

A PRESBYTERIAN RESPONSE TO SCHOOL CONSOLIDATION

Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time, a
February 13, 2011
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Prayer: In this time together, O God, be with me that your Spirit might take these words and make them faithful; be with those who hear me, so that they might be startled by the challenges and joys of your Word; and be with us all, so that we might go forth from here even more alive with your love, revealed in Jesus Christ. Amen.

Some things are more important than our prejudices and fears.

Buddy Ennis, a retired Presbyterian pastor and friend, once told a story that took place during his college years over 50 years ago when he took a job to help with expenses. The job was far from ordinary...living in a funeral home and being on call at night to drive the ambulance. Those were the days when the only ambulance service was provided by funeral homes. It was a small, southern, college town. The home was a low-budget operation run by a man and his wife and the wife's bachelor brother, and so for additional help they always had two guys from the college live in. Their only responsibility was to be on ambulance call during the night. They had no training in first aid. No CPR. There were no licensing agreements in those days, at least as far as Buddy knew, and only a few instructions, and the instructions they did get had little to do with emergency health care.

Buddy did remember, however, when he and his roommate first moved in, how the owner explained the arrangements. Deliberately it seems, he waited to the end to tell them the difference between the two ambulances. There was the white ambulance (some of you might remember the day when all ambulances were white and all fire trucks were red). There was a white ambulance and a black ambulance that doubled sometimes as a hearse. Mr. C. seemed pained to explain the difference, for Mr. C. was a good and devout man, --a steward in the Methodist church — who had become almost a father to the students who lived there each year, for they had no children of their own.

Mr. C. confessed that the white ambulance was for white people and the black ambulance was for black people. It seems, he tried to explain, that in that little North Carolina town that's the way it was — and the townspeople watched, he said, and when the time came for a funeral in the family, they remembered the funeral home that remembered the local customs. Though he apologized, that was the way it was for the sake of the business.

Some weeks later, early in the evening, a call came in. It was an accident on the outskirts of town. An ambulance was needed. Buddy's roommate was out, so Mr. C and Buddy answered the call. They got there in a matter of minutes. A pickup truck had collided with a car coming out of a driveway — a child was hurt (unconscious and badly cut) — a little African-American boy

about eight or so. They were in the white ambulance. Whoever made the phone call, didn't think to tell them. Mr. C. got out the stretcher. Buddy says he said nothing, but knew that Mr. C. could read his mind, for the owner whispered on the side as they wheeled the stretcher toward the little boy lying on the pavement "It's all right ... it's a child." Some things are more important than our prejudices and fears.

Flames leap up from the eave of an upstairs apartment; a school bus overturns; a gas heater explodes in a day care center; some children are killed in their home by an angry uncle, and the cry goes out, "For God's sake, save the children!" And instinctively (if sometimes temporarily) ideological and sociological differences give way to higher values and to nobler priorities, because some things are more important than our prejudices and fears.

It might surprise some of you to realize that the Bible talks in several places of children literally being sacrificed like lambs and doves on fiery altars. Psalm 106, for example is a part of that primitive literature telling of the times the people of Israel turned away from Jehovah and began to worship Molech, the false god who required the sacrifice of their children. The images of this psalm are grotesque and repulsive: "They served their idols ... they sacrificed their sons and daughters to the demons; they poured out innocent blood ... the blood of their sons and daughters, whom they sacrificed to the idols of Canaan." Primitive and barbaric, to be sure — unthinkable for enlightened, sensitive people — certainly un-Christian — child sacrifices!

And yet I wonder, (and I'm just wondering out loud now) I wonder if there might be a sense in which contemporary culture still sacrifices children on the altars of secular gods, unwittingly, to be sure, but nevertheless offers its children in sacrifice. One need only mention the disparity between what the nation spends on armaments and what the nation spends on education. One need only to watch television to recognize the way the consumer mentality is educated into our children long before they ever reach kindergarten even. To be sure, the gods change, the names of the gods change ... but the idolatry goes on.

Unless you have been living on Jupiter the past months, you know that school consolidation with the Memphis City Schools and Shelby County Schools has come to the forefront of all issues facing the greater Memphis community. The state legislature and governor have gotten involved and every day seems to bring new developments. My purpose today is not to propose any solution or any advice on how to vote or what to say to those who represent us. That is partly because heaven knows I don't have a solution; it is among the most complicated of all issues; an article by Jane Roberts in this morning's Commercial Appeal says that this is confounding even the experts, and the fact is that no one knows the repercussions of any possible decision that might come down; but I also don't give solutions or tell you how to vote because that is not the role of the preacher. The role of the preacher is to help us draw upon the scriptural and theological resources we have so that we might be as well informed *theologically* as we are politically. The role of the preacher is to project the promise and hope of God.

So let's get back to the Bible. Consider two more well-known stories of child sacrifice. First, Abraham obediently leading little Isaac up Mount Moriah—carefully laying the sticks upon the altar, all in preparation for the sacrifice of his son, which Abraham believed obedience demanded. The second incident — equally well known — is of the two young women brought

before Solomon in a dispute over who was the real mother, and thus the guardian of the child. Solomon, unable to decide, calls for a sword with which to cut the child in half and award each woman half ... whereupon, you remember, the real mother relinquishes her claim in order to save the child. Two classic Biblical paradigms of human response. The one — Abraham — suggesting a willingness to sacrifice the life of his child for principle: to prove his obedience. The second (the woman before Solomon) willing to sacrifice principle and truth, for in truth the child was hers, for the sake of the life of the child.

More, I think, than merely the difference between the way women and men view moral decision making, as has been suggested, (and though it may be that), we have here two classic paradigms of human behavior toward children: the one favoring principle over life; the other favoring life over principle.

You see, what we must not forget is that my belief — my principles — my perception of truth — may also be an idol. God is always greater than my little glimpse of God, and God's truth is always greater than my perception of that truth. And while surely there are principles for which one might die ... freedom for our country, for example ... in the warfare between contemporary gods, a good guide to God's truth, wisdom, and purpose is the welfare of the children — *all* children.

Now it is not, of course, that children are more precious than adults, but they are *as precious*, and that is the point, because the way the world's priorities work, it is too frequent that the children are the ones sacrificed. And what those grotesque Old Testament stories on child sacrifice point to is *never* a devaluing of human life. Remember, even in the incident of Abraham and Isaac, God stepped in to stop the sacrifice, thus to save the life of little Isaac from his father's misguided loyalty and misunderstood obedience. God always stands on the side of life; always stands on the side of wholeness and human fulfillment; always on the side of the *future*.

In the New Testament, Jesus confirmed that countless times, calling the children to him when the disciples wanted to send them away. And finally, you remember, humbling us adults by proclaiming that unless we become as children, we shall not enter the kingdom.

If any religious tradition has something to offer to the current debate, it is our Reformed tradition and the emphasis John Calvin put on the sovereign, benevolent God whose will for all God's children is wholeness and safety and justice. If you had one sentence that would summarize Calvin's theology, it would be that "every human being has at every moment to do with the living God." Every human being has at every moment to do with the living God. And for Calvin, that state was not one of punishment, where God was forever monitoring human activity in order to catch us in some infraction; but our having every moment to do with the living God for Calvin was seen as a blessing by which humanity was meant to discover its purpose and thereby to achieve God's intended happiness and fulfillment.

For those of us who are heirs of Calvin, our purpose is not the saving of souls or to be consumed by who gets in and who gets out. Our purpose is to glorify God and enjoy God., and for Calvin, that meant preserving the human quality of life in the city, in his case, the city of Geneva.

Thus, Calvin laid the groundwork for what we now know as public education, as he established an academy and university in Geneva in the 1540s, not just for those who could afford it, (and this was radical back then) but for *all*, because he believed in the life of the mind for the service to God, that we were called to love God with all our minds as well as hearts, souls, and strength. Furthermore, he opened them to girls, (let's talk radical here!) virtually unheard of in that age. If there are any people of faith who have something to offer to all the issues surrounding school consolidation, they are the heirs of John Calvin.

But even deeper than our own tradition, and richer than our own tradition, is our baptism. We do not fulfill our baptismal vows to help raise these children to know the love of God in Jesus Christ simply by teaching a Sunday School class (though that is where it starts!). We fulfill our baptismal vows more comprehensively when we create a nurturing environment, a creative, protected space for children and young people where they can grow and develop physically and psychologically, emotionally and spiritually into healthy, whole, and holy adults.

You and I should be as concerned about the public schools as we are about our Sunday schools; as devoted to safety in public parks as the safety of our own backyards. When we live such a holistic baptismal commitment, the children of this world will have the chances and opportunities they deserve.

So where does that leave us, amidst the complexities and ambiguities and emotionally charged issues surrounding our schools? Here are a few suggestions, based upon the resources we have in scripture, theology, and each other:

First, ask the justice question. The God of scriptures is above all a God with a passion for justice, and the justice question asks not only what is good for my children, but all of God's children. Not only what is good for the children of Germantown or Bartlett or St. Mary's and MUS (or St. Benedict at Auburndale), but the children of Orange Mound and Binghamton and Booker T. Washington. Not only what is good for the children in our optional schools but our failing schools.

Let's be honest: Justice has never been served here in Memphis since the very first schools were established. Before the Civil War, slaves could not go to school. During Jim Crow days there were schools, but they operated under the "separate but equal" doctrine. Brown vs. Board of Education was a step towards justice, but fear and prejudice led to the establishment of white-only academies and flight and continued segregation. Though the architects of school busing were well-intentioned, there are few who see that as a success, leading to further retreat. This has led us to a school population that is 85% black and poor in the city schools, and 70% largely white and middle class and above in the county system. What does justice require? Ask the justice question. For as you have heard me say before, sometimes the questions are more important than the answers.

Second, become informed. This is hard to do, for I have tried to read everything I could, watch the debates, talk with teachers and school board members and even the mayor as a member of his Faith Leaders Council, and I am more confused than ever. But our task is to be informed. Reinhold Niebuhr once said "Consecrated ignorance is still ignorance."

Find out more by becoming involved in groups like “Friends United for School Equality.” This is a grass roots group of concerned Shelby County citizens, some with children in schools now, some for whose those days are behind them. They educate each other, and advocate for the equality of all children. They don’t have all the answers, but they are educating themselves bringing the resources each of them have.

Just this morning, at the suggestion of a school board member, I did some research and found out, according to the Christian Science Monitor, something I did not know. I found out that Memphis was named one of 5 city over-achievers that posted much higher graduation rates than would be expected based upon a range of factor including demographics and. We rate ahead of most big-city school districts, including Dallas, Houston, Chicago, Detroit, Indianapolis, Atlanta and Boston. I need to know that.

But there is another way to become informed, and it is the harder road. Listen to those with whom you disagree. Put aside the angry rhetoric and try to model what the apostle Paul called for, “with gentleness and humility, with patience, bearing with one another in love.” Be open to the possibility that you might not have all the answers. Listen to their fears. This kind of dialogue should not be hard to do in this congregation, for we have students and teachers in city schools, county schools, parochial schools, and private schools. And then ask yourself a harder question, “What are my fears?” For when decisions are based on fear and not hope, no good can come of it.

And don’t wait to get all the answers before you become involved. Be a tutor or a reader in the Idlewild Elementary School with our Adopt-a-school program, (or any other school). I have, and my heart has been touched.

The need today is for political leadership, but that will not come unless the people demand political leadership, people who ask the impertinent, inconvenient, uncomfortable questions: *Why not? Why not* a good education for all children of Memphis and Shelby county? *Why not* priorities that place children at the top? *Why not* equity, justice, and hope for all the citizens of the Memphis area? *Why not?* If that is ever to occur, it will be because an informed, faith-based people demanded it.

How will this happen? I don’t know. As William Sloane Coffin would say, “It is the task of the church to proclaim ‘Thus saith the Lord: Let justice roll down like waters and waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.’ It is the job of the politicians to work out the irrigation system.”

Finally, remember your baptism. The qualities and values we teach and nurture in children will shape the quality and values of the future. The children are watching us as we deal with this. If we can instill forgiving spirits within children today, the future of Memphis will be a more forgiving city. If we can convince our children today that they are worthy and valuable in God’s eyes, they will not be plagued by low self-esteems in the future and will see others as valuable in God’s eyes as well.

If we do that, then I wonder ... and I'm just wondering out loud again ... I wonder if some day, into the future, we might be able to look back and say "The end of slavery didn't do it. The end of Jim Crow laws didn't do it. Brown vs. Board of Education didn't do it. Busing didn't do it. But with God's help, we were able to put aside our prejudices and fears and idols, and we used an opportunity to choose life for our children and their children. "

For some things are more important than our prejudices and fears. And saving our children is one of those.

Amen.

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