

The Park Road Pulpit

Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church

Russ and Amy Jacks Dean, Pastors



Why We Can't

Jeremiah 31.27-34 and Matthew 17.14-21

Russ Dean, October 21, 2007 (Children's Sabbath)

One of our favorite children's books is the story of the little engine that could. Our book at home is cleverly designed with a little circular track on every page and a cute little wind up engine that runs wildly around the curves of that track. Trying to get over the mountain, wanting to bring the toys to the children in the town on the other side, the little blue engine determines his way over the top. "I think I can, I think I can, I think I can."

I detest the phrase "I can't do it." To say "can't" is to give in to despair and defeat – even before we begin. Or, as my mother frequently reminded me, "Can't never could."

Following the fall of the nation to the Babylonians, and the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple, the people of Israel began to speak of the judgment of God in such events. Calamity always has such an effect on the popular psyche. Just yesterday, in fact, I heard someone opine that the great sinfulness of Charlotte's citizens is the cause of our epic drought. She had a college degree and a goodly amount of sophistication. Her opinion is not uncommon; I read it in last week's paper, also: "When we repent" the letter to the editor said, "then God will send rain." It was this mindset that caused Jeremiah to write that God is the kind of God who will "*remember their iniquity and punish their sins*" (Jeremiah 14.20). Another prophet claimed this righteous

vengeance would be visited “*to the third and fourth generations*” (Exodus 34.6-7). Apparently a wrath-filled God has some strange appeal in the hearts and minds of the people.¹

So powerful was the understanding that God’s vengeance would be meted out – on the offending people, and on their children – that it eventually took the form of a common proverb: “*Sour grapes eaten by the parents leave a sour taste in the mouths of their children.*” In other words, if the mother eats a lemon – even her children’s lips will pucker up! And, of course, the proverbial truth is still truth. Children do suffer the consequences of their parents’ sins.

Yesterday as we were returning from a ball game, the warning sounds of a state-wide “Amber Alert” interrupted our radio station, and I had to try to explain to Jackson why a mother would be on the run for kidnapping her own child. How do you explain to a child that sometimes even mothers abuse their own children?

The more I am aware of the ways of the world, the more I am amazed that we as a common humanity have progressed at all – which convinces me even more that the Grace of God is rampant in this frightening world. It is no wonder there are so many disturbed adults in our world – look at what we did to them when they were children! And they are the people who are now raising tomorrow’s leaders! Not long ago I was in a supermarket, or maybe it was a Walmart, at nearly midnight during the week and there was more than one mother there, dragging around her elementary-aged children – shopping. Didn’t they know it was a school night!? And this is just a mild form of abuse (but it is abuse). I need not mention the gory details,

¹ Is God really a “God of wrath,” or is that deity a god of our own making? Is the God revealed in Jesus Christ not the very opposite wrath? (This God is also revealed through the prophets of the Old Testament. For example, Hosea records these words of God: “*My people are bent on turning away from me... (yet) How can I give you up?... How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim? My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim...*” (11.8-9) These are the words of a self-sacrificing God, not a God of vengeance. I believe this “wrathful” God is a god of our own making, a God conceived out of our own need for revenge and punishment. It is a concept that has been (and probably will continue to be) with us for a very long time – though a theology based on the life and death of Jesus should call us to re-think such a concept. God is love. Period.

for our failure to our children is documented on the news, nightly. Anne LaMott says we are punished “by our sins and not for them”² – and in this regard the ancient proverb will always be true: Parents’ sins will always, inevitably, be visited on their children.

But Jeremiah’s prophecy – as with all prophecies – contains hope, a message of Grace, that is rooted in the very heart of God. Though it is stated strangely, it is a message of good news that the children of today still need to hear: *A day is coming... when only those who eat sour grapes will get the sour taste... only those who sin will be put to death.*

Wouldn’t it be great to awaken to a world of that new day – when children no longer had to suffer the ignorance or the arrogance, the abuse or the neglect of their parents or guardians, their teachers or respected elders? Shannon Daley-Harris says, “It’s time for that new day to dawn, when no child dies from what we failed to do or because of what we have done.”³ Indeed, it is past time!

Though they are revered as “the twelve,” the disciples of Jesus were such a pathetic lot. They almost seem like twelve of us, called to respond to the grace of God walking among us.⁴ They constantly didn’t get it. Didn’t see it. Couldn’t find it. Weren’t aware of it. Missed it. Missed it. Missed it.

“*Why couldn’t we force out the demon?*” they ask. I can almost hear that annoying whine in their childish voices as they speak, “We can’t do it, Jesus!” And I can almost hear Jesus saying, in my mother’s exhaling exasperation: [exhale] “Can’t. Never. Could.”

² I have not had time to find the exact citation, but this is a direct quote, recorded in her book, *Traveling Mercies*.

³ *My Boat is Too Small*, Vol. 16, p.79. (National Observance of Children’s Sabbaths Manual, by the Children’s Defense Fund).

⁴ My implied point is that this is exactly who they were – common folk, exactly like us. Their experience is our experience. And God is still among us.

Just as the collective psyche of cultures seems to celebrate the wrath of God more than the grace of God (which is always the final word), the collective soul of the culture always seems to look for proof of the sacred in some sensational acts of God. It is as if we are, collectively, crying out, “Give us some proof, God, that you are really here: Heal it. Fix it. Change it. Do something. Right it. Correct it. Make it rain, or something... and then we will know!”

But that is not the faith Jesus sought to instill in his disciples. He did not say they could not cast out the demon because God hadn't done any miracles. He said they could not heal because they had no faith. Do you understand? God is not going to give nine million American children health care coverage through some divine miracle. God will not do it! (“We can't do it, Jesus”) And if we refuse to grow up and quite playing partisan politics, on both sides of the aisle, while the health and the safety and the education of American's children hang in the balance – our children will continue to die for our sins.⁵

We can not – only because we will not.

We cannot raise our church's budget? No. We will not.

We cannot bring an end to a costly and misguided war? No. We will not.

We cannot cease the flow of youth, mostly African-American and Latino, into our nation's prisons (which we are building more rapidly than we are building schools)? No. We will not.

⁵ This message comes on the heels of President Bush's veto of the SCHIP bill (which would, purportedly, have provided insurance coverage for most of the uninsured working poor in the country), and of the House and Senate's failure to overturn that veto. Though I am personally disappointed with the President's decision, I did not intend this comment as a partisan shot across the bow. I believe it is undeniably true that we, the American people, are failing our children. This is not President Bush's fault – though his veto shows that he is hardly innocent of playing politics with lives. I believe we will be (indeed I believe we ARE being) judged by the way we take care of the weakest and most innocent and needy in our nation – not by the way we care for the wealthy. Sadly, and curiously, however, none of our known Republicans had any positive comments about the sermon, and several “yellow dog democrats” came through the line at the door with a “wink, wink, nod, nod – you really got ‘em today, boy” kind of comment. The comment was intended as a prophetic pronouncement against our leadership and our national body politic in general – NOT as playing partisan politics from the pulpit. If I was misunderstood, I offer my full apology. We, the American people, will be held responsible to the extent that our children fail – and that will be made manifestly clear in the generations to come, and with the future of this nation – not any one political party.

We cannot insure nine million children, mostly of the working poor in this country? No.
We will not.

We cannot support little Sutton DeLapp so he has all the love he needs to become a secure adult, all the discipline he needs to become a productive adult, all the education he needs to become a responsible adult? Oh... yeah. Of course we can. And you know we will.

For Sutton is a child of God. And he is one of ours.⁶

But... aren't they all?

Give us the faith today, to make tomorrow a new day, when no child will die for my sins.

We can. We really can.

May it be so!

⁶ This "Children's Sabbath" service featured our children leading in various aspects of worship, and included a time of presentation of bibles to our third graders and a commissioning of acolytes. There was also a notification of our newest baby born into the church, and a parent/child dedication service for Sutton Patrick DeLapp.