. There are no good role models. A strong religious faith is not a motivating force in any of the people's lives. There is little about people working together in a cooperative fashion to build a better community. Is this an accurate portrayal of life in today's world? I hope not.

The title of this sermon is ALL OUR CHILDREN, not ALL MY CHILDREN. While it is true that if you are the parents of children they are yours, in a deeper sense, it's also true that the children in our midst belong to all of us. That's why there are child protective laws and agencies. It's why day care centers for children need to be licensed, and why we pay taxes to help support the public schools so that children and young people can be educated. All citizens benefit from this in many ways. Representative forms of government cannot survive without an educated population.

In the Biblical tradition, it was assumed that the raising and care of children was not only the responsibility of the mother and father and extended family. It was also understood that the raising of children was the responsibility of the larger community as well. That's why Jewish people and Christian people have always been interested in good schools and other community activities for children.

When we baptize children, we acknowledge that the children being baptized are "all our children." In the baptism liturgy, the members of the Christian community say: "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."

That's why we as a church provide Sunday Church School classes, Confirmation classes, and other programs for children and youth. The children in our community are "all our children."

The story read as our scripture reading today explains that Mary and Joseph assumed that the 12-year-old Jesus was traveling with them back home from Jerusalem to Nazareth. That's what the gospel of Luke says: "When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. Assuming that he was in the group of travelers, they went a day's journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him."

In hearing this story from Luke's gospel, you might say to yourself, "His parents were not very good parents. They should've checked on him sooner." Or you might think, "Jesus was a very

responsible young man. He should've told his parents that he wanted to stay in Jerusalem a little longer."

People talk about the lack of communication between parents and children today. This story shows that it is not a new problem. Mary and Joseph were operating on an unstated assumption, and so was Jesus. They assumed he was traveling with them and their other relatives and friends. He, on the other hand, assumed that his parents were aware of his growing interest in the Jewish religious tradition and would know that he could be found in the Temple talking with the teachers and scholars. He was 12 years old and had no doubt gone through the rite of "son of the law," which signifies religious adulthood.

The story has a happy ending. Luke says that after searching for three days, they found him in the Temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. Luke goes on to say that his parents were astonished, and his mother said to him, "Why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety."

I especially like the last sentences in the story: "Then he went down with them to Nazareth and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart. And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor."

What does this story teach us about "all our children" as we once again celebrate "Children's Sabbath?"

First, as already mentioned, my children and your children are also our children. Fathers, mothers, aunts, uncles, grandfathers, grandmothers, and other members of extended families are very important, but more is always needed. In today's world, with more and more parents working outside the home, we've had to add pre-schools and daycare for children. A study showed that almost 3 out of 4 children (73.5%) live in households in which both parents or the only parent works outside the home. Childcare arrangements vary.

That's why in Nebraska, as in other parts of the country, there are more and more licensed daycare providers, and there's still a shortage of quality daycare. That's why we also need the TeamMates Mentoring Program, which Tom Osborne started some years ago. Federal Government initiatives such as the "No Child Left Behind" legislation are based on the assumption that children belong to all of us.

We must continually find new and better ways to strengthen families where children are involved. In addition to strengthening the family unit, we need to be concerned about the broader institutions and influences in our culture which affect our children's lives.

Increasingly in our kind of world, no matter how good you are as parents and how good our church programs for families and children are, there are more and more influences at work on our children outside the home and church. There was a time in the past when most of the knowledge and influence of the world at large was selectively filtered through parental values to the children.

For example, if you had lived on the frontier on a homestead without a telephone, radio, television, the internet, movies, daily newspapers, or the automobile, then certainly you were the main and only influence on your children. But this is no longer true. Now more than the immediate family is affecting all children most of the time. Even the "Old Order Amish," who do their best to keep out the influences of the world around them, find it difficult to do so.

Therefore, if you are really concerned about all our children, you will also need to be concerned about the direction and health of the community and the culture at large. Lest you misunderstand, I am not at all de-emphasizing the role of a strong and healthy family. Parents need to be good role models. You need to set good examples in morality, ethics, and giving. These character traits are more important now than ever. But even when all of this is done to your best, it is not enough.

Part of what makes this so difficult to understand is that not too many years ago, many of the influences outside the home used to be handled informally without our being much aware of them.

Not too many years ago, extended families were not only larger, but members of the larger family also tended to live in the same geographic area. When I was growing up, we lived within five miles of almost all of my uncles, aunts, grandparents, and cousins.

They went to your home, and you went to theirs. They came to your house and stayed for dinner. You knew them all, and they knew you. This had its good side and its not-so-good side. On the good side, some of your relatives were interesting people — or at least you thought so at the time. Uncle Charlie had been to China. Aunt Bess made the best fudge in the family. Cousin Bill could do magic tricks, and all of these relatives gave you Christmas presents.

But there was the other side. All these people had a tendency to mind your business as well as their own. They wanted to know where you had been, where you were going, and why. They wanted to know who you were going to marry and why. And if they didn't like your answers, they said so. Not only your relatives minded your business; everyone in the neighborhood did.

If you walked on the railroad trestle, the phone would ring at your house. Your parents would know what you had done before you got back home. People on the street would tell you to button your jacket or wipe your nose and ask you why you weren't in Sunday School last Sunday. In an informal way, the whole community helped to raise all our children.

As the world of the small town and rural areas has become absorbed into an ever-shifting suburban and urban world, with more and more people crowding together and at the same time with increasing mobility, then add the automobile, television, and the internet, children are growing up in a different kind of environment. The type of larger family which informally existed as part of the environment is no longer available for many people. Now we need to provide similar experiences in other ways.

This doesn't always happen automatically. It needs to be done intentionally, and churches can take the lead, as has been done so many times in the past. The first schools in this country were started by churches — the first hospitals, the first orphanages, the first day-care centers, and the first institutions for people with mental difficulties.

Churches began these institutions because they believed that all children are our children. Jesus said, "Let the children come to me, and do not stop them." Most people do not stop children on purpose, but children are quick to imitate the way you live, and you could be stopping them without being aware of it.

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 seems to reward greed and guile; a

culture that teaches that life is about getting more than giving. We live in a time that all too frequently defines success by consumption rather than character — a culture that values things, style, and packaging over substance.

About ten years ago, I read a short little book, The Measure of Our Success: A Letter to My Children and Yours by Marian Wright Edelman. In that book, 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.” The Bible teaches that all human beings are creatures of God, created in God’s image. Because of this, the Bible goes on to say that all children are our children. Amen.