

Sermon for Sunday, May 25, 1975, by Andrew A. Jumper, D. D., Pastor
Central Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, Missouri

"ARE CHILDREN PEOPLE?"

John III; 1-15

Text: "I could have no greater joy than to hear such things about my children."

St. John III, verse 4

(The Living Bible)

Elizabeth Skoglund, a child psychologist, tells of one of her little six-year old patients. She writes, "One day a little girl came to my office very upset and barely able to compose herself. Her mother had died six months earlier. But now when she cried her teacher scolded and her father spanked her. It's difficult to stop crying when someone is hitting you. She learned to bottle up her emotions inside. But this day she climbed onto my lap and sobbed. I tried to console her with games and toys, but to no avail. So I held her while she cried. Toward the end of our hour her tears subsided and she was ready to leave. With and without words I shared my understanding of her pain. I cared. She trusted me not to punish her or tell her father. When she finished crying, she was a little stronger because someone had understood the deep feelings even a six-year old has."

Are children people? Well, I don't know. The word people seems awfully impersonal to me. But I do know this: I know children are persons. They are not yet the persons they will one day be. They are not fully matured. No, but they are persons in process of becoming. Let me say that again: they are persons in process of becoming. Like a sculptor working with soft, pliable clay, they are in process. Someday the clay of their personhood will have hardened. It will be very difficult to change it then. So, while it is still malleable, while it is still soft and changeable, it needs to be molded and shaped properly. You see, children are important because they are persons in process of becoming and they are important because Jesus loves them. Even back in Bible times, people ignored children. The disciples themselves once pushed children away. But Jesus wouldn't have it. He showed how much he loved and valued them. He said to his disciples, "Let the little children come to me! Never send them away! For the Kingdom of God belongs to men who have hearts as trusting as these little children's." (Luke 18: 16,17)

I don't really want to preach a sermon this morning. Instead, I want to share some things with you. They are important things because they concern not only the present ministry of Central, but the future of our church as well. Some of you have belonged here many years. We have families who are third and fourth generation members. For that reason, your roots in this church are deep, you have many memories that relate to Central. Others of you are new members. Yet, Central already plays an important role in your life. But I want to raise a question about the future. What will Central be like 10 years from now, or even twenty years from now? Stretch your imagination a little. Where will Central be fifty years from now? Many of us will long since have passed from the scene by then. The little children in the nursery this morning will be middle aged, our young people will have mostly retired by then. Our officers will be some of those children who are in the nursery class this morning. What kind of a church will Central be then? What kind of persons will those children downstairs have become? Isn't that being determined right now? The quality of the Christian education they are getting in the home from us parents, the kind of teaching they are getting in their Sunday School classes--that is what will determine the kind of person they become. And that will determine, too, what Central will be like fifty years from now.

Let me share some statistics on the birthrate with you. The birthrate is declining. For example, in 1960 the so-called "crude birth rate" (that is, births per 1,000 of population) stood at 23.7. By 1965 it had declined to 19.4, and by 1973, it had declined to 15.6. Now, this means that during the decade of the 60's, America's infant population declined by 15.5 percent. To put it another way, in 1970 there were three million less youngsters than in 1960. In the Clayton area and surrounding areas we have already begun to see the impact of this. Trained teachers are going begging for jobs and already some grade schools have been closed and others combined. Here is another way to look at it: in the latter 1950's, the number of children born to every 1,000 women of child-bearing age was 120. By 1967, it was down to 88, and by 1973, it was down to 66.6 (and incidentally, that is below the lowest figure since records have been kept, the previous low being in the depression year of 1936 when it dipped to 75.8).

But let me share another statistic with you: the enrollment of children and young people in the Sunday School at Central is the highest in our 130 year history! Now, all across the city, Sunday Schools are declining. All across the nation, every major denomination shows a dramatic drop in Sunday School enrollment. But here at Central every room is crowded, we have put into use every nook and cranny, and we have moved part of our Sunday School across the street to Hanley House and it is full, too. Now, why is that so? Well, obviously there has to be a reason and I suspect there are a number of them. But at least one of those reasons is because people who care about their children feel they will get some quality Christian education at Central and that they will be taught about the Bible, about God, and about Jesus.

Isn't it exciting to think of the opportunity we have for Jesus? But opportunity brings problems. We need more space and we need about forty new teachers. Keep this in mind, I'm coming back to it!

Now, let me give you some statistics in another area. In 1974, it is estimated that 112 million Americans were attached in some way to Protestant or Roman Catholic or Jewish congregations. Now, that is an inclusive figure and if we counted only those who were actually communicant members or confirmed members, the number would be about half of that. But for arguments sake, let's assume that some 122 million Americans have some sort of relationship to church or synagogue. Now, of that 122, many of them--if not most of them--have only a very casual relationship to the church. Yet, there are another 98 million who have no identifiable connection with any church. Now that staggers my mind: almost half the people in America have no church relationship at all. And that number is growing. For years now, statistics show that the number belonging to the church is declining. We hear a lot about world missions--and surely we need to be concerned--but somebody needs to get busy here at home!

But let me share another statistic with you. The membership at Central is at an all-time high and we have more people participating in Sunday School and Church than at any time in our history. That's good news. Now let me give you the bad news. Experience shows that a church never stays static. If it does not continue to grow, it levels off and very quickly begins to decline. We have reached our maximum with our present facilities and our present teachers. Now, either we pay the price of moving ahead or we will begin to stagnate and decline. Which do you want? So we come back to the problem of space and teachers.

Let me move over into another field and give you some statistics. In 1974 serious crime rose 17 percent in this country. The FBI began keeping records forty-five years ago and this is the largest annual increase in all those years. And if you think it is all in the inner city, you are wrong. The increase in crime in the suburbs was more than twice that in the city and the largest regional increase was in the southern states where crime rose 21 percent. Now our United States attorney general has said that we must "emphasize deterrence." But answer this question: what deters crime? Is it a better judicial system? Is it better police protection? Is it a better prison system? Well, those things are important. But let me suggest something better and more basic. Statistics show that children who start out in Sunday School rarely end up in jail. Suppose we Christians go beyond the social conditions that foster crime, go beyond improving our laws, our courts, and our prisons. Suppose we Christians get at the root cause of crime which is sin in the human heart. Suppose we attack crime at its base, wickedness in human hearts, by trying to win more and more people to Jesus. The best deterrent against crime I know is to lead a boy or girl into a saving relationship to Jesus. And when the Christian faith with its emphasis on the ten commandments and the moral laws have a grip on the hearts of people, the crime rate will fall. Now, you and I can't possibly do this all over America or even all over St. Louis. But right here where we are, we can do the best possible job with as many people as we can reach and we will be doing our share. To do that we need more space and more teachers so we come right back to the same problem.

You may be interested to know that the Human Interaction Research Institute of Los Angeles did a study of the cycle of crime and welfare. One consistent finding was that as a child, the successful person had at least one parent who had high expectations of him in achievement and behavior, and who insisted on certain standards. The family was supportive, and went to church often. The child's primary loyalty was to family, not to street. By contrast, on the other hand, the unsuccessful person had no effective parent or parent figure who set standards and provided discipline. These families had low expectations for their children and did not stress religious values. The primary loyalty of these children was to their peer group and the streets. This means, you see, that the old-fashioned virtues are still good standards and perhaps the greatest help young people can have is in things that concern the spirit.

Here at Central we are doing something right. Our attendance at church and Sunday School is at an all-time high. We have a great opportunity. If we do the job, we will have a great impact on this area, perhaps on the entire city. We will touch little persons and help to shape the clay of human personality for Jesus. To do the job we need more space and more teachers. The Session has a committee working on the space problem. In the months ahead you will hear more about it. But a more immediate problem is the need for teachers. We need forty new teachers who are willing to undergo some training and then commit themselves to teach for at least a year, beginning this fall. It means taking some time out of your life and investing it in the lives of others. It will mean studying, learning, struggling as you strive to do a good job. I believe the results will be more than worth it. Dr. Haim Genott, a psychologist and author of several books on parents and children, tells the story of a little girl who lost a stone out of her ring and began to cry because she was afraid of the reaction of her parents. However, her father said to her, "Don't cry, dear. Stones can be replaced. At our house, people and their feelings are more important." He conveyed to her that he cared and that she was important and she was loved... There are many children and young people in this church, in this neighborhood, in this city who need to know that they are important to somebody and that they are loved. That is the ministry Jesus called us to. Will you be a somebody who cares?