

Sermon for Children's Day

TITLE: Jesus, the Children's Advocate

Scripture: Matthew 19:13-15; 18:1-10

Introduction: This age is hostile to children. All over the world kids are being exploited, neglected and abused. Because children are powerless--the weakest of the weak--they have always been treated harshly by the strong; but today the abuse of kids has fallen to new depths of evil.

In not just one, but several countries, children have become pawns in a political struggle. They are kidnapped, branded with the name of a political group, and forced to take part in fighting. Sometimes they are made to come back and attack the people of their own family or village. After the fighting is over, the brand on their face or chest is a mark of shame that prevents them returning home.

Not only teenagers are being abused this way--kids as young as 6 or 7 have been so violated.

In the western world the abuse of children takes other forms and is no less prevalent. Kids are used for sexual pleasure by perverts who stalk the Internet or make pornographic movies. Kids are treated as nuisances and throwaways who get in the way of adult pleasures and can be shouted at, insulted, beaten and murdered. [Suggestion: Mention a story of child abuse from the news sources your congregation uses. Every week new "horror" stories come to the fore.]

In this age so hostile to kids, who will stand up and be their advocate?

We claim to be Christians, but if we would follow Jesus we must be advocates for children--because that is what He was.

A. Jesus defended children:
Read Matthew 19:13-15.

"Then little children were brought to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and pray for them. But the disciples rebuked those who brought them. Jesus said, 'Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.' When he had placed his hands on them, he went on from there."

Those disciples weren't worse than the other men in Galilee. They simply reflected the way society regarded and treated children.

But not Jesus: He defended children. You can study the lives and teachings of the so-called leaders of this world. You can go back to the founders of world religions or to the figures who are revered or worshiped by millions: Buddha, Krishna, Zoroaster,

Mohammed. Forget about the wise or profound sayings they are supposed to have uttered. Forget about miracles or amazing acts of heroism. Just look at one aspect: how they treated children.

Then read the Gospels and think for a while about Jesus of Nazareth. You find a profound difference.

For the so-called great people of history, kids hardly counted. They weren't important in themselves but for what they might become. The goal of life was focused on adult behavior and attainment. For Buddha, it was to become enlightened and reach the cessation of all desire. For Hinduism it is to accumulate so much good karma by our deeds that we can break the cycle of endless death and rebirth.

But Jesus comes along and says: "No! Kids are important right now, as they are, in themselves. The kingdom of heaven belongs to them." And Jesus takes them into His arms.

Who will be an advocate for children today? Who will speak up for them? Who will defend them from those outside the church--or in it!--who would turn them away, crush them, humiliate them, enslave them?

Application: Jesus spoke up for kids in His day, and we must speak up for them today. We must speak up to denounce the sexual and physical abuse of kids. We must speak up against the exploitation of kids for adult sexual pleasure. We must speak up against child pornography in sick movies. We must speak up against the use of the Internet to lure and trap kids by evil adults. We must speak up, warning parents, warning kids.

Jesus defended children, and so must we. It begins in our homes and in this church. Let's spend more time on our knees and in the Word studying the life of Jesus and treat kids as He treated them, not as society or TV treats them. Let this be a church where kids are safe and secure, where they are valued and defended.

B. Jesus welcomed children.

Read Matthew 18:1-5:

"At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, 'Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?' He called a little child and had him stand among them. And he said: 'I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me.'

This is radical stuff. Jesus reverses the teacher-student relationship. Not the grown-up, not the guru, not the aged head heavy with "wisdom"--but little children!

Now, some characteristics of kids are best avoided--tantrums and fears and meanness.

Ellen White helps us with what Jesus was getting at when He said we must become like little children: "The simplicity, the self-forgetfulness, and the confiding love of a little child are the attributes that Heaven values. These are the characteristics of real greatness" (The Desire of Ages, p. 437).

Sometimes it takes us adults a long while to "get" this message of Jesus. Even though we have kids of our own, we tend to be so concerned that they will turn out right that we cannot learn what they have to teach us. Maybe it's only when we become grandparents and aren't so uptight that we can really appreciate and enjoy the wisdom of children.

One thing about small children: you can know exactly what they mean. You can take their words at face value. As we get older our words get layered with all sorts of hints, innuendoes and double meanings, but not kids. One granddad was patting his granddaughter's back as she was going to sleep when suddenly she said: "Get out of my room; you smell yucky." No doubt about what she meant, was there!

A grandmother was walking on the beach with her two little granddaughters, picking up shells and putting them in the bucket. Some of the shells had pretty patterns. One of the girls was cooing over the patterns, saying, "Grandma, they're beautiful". Then she found a patterned shell, but it was broken. "What a shame," said Grandma, "it's broken." "Yes, but it's still beautiful", said the little girl.

What a lesson of grace--broken but still beautiful. That's the wisdom of children, and it's the wisdom that Jesus tells us we must have if we are to enter the kingdom.

Application: "Whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me", said Jesus. Does this church welcome children? Do we value them, not for what they may become, not for what they might do or give when they are grown up, but value them, right now, for themselves?

The old method of handling kids was: "Children should be seen and not heard." What did that say about kids-- that they are somehow not fully a person, but something to be tolerated or ignored. Some churches still operate on that philosophy: seen but not heard, or out of sight and out of mind.

Jesus' way was 100 percent opposite.

No wonder many Adventist young people walk away from the church and never come back. They grew up seeing stern-looking, unsmiling adults in church who were impatient with them and seemed to be ever waiting to find fault. Hardly anyone took the time to learn their name or talk with them on a level they could appreciate. Here's a suggestion: Let's all resolve that we will learn the names of every child in this congregation. And that we will greet them by name each Sabbath and spend a moment chatting with them. Let's go out of our way to commend them, to let them know they are special to us and to God.

C. Jesus protected children

Read Matthew 18:5-10:

"And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me. But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea. Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to sin! Such things must come, but woe to the man through whom they come! If your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell. See that you do not look down on one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven."

Students of history look to ancient Greece as the finest flowering of the human spirit. With all its accomplishments in the arts and philosophy, however, this civilization bore the curse of pedophilia, which was practiced without shame by the "great" people of the day.

Sexual predators are still around. Some of them are in the church. In the church there are others who aren't predators but who have weaknesses that put kids in their care at risk.

The church must--**MUST!**--be made a safe place for children. Although society is hostile and unsafe, in the church they must be secure. Everyone who works with kids must be above reproach. Working with kids, mentoring them, is a wonderful and rewarding ministry. You can influence impressionable lives for this world and for eternity. The kids look up to you and will remember you fondly many years later.

But the other side of the coin is also true: to abuse that relationship is a terrible thing. You can warp a kid's mind and life for time and eternity. These words of Jesus (in Matt. 18:5-9) are the gravest He ever uttered. He spoke as the Protector of children, and we must protect them also.

But you don't have to be a sexual abuser to lead a little one astray. You can bend the twig so that it will never grow straight.

In every group of kids there's someone who doesn't fit. It's as though someone has to be singled out as the slowest or the fattest or the dumbest. The sad thing is that, no matter how these designations arise, they become self-fulfilling prophecies. So in the midst of a crowd you have kids who don't belong, who have a low self-image, and who are desperately lonely.

We should do what Jesus would do if He were here. We should look out for the left-out

ones, the lonely ones, the cast offs, and give them special attention, helping to build up their self-esteem and get them accepted by the others.

In early 2001 F.B.I. agent Robert Hanssen was arrested one Sunday morning just after he had left a cache of materials to be picked up by his Russian contacts. When the extent of his activities became known--he delivered vast amounts of top-secret information, leading to the exposure and execution of at least two Russian "moles"--Americans confronted troubling questions. Here was a man seemingly devoted to church, family and country, who attended Mass every Sunday and was a member of the tight-knit Catholic lay organization Opus Dei. How could this individual become the most dangerous double agent in the F.B.I.'s 90-year history?

The Washington Post decided to figure out what made Robert Hanssen tick. After a long investigation they concluded that the roots of Hanssen's betrayal lay in the warped relationship between Robert and his father, Howard. They chronicled a pattern of verbal and physical abuse by the father, for whom the son could never do anything well enough to please him. For instance, when Robert took the test to get his driver's license, he was failed, even though he drove well. Later he found out that his father had bribed the instructor to fail him, so that--in Howard's view--Robert wouldn't be so cocky. That was the pattern: in college Howard told one of Robert's professors that his son's grades were sure to go down; and on the night before Robert's wedding Howard tried to dissuade his fiancée from going ahead with the marriage.

Eventually Robert Hanssen abandoned the career in medicine that his father had wanted for him and joined the F.B.I. But in time he became disenchanted with the agency, and the accumulated resentment toward his father transferred to the F.B.I.

Young minds--how sensitive they are! Who is sufficient to guide the twig so that it will grow up straight? Who is sufficient for this precious but all-important work? Who is sufficient to be a parent? Who is sufficient to be a guide to the church's children?

None of us is sufficient, but Jesus is our sufficiency. We must spend much time in prayer. We must contemplate His life and in particular how He dealt with children. As we spend time with Him He will transform us into His likeness. His attitude will become our attitude, His ways our ways. Then, like Him, we will be ready to be an advocate for children.