

Garbage in, garbage out?

James 1:19-27, Mark 7:1-15, Deuteronomy 4:7-10
September 3, 2006

The question is this: What are we going to do for our children?

What kind of world will we leave them? What kind of future will we make possible for them? What will we do for them and with them to give them the best possible shot at a life that is fulfilling, safe, happy, productive, even joyful?

What are we going to do for our children? Our children! All those young lives whose future, whether they are directly related to us or not, is very much impacted by what we do collectively in the present.

What will we do to provide for them or, better, to give them the opportunity to provide for themselves? The economic forecasts are not promising: we have been told that this next generation may be the first to face the prospect of a lower standard of living than their parents.

What kind of world will we leave them ... literally? We are exhausting and polluting the earth's resources at a furious pace. We are upsetting the balances of nature and climate in historically unprecedented ways. We are mortgaging the planet's future for the sake of creature comforts and coveted luxuries now.

What kind of education will we provide them? Will we equip them to survive and thrive in an increasingly fast-paced and competitive and complex and demanding world, or will they be left behind -- intellectually, technologically, socially?

Will we leave them a world that is safe? Or will we leave them a world hopelessly torn apart by violence, hopelessly divided by race and nationality and class and religion?

Will we teach them how to live? Will we equip them, not only intellectually and technologically and socially, but morally and spiritually? Will we tell them and show them how to make the world a better place, not just for their sake, but for the sake of all humanity?

This is the question that undergirds all the rest, the question that presupposes all the rest. Before our children can move forward economically in a way that will make a good life possible for as many of them as possible; before they learn how to be good stewards of the earth's finite and fragile resources; before they learn how to value learning; before they learn how to make peace; before all of that, they will need to learn how to be and how to be together. They will need to learn what matters and who matters. They will need to learn to care.

This is the place to learn that kind of stuff! This is the place to teach our children, as we learn along with our children, the things that will equip all of us to be peacemakers, shalom-makers, world-builders, kingdom-builders. This morning, we will consider three Bible texts, three texts selected from this Sunday's lectionary readings, that give us a start.

(Read aloud James 1:19-27)

Teach your children how to live by showing them! Show them you can control your anger. Show them how to listen. Live your faith, don't just talk about it. Don't just go through the motions of going to church on Sunday, but show them how you live your faith ... every day.

Show them religion that is meaningful and genuine, which, according to James, is this:

... taking care of orphans and widows in their suffering and keeping yourselves from being corrupted by the world.

Show them compassion in action, paying attention and giving help to people with limited resources of their own.

- Take them shopping with you for clothes and school supplies and toiletries and toys to fill a shoebox for a child in Nicaragua.
- Bring them with you on a Monday night to the Kimball Avenue United Methodist Church to help serve meals to the neighborhood folks who come there to eat a free meal.
- Take them with you when you visit Clara Smith at Ravenwood Health Care Center or Edith Byrnes at the Lutheran Home.
- Or plan and prepare with them a special meal in your own home and invite someone, someone alone, to share it with you.

And show them what it means to keep oneself from being corrupted by the world, because this world does corrupt! This world threatens to poison our children!

Would you feed your child nothing but potato chips for breakfast and lunch and dinner? But much of their daily cultural diet is just that, nothing but junk food for the soul!

Would you allow your child to drink a glass of antifreeze? There are things, many things, that we allow them to see or hear on a daily basis that are just as polluting, just as deadly to the spirit, images and lyrics and language and games that are far beyond harmless diversions: filthy, provocative, abusive and self-abusive, cruel, debasing, debauching, blasphemous.

Now I am not a fan of burning books or CD's or banning movies or censoring television, and I do understand that every generation tests the cultural limits of its predecessors, but when you put garbage in, what do you expect to come out? When you fill your mind and heart with nothing but trash, how healthy can you expect that mind and heart to be?

Images are powerful, especially visual images. Once they are entered into the memory bank of your mind, they do not go away. That horrible, violent, sadistic, dehumanizing image will haunt you for a lifetime. And the accumulation of such images cannot help but change you. Garbage in, garbage out!

So what can we do for our children? It is futile to try to protect them from the world, but we can teach them, and show them, self-control, self-discipline, good taste! We can make sure their minds and hearts have opportunity to be filled with good things: good books, good movies, good music, good conversations, good experiences.

I heard an National Public Radio report this week about the latest thing in child care, grocery carts with built-in video screens! Parents think it's great: shop in peace while your child is well entertained. They show "Barney" and "Sesame Street" and "The Wiggles" -- but still! Talk with your children! Play games with them! Take them places! Visit relatives or friends! Teach them to enjoy the real world. Teach them to be curious about real people. Teach them and show them how to keep themselves from being corrupted by the world.

(Read aloud Mark 7:1-15)

There is nothing that goes into you from the outside which can make you unclean; rather, it is what comes out of you that makes you unclean.

OK. Has Jesus just blown my whole argument? Is Jesus contradicting James? Does it not matter what goes in?

At the very least, Jesus has once again done and said the unexpected thing and has made us think. I think Jesus intends to keep us from taking any shortcuts to spiritual purity. It's not about appearances, but about substance, not about protecting ourselves, but about giving ourselves away, not about the negative purity of an unpolluted body, but the positive purity of a heart filled with compassion.

You can decide for yourselves, but I think Jesus is making very much the same point as James. Genuine faith is a living faith, not a matter of saying the right words or keeping the right rules, but of living creatively, attentively, compassionately; not doing just what you feel like doing, not doing just what everybody else expects you to do, but doing what brings joy to the heart of your neighbor and to God's heart.

This is what we can do for our children: teach them and show them this kind of faith.

(Read aloud Deuteronomy 4:7-10)

This is the best thing we can do for our children, the very best thing! We can tell them what we have seen! We can tell them what we have heard! We can tell them what we know! We can tell them what we have experienced of God's power and glory and love and mercy for ourselves! We can tell them of the times we knew that we stood in the presence of the Lord our God!

It's not just about protecting them from the world. It's not just about developing conscience or building moral character. It's about witness. It's about passing on the stories of the living God in action. It's about passing on our stories.

Let me tell you of the day I stood at the rail of a boat so far out to sea I couldn't see the land anymore, and I watched the ocean stretching out in every direction and I felt the greatness of God, the greatness of the God who holds the universe together, who is so far above and beyond our capacity to understand!

Let me you of what it is like to know you have hurt someone close to you, to know you have hurt God, in an inexcusable and unforgivable way, but to be forgiven, to be set free, to be loved still and loved forever!

Let me tell you of the extraordinary beauty of the wisdom of God: "Love your enemies!" "Overcome evil with good!" "Become great by being humble!" "Gain the world by giving yourself away!"

Let me tell you about the extraordinary beauty of what Jesus did for me, the extraordinary beauty of what Jesus did for you ...