

Suffer the Little Children

From the New Testament we gain the unmistakable impression that Jesus ~~was~~^{had} a very special interest in children. Once he referred feelingly to their playing at marriages and funerals in the market-place. On another occasion when he was in the temple he was asked to ~~listen~~^{silence} the children who cried "Hosanna!" in his honor, and (Matt. 21:15) he refused, citing the words of the psalm, "Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings thou has brought perfect praise." On another occasion he took a little child and placing him in the midst of a crowd, illustrating^{ed} to his apostles what he meant by perfect faith. And of course there is that most famous incident in which Jesus rebuked the disciples who sought to prevent a group of little children from breaking through a crowd to gather at his knee. The words he spoke on that occasion have remained imperishably in the memory of the Christian community: "Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not; for of such is the kingdom of God." The artists of every age have sought to recapture the poignancy of that scene.

Some have thought of this saying of Jesus as being the charter of Christian education, even though it was not until the 1780's that Robert Raikes became the first leader to popularize the Sunday School. ~~nevertheless~~ Just as it took the Christian church many centuries to learn the importance and necessity of Christian education for children, so even in our own day we frequently appear ~~to~~ most reluctant to give it the priority it deserves. Certainly the words, "Suffer the little children to come unto me," constitute our charter. It is just not possible to be true to Christ while neglecting the nurture of children in the knowledge of his way and life and truth.

The first word in the entreaty, "Suffer the little children . . .," is not now commonly used in our language. The Revised Standard Version has changed this to read, "Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of God." (Luka 18:16) The word "suffer" is discarded. But I want this morning to use that word because it has a double meaning ~~which~~ suggesting where we begin and where we ought to go in our present program of Christian education.

-I-

In one of its meanings the word "suffer" may be used to indicate that something

painful or injurious has been inflicted upon someone. ~~xxxxxxx~~ When a person suffers he experiences distress or grief. In this sense our age may be described with the words, "Suffer the little children."

Sometimes I think that our world is filled with an almost unrelieved kind of tragedy. I see so many people whose lives have run aground the shoals of misery. So many people are deeply distressed, sick in heart and mind, and almost totally unable to bear the burdens of life. There are simply not enough doctors and counsellors, indeed there are so few known ways of therapy, to ^{heal} ~~xxxx them~~ of their spiritual diseases and make them whole. And nowhere are these distresses to be found more overwhelming than in children and youth. The world is full of sad, lonely and broken children. To countless numbers of children these days the world is a cruel place in which to be born. Alarmed, we complain bitterly about juvenile delinquency and the general aimlessness and obstreperousness of ~~our~~ youth. But so many of our children and youth have known only a world that has caused them to suffer.

from Battle Creek, Mich.,
Last year, on September 12, the Associated Press sent out a story ^{which} told of a sixteen year old boy who ^{had} admitted to a long string of crimes being sentenced to 45 days of solitary confinement on a bread and water diet. The story also reported that the judge had ordered that the boy be allowed no visitors except a clergyman, attorney or physician. Furthermore he was to have no reading material except religious literature and the Bible. By March of 1960 another ~~wxx~~ press release revealed that the 24th Battle Creek boy had been sentenced to a similar bread and water diet and solitary confinement. Now there are many people who devoutly believe that the only way to deal with disorderly youth these days is to mete out this kind of tough ^{Punishment.} ~~treatment~~. The only trouble with this get-tough attitude is that it fails to come to grips with the causes of juvenile delinquency. It is so hard for us to face the fact that our youth are behaving in this way primarily because of massive cruelty to their childhood. When so many are born the world says, "Suffer the little children" (above story in Christian Century, Aug. 17, 1960, p.944)

Mort Sahl, the comedian who is presently refreshing the American scene with his wry and piercing humor, was recently quoted as saying: "I'm for capital punishment. You've got to execute people - how else are they going to learn?" (Time Mag. July 25, 1960, p.43) This is

pretty much the educational pattern for multitudes of children and youth: after making them suffer spiritually from the deprivations of normal needs, we tend vindictively to execute them in order to make them learn! Very few bother to find out why young people are behaving so maliciously. We are simply appalled by the ~~xxxx~~ kind of behaviour which is to be seen in the attitude of Frenchy, a young member of a gang, whose story is told in a new book by Ira Henry Freeman, Out of the Burning. Listen to Frenchy:

I would approach a boy who challenged me with a smile and outstretched hand. "I'm sorry." As he shook hands with me, I would smash a cola bottle full in his face with my left hand. I dumped more hard guys that way. I never heard a complaint of foul. Such jive talk was for the lemons in the Y.M.C.A. We admired meanness.

(from Fred J. Cook's rev. of this book in SAT.REV.
Aug. 13, 1960, p.32)

Before you damn this young demon, you might ask how it is that he acquired such a barbarous ~~xxxx~~ demeanor. Haven't you seen many TV shows and films in which cola bottles are used in that manner? Doesn't the world really admire meanness? Isn't our entire globe threatened with meanness?

Don't blame the child or youth for being born into such a world. Don't blame him, for there are in fact plenty of quite ordinary people who do almost nothing to teach him any better way. Many of us deplore juvenile behaviour and cry "Foul!" when we are hurt by meanness, but we scarcely lift a finger to change the atmosphere of the world in which these attitudes are incubated. Several months ago I met one of the foremost child ^(Dane) psychiatrists in Columbus who confided that he was deeply discouraged because he could get so little response from the parents of the sick children who were his patients. Frequently he tries to arrange meetings where he can consult with the parents about their children's problems, but, can you imagine it, they so seldom respond. They seem not to care. Well, I can imagine it. There are Christian teachers of children and youth in this church who can imagine it, for they experience the same monumental apathy when it comes to soliciting the interest of parents in what they are trying to do for their children. Let me illustrate: in the past several weeks the supervisors and teachers in our church school have been contacting parents in the attempt to obtain helpers for our church school. One supervisor ^(Ray) in the nursery department alone called over 50 parents of children who are or could be in our nursery. How many do you suppose responded to this call for service? Exactly two, each one for only a six months period. Do they care? Is this not the prevailing attitude of

indifference which denies little children the Bread of Life, and then, when they turn out to be twisted and broken, vengefully condemns them to a bread-and-water diet in solitary confinement?

What kind of a world is this into which we are bringing so many ~~of~~ millions of children? Some time ago a dear friend of mine (John Adams) told me that his nine year old son was watching television when Nikita ~~Khrushchev~~ Khrushchev appeared to denounce the President of the United States and threaten atomic war for alleged indignities. The father told me that the little boy began to cry. "Daddy," he sobbed. "I don't want to die." He understood, you see, the kind of a world in which he lives. "Suffer the little children." *Today's child is immune to the crippling paralyzing pain but shriveled with the terror of extinction*

I can tell you that I see scores of children and youth, as well as adults, whose lives have been subjected to the most cruel treatment and deprivation. To be sure, not all of them have been maltreated physically; indeed many have been supplied ^{with} almost with a ~~surfeit~~ surfeit of things. The suffering they have known has been more subtle and less blatant. Nonetheless ^{it is as} ~~is it~~ as severe and insidious. There are not enough people in this world, seemingly, to care for the ~~broken~~ broken hearts of little children. Indeed our task of Christian education must begin with the recognition that the world says, in this sense, to many of the children of our age, "Suffer the little children."

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Let us think now of the second ~~meaning~~ meaning of the word "suffer." When Jesus said, "Suffer the little children to come unto me," he meant, "bear with them, put up with them, tolerate them." Indeed the Revised Standard Version has translated it correctly, "Let the little children come unto me; and do not hinder them."

In terms of our challenge as Christian educators this means that we need to have a greater tolerance for the needs of children. Yes, we need to be more tolerant of the needs of those children whose parents disgust us by their indifference. It is so easy to say ~~that~~ that parents ~~look~~ ought to look after their own children. It is disgusting to spend hours on the telephone in the interest of other people's children only to have ^{them} ~~their~~ parents refuse all requests for help. As Christians we must learn to bear with, to put up with, the needs of these children for the simple reason that they belong to God. If their own parents fail them, then it is our duty as Christians to obey Christ: "Suffer the little

children." How easy it would be for us to express our disgust for parental indifference by turning the children away. But isn't that what the disciples did? They were annoyed when the mothers, probably, brought the children to Jesus, pushing their way through the crowd; they rebuked the children for coming. But the Gospel of Mark reports a very real reaction on the part of Jesus: "But when Jesus saw it he was indignant." Wouldn't Jesus be indignant at us if we rebuked the children for coming? Wouldn't he ask us to bear with them, to put up with them, ~~not~~ to be tolerant of them?

Recently I heard Dr. Chauncey Leake, one of Ohio State's most eminent scientists, say that when he was in Russia he was deeply impressed with the amazing kindness the Russian people showed to their children and experimental animals. Is it possible that our godless adversary is more kindly disposed toward children than we who have Christ? Has our Christian education failed to this extent?

What is it that we seek to do in Christian education? As someone has pointed out our children are growing up in a world where they are taught the importance of food, exercise, rest, recreation and repose. But these alone do not make for the abundant life. There is a fine discrimination which guides the choices of those who know the depths of spirituality. A Chinese sage once said: "If you have two loaves of bread, sell one and buy a lily." (from TEACHER'S LETTER, Christmas, 1956, cited to me by Arthur Wohlers) Possibly here is the significance of Christian education: its purpose is to teach children and youth to give up some of ^{their} ~~the~~ many things ~~that they have~~ so they might possess the values of truth and beauty. It is this sense of moral and spiritual values we are seeking to convey to all whom we teach. G. K. Chesterton wrote as an inscription of the 1933 World's Fair: "Man will never starve for want of wonders; but man may starve for want of wonder." Our children live in a world of incredible wonders: jet planes flying faster than the speed of sound; space ships orbiting about the earth; rockets shooting through the emptiness of space. Yet multitudes are starved for a want of wonder. How many children and youth are there who can look up into the majestic dramas of a night sky and feel what the psalmist felt:

The heavens are telling the glory of God;
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.
Day to day pours forth speech,
and night to night declares knowledge.

There is no speech, nor are there words;
their voice is not heard;
yet their voice goes out through all the earth,
and their words to the end of the world.
(Psalm 19:1-4)

What is the purpose of Christian education? Is it not to teach a little child that though the earth sometimes ~~seems~~ appears in one's experience as a desert of loneliness and death, he may still know that truth about Almighty God which enables him confidently to say,

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want;
he makes me lie down in green pastures.
He leads me beside still waters;
he restores my soul.
He leads me in paths of righteousness
for his name's sake.

Is it not our privilege to illustrate this confidence by relating the lives of the faithful to our lives? For example, one of the most distinguished members of this church was Dr. Fred Rosemond, a man whom many of us ~~can~~ affectionately recall. One day, after a long life as a Christian lawyer and teacher, had come to an end, they opened his bank box, and among his papers they found a small ~~thin~~ slip upon which were written the words: "The Lord is my shepherd." Is it not our purpose in Christian education to prepare God's children to ~~say that?~~ *receive that legacy?*

Several weeks ago I saw a news note regarding Francoise Sagon, a young French novelist who has been most successful at spinning salacious tales. Now ~~24~~ twenty-four years old, she has been recently divorced. For the benefit of a magazine interviewer ~~and~~ she offered her views of life and love. Wearily she sighed: "At 19, if you like, I could have ~~been~~ completely changed by someone or I could have discovered something through someone. Now I don't think I could any more. I could change my ^{way} ~~my~~ of life, be happy or unhappy, but I can no longer change a set of reflexes which is me." (Time Mag. July 25, 1960, p.40) That is undoubtedly the spiritual biography of multitudes of haunted people in our world. For all there has been a time when something through someone could have changed their lives. Instead

they exist merely as a set of reflexes, starving for wonder in a world of mechanical and electronic wonders. And all of the while we, who are the teachers of the Christian faith, have what they need to be changed. For we have Christ. It may very well be that some child who came under your teaching care this morning is in the last stage of his life wherein he may be saved from the soulless status of a set of reflexes. Do you recall why the little children were being brought to Jesus? The record says: ~~Ministry~~ "Now they were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them." "Suffer the little children to come . . . " yes, to us, that we might lead them into a presence whereby they may be touched by Christ.