



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
Jody C. Wright, Senior Minister

OCTOBER 20, 2013
CHILDREN'S SABBATH

Swords into Plowshares Micah 4:1-5; Luke 18:1-8a

The musical *The Sound of Music* is known primarily for its engaging story line and its timeless music. I doubt that there is any song from the musical that we could not sing along on. The lyrics stay with us. There is also a brief exchange of dialogue that has always stayed with me. It occurs during the elegant dinner party Captain Von Trapp has thrown to celebrate his engagement to the Baroness Schraeder and just after the children have sung their goodnight song. We see the Captain mingling with the crowd, chatting with his neighbors the Baron and Baroness Ebberfeld. Nearby stands his nemesis, Herr Zeller, the leader of the regional Nazi Party, now in charge of Salzburg.

Baroness Ebberfeld says, "Captain, you must be very proud of your youngsters." The Captain replies, "I am, thank you, Baroness." Her husband smiles and says, "Is there a more beautiful expression of what is good in this country of ours than the innocent voices of our children?" Herr Zeller intrudes into the conversation and comments, "Oh, come now, Baron, would you have us believe that Austria alone holds a monopoly on virtue?" To which Captain Von Trapp replies, "Herr Zeller, some of us prefer Austrian voices raised in song to ugly German threats."¹

I think most of us prefer the innocent voices of our children raised in song or reading scripture to the angry voices of Syrian dictators, Afghan terrorists, or local street gangs. The voices of our children are precious, prophetic, and powerful. Sadly, however, every year, every day, the voices of our children are being silenced.

I am certain you know that in the Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan wars combined 52,820 soldiers were killed. That is an horrendous number that represents nearly 53,000 sons, daughters, brothers, sisters, fathers, and mothers who never returned home. We will never be able to calculate the ways in which life has been diminished without them.

¹Oscar Hammerstein II, *The Sound of Music*, transcript according to *All Scripts*; available online at: <http://www.allmusicals.com/lyrics/soundofmusicthescript/soundofmusicscript.htm>.

Did you also know that during that same time period, roughly 1963-2010, that 160,000 children and teenagers were killed by gun violence? These precious lives were not taken from us by foreign armies or terrorists but by fellow Americans—neighbors and relatives.

The Children's Sabbath is an opportunity to focus on the needs of our children and youth, to make critical changes in their lives and ours, and to move toward the fulfillment of God's dream for all of children regardless of age or nationality. That movement must begin today.

In a little less than two months we will observe another sad anniversary: the killing of twenty children and six adults at the Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Massachusetts. Can it be possible that mass killings in schools, theaters, shopping centers, and even churches is becoming so common that the names run together? Can you remember the details of Columbine, Red Lake, Aurora, Fort Hood, Virginia Tech, or The Navy Yard? Can you even fathom the number of children who are killed in gang-related attacks or by domestic violence? In 2008 and 2009, 5,740 children and teens were killed by gun violence in our country. Another 34,387 children and teens were injured by gun related violence.²

Dare we even think about places like Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Israel, Uganda, Rwanda, Libya, Somalia, Serbia, Croatia, Chechnya, or dozens of other countries where war, revolution, ethnic conflict, or political turmoil has robbed children of life? Can we even begin to imagine the toll that hunger, poverty, and disease have taken on children worldwide? In our nation alone, more than sixteen million children live in poverty. That is about one out of every five children. And poverty for a family of four is defined as having an income of no more than \$23,500 per year.

The Bible is well aware of the vulnerability of certain groups of people in our community. Micah, like Isaiah, denounced broken social and political systems that not only neglected people who were vulnerable but often exploited them as well. He spoke to the Israelite fear of foreign invasion which caused them to build bigger fortifications and better weapons, all to the neglect of the vulnerable in their midst who were primarily widows and children. In the passage which Georgia and Connor read earlier, Micah offered hope for what God could do if the people turned completely to him.

²The Children's Defense Fund, *The State of America's Children: 2012 Handbook*, © 2012 Children's Defense Fund.

The nations would stream to Jerusalem where God would counsel people in justice and righteousness with the result that “they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more; but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid” (Micah 4:3b-4). In other words, instead of arming themselves for attack or defense, under God’s leadership, people would invest in resources which would support and sustain life for all people.

The Africa exhibit in the British Museum in London is different from most of the rest of the exhibits in that magnificent storehouse of treasures. The majority of exhibits tell the story of a particular civilization’s development. The Africa exhibit, however, is more about craft and culture. It has a stunning display of headdresses used in an annual parade in which people take on the personas of various animals. And then it has a startling display of sculptures created from weapons. There is a throne fashioned from machine gun parts, and animals comprised of portions of guns, knives, and grenades. And there is a “Tree of Life” towering toward the ceiling which includes pieces from decommissioned weapons that were part of the civil war in Mozambique.

The exhibit reminds me that Micah’s prophecy can come true. Just as a metal artist can take objects of violence and transform them into art, we can take the inclinations, the attitudes, and the resources of violence and turn them into resources for good. Not only could guns and knives become hoes and rakes, but battleships and bombs, gang colors and handguns, chains and coffins could become community centers, classrooms, playground equipment, training opportunities, and mentoring for children and youth. We could take Micah’s message to heart for ourselves and begin to work now to save our children for their tomorrows. We could transform the ways we live and work in community to include all of our community and to save all of our children—and ourselves.

I am not blind to the dangers we face in the world and in our own community. Last Friday was the anniversary of the attacks here at the church which killed one of our friends and seriously wounded another. Last week one of our oldest members was robbed, the thieves walking around her bed while she slept. Every week we read of assaults and shootings in this community and all over our nation. We have to protect ourselves. We have to protect our children. We have to find a way to get weapons off the street and young people back into schools and jobs and nurturing homes.

I realize that such issues are hot-button political *topics* these days, but they are not political *issues*. They are moral issues. And for people of faith, they are spiritual issues. Scripture tells us that the first sin was one of disobedience toward God. The second sin, which immediately followed the first, was the sin of turning upon one another and pointing the finger of blame at the other. That led to the third sin which was an act of violence leading to the death of a child at the hand of his brother. We do not need to repeat this sad story by turning upon one another; rather, we need to recognize our common dilemma and work together to solve our problems and heal our world.

How does such transformation begin? It begins with prayer and a determination to see righteousness prevail. Luke was familiar with this reality when he included Jesus' parable of the widow and the unjust judge in his gospel. In Jesus' day, widows were indeed among the most vulnerable and at-risk people because women had virtually no rights and a woman without a father or a husband had no rights or privileges at all. As this parable indicates, the widow had to rely solely upon the judge to secure her rights. But this judge was evil. He did not fear God and could not care less for people. Nevertheless, the widow never backed down but persisted in asking him to judge in her favor against an opponent. The parable suggests that the judge finally relented, not because he was compassionate or wanted to do what was right, but because he did not want the widow to "wear him out" or, as the Aramaic is translated, he did not want her to "hit him in the eye." In other words, she confronted him often and sometimes in public which was embarrassing. Jesus' point was if this evil judge will finally help the widow, imagine how much quicker and more generously God will help us with our needs.

Together, both Micah and Luke remind us that God is not yet done with us. God is not pleased with the ways in which our world operates. God is not delighted with conflict that persists in so many parts of our world. God is not pleased with the violence in our communities. And God is not satisfied with our efforts, often feeble, at protecting all of his children.

Will we continue to allow the voices of our children to be silenced through violence of any type? Will we give up our security to those who think they have a right to defend themselves or attack others at our peril? Will we realize that the resources drained by our violence could better be used to nurture and educate our children rather than to bury and memorialize them?

Will we transform the culture of violence into a culture of nurture so that all children can fully explore their God-given talents and gifts?

I have mentioned before that when the Jews of Prague were sent to the Terrezin Concentration camp during World War II, one of the teachers encouraged the children to draw in order to cope with the terror around them and maintain some hope. One of the children, a twelve year old girl, had always loved to draw and somehow managed to take crayons, watercolors, and some paper with her to the camp. Her first picture was of two children, a boy and a girl in bright colored winter clothes, building a snowman. It could have been drawn by any child anywhere in the world snow can be found. Somehow she managed to smuggle the picture to her father in another barracks. He sent back the message to her, "Draw what you see." From that point on, most of her pictures were drawn from what she saw outside her barracks window. Her art gradually lost its childish naivete and focused on the horrors and hardships of war. Years later she said, "The impressions that from this point in time would affect me, ended my childhood."³

No child should be deprived of a healthy and nurturing childhood. We need to protect and nurture our children and to take care of all of God's children no matter their age. The innocent voices of our children are a beautiful expression of all that is good in our world. So is their art and sport and everything else our children do. Let us not allow childhood to be robbed in any way. Let us be persistent with God and with one another until justice and righteousness prevail for all of God's children. Amen.

³Helga Weisssová-Hošková, "The Origin of the Drawings, in *Draw What You See: A Child's Drawings from Theresienstadt/Terzín*, (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 1998), 13.

October 20, 2013

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

Holy and Gracious God, who came to us as a helpless infant, who welcomed and blessed little ones, and who loves and nurtures us as our heavenly Parent, you have called us to have a child-like faith and trust in you and to make ourselves vulnerable to life in community with one another, but teach us, we pray, to avoid being simplistic or childish in the ways we live out our faith in this world. You have given us immeasurable blessings and have charged us to be good stewards of those resources, and among the greatest and most precious of these gifts and responsibilities are our children. You have given us their laughter, their love, their trust, and you have asked that we protect and teach them and provide a good example for them to follow. We thank you for the promise of these young lives that motivate and inspire us and give us hope for the future. Forgive us when we fail them and you. Make us truly grateful for these extraordinary blessings and for every good gift which comes from you.

O Lord, as we celebrate the delight and innocence of childhood, we grieve that so many children live with trust that has been violated and little reason to rejoice. Too many children are victims of abuse and violence, drugs and poverty and neglect. Even in our land of opportunity and prosperity, we have yet to achieve a society that protects and nurtures families, that educates our children to prepare them for the future, that promotes peace and dignity for all. We lift up to you, O Lord, those children who, even now, are hurting and forgotten, poor and hungry, lonely and desperate. Help us to meet these needs by being tireless in our work, courageous in our stands, obedient in our service, and faithful in our prayers, that our children might discover their gifts and have the opportunity to fulfill their purposes in your kingdom for generations to come. Make us unwavering in our determination and creative in our vision, not only that we might address the needs in our community and our world, but also that our children might see your image reflected in our lives. In the name of Jesus the Christ and by the power of your Holy Spirit we make our prayer. Amen.

Elizabeth J. Edwards
Associate Minister