

Oct. 23, 2011

“The Beasts and the Children”

Matt. 22:34-40

In 1971, Stanley Kramer directed a film based on a novel by Glendon Swarthout about six lonely, ostracized teenagers at a summer camp. The film was called “*Bless the Beasts and the Children*.” It was about the lives of these teens, who, in the course of things, decided to set free a herd of bison that had been captured so that they could be shot by local hunters. The theme song was sung by the Carpenters, the sister-brother duo who were popular back then. The words went like this:

*Bless the beasts and the children, for in this world they have no choice.*

*Bless the beasts and the children, for the world can never be*

*The world they see.*

*Light their way when the darkness surrounds them.*

*Give them love. Let it shine all around them.*

*Bless the beasts and the children. Give them shelter from the storm.*

*Keep them safe and warm.*

It could be the theme song for today, on the annual, national observance of Children’s Sabbath, the day each year, when we think about the issues that affect the well-being of children everywhere. Someone has to advocate for the beasts and the children. Every day—worldwide—six million children under the age of five dies because of hunger and malnutrition...this in a world where there is enough food for everyone. There’s something wrong with that picture! Far too many children are suffering from abuse, poverty, illnesses and death, far too many to be observing Children’s Sabbath once a year. But at least today we’re stopping the merry-go-round long enough to look at what is wrong, to think about what we responsible adults can do to bless the beasts and the children.

In our reading from Matthew today, it doesn’t say anything about children. But children are part of it because children are a part of us. Every day in America five children die from abuse or neglect; five children or teens commit suicide, 80 babies die before their first birthdays, 368 children are arrested for drug-related offenses, 1,204 babies are born to teen mothers, and 2,163 babies are born without health insurance. Moreover, 2,573 babies are born into poverty, and 18,493 public school students are suspended. Something is wrong. And today, Jesus is asking, “Is there something you wanted to do for me?”

Today is where the pages of the Bible become real to us. This...the Bible...is not a pipe dream! In today’s passage, some religious leaders were trying get Jesus to say something he shouldn’t say. To test him, they asked what was the most important thing God asks of us. They were talking about laws in the Bible. *Now, before I go any further, I want to stop and place huge stars all over this part of the sermon. I*

want to take out a huge highlighter and paint this part with yellow. I want to say, “We interrupt our regular programming for a special report. If you leave this place this morning with anything...anything... please remember this”: Jesus is saying here that life does not consist of doing all I need to do to get to heaven. Life does not consist of getting from birth to death with as many items checked off our bucket list as possible. Life is lived completely and authentically by loving the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind.” It’s worded a bit differently in the Ten Commandments, but it appears as the first commandment. It’s the most important thing you will ever...ever read in the Bible. The second thing Jesus wanted us to know—as far as what God expects of us—is this: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. It’s our job description!! And you can’t do one commandment without having to do the other. Which is to say, you can’t love God the way God wants to be loved if you won’t love the children. And you can’t love the children the way God wants you to love the children unless you love God with every bone of your being, every ounce of your strength, every promise from your soul. You can’t do one the right way until you do the other. The two laws are inseparable. If you learn anything here...learn this.

After Jesus said it, according to Matthew, the religious leaders had nothing more to ask him. Nothing more needed to be said.

This statement by Jesus about the two greatest commandments was not original. The wisest rabbis of Jesus’ day were saying the same thing. But the devil is in the details. It’s one thing to say something high and glorious like this. It’s quite another to live as if it’s true. The love that Jesus is asking for when he says we must love neighbor as self is without restrictions. Madeleine L’Engle once said, “If you’re going to care about the fall of the sparrow, you can’t pick and choose who’s going to be the sparrow. It’s everybody.” And today, it’s the beasts and the children. Or, to be more precise, it’s the children.

I can’t tell you how to love the children. There are far too many children for me to say one thing or another. Far too many ways in which the children need our care. And you and I cannot do everything for every child that needs to be done for today. But can’t we do *something*? For in this world, our children have no choice. And they have no voice.

Ann Weems wrote a poem once called *Reaching for Rainbows*. It was about a child who was invisible. She was everywhere...and she was no where. She blended in. No one saw her. No one heard her. I think she was drowning. The poem in part said,

*Who will touch this greenless child?*

*Who will plant alleluias in her heart*

*And send her dancing into all the colors of God?*

*Or will she be left like an unwrapped package on the kitchen table—*

*Too dull for anyone to take the trouble?*

*Does God think we're her keeper?*

And here at this table, if we don't love the beasts and the children...and if we do not love one another...we are noisy gongs and clanging cymbals. At this table, if we are to believe Paul's song to the Corinthians, love does not end. It did not end with Jesus, and it does not end with us, not after we're done and go home. The bread spells out God's unchanging love for *us*. The cup tells us that there is no price too high that God is not willing to pay it for the children. Nor must there be for us.