



Children’s Sermons? No!

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Children’s sermons are in fashion in our churches these days, and to worry about them seems, at best, un-American or, at worst, unchristian. Nevertheless, I do worry about children’s sermons, not so much because of practice as because of principle. Certainly many fine children’s sermons are given each Sunday, sermons which help attract some children to church; but a difficult theological issue is raised when the full gospel is directed specifically to the hearing of these little ones.

The children that come forward tend to be very little. There are usually more four, five, and six year olds than fourth, fifth, or sixth graders. Some are old enough to give clear and often humorous answers to the preacher’s questions, but there are more who stray from side to side on their leisurely perambulation down the aisle and give their grandparents no end of pleasure by giving coy, backward glances. The children who hear our children’s sermons are very young children and their youthfulness contributes to my worry.

General linguistic concerns are a caution, if not an outright worry. The goal of all Christian preaching is the declaration of the gospel and that gospel, rooted in the death and resurrection of Jesus, is a communion event that takes linguistic form. The words of the preacher become the sound of the gospel, and the more appropriate the words are, the more clearly the gospel rings for the hearer. Preaching to young children who have limited vocabularies may force some preachers to become suitably direct and simple, but more often it will serve as a linguistic impediment. Preachers must always use the words of their auditors, but the more words that are available, the better.

Far more serious is the unlikelihood that a very young child can or should comprehend the reality of sin. Very young children may, of course, understand that they have done wrong—wrong before their parents, their neighbors, and even before God. But who would expect a small child to think of being sinful, especially originally sinful? If one should find a small child with a full consciousness of sin, one would naturally be either amused or chagrined. Little ones are best reminded

of their baptism and nurtured in the basics of our faith. Knowledge of sin comes soon enough.

The question is whether precious worship time is best used for the formal preaching of the gospel to children who do not yet comprehend that they are sinners. The problem is not that a full awareness of sin is necessary as a preparation for the gospel, for that awareness comes most keenly when God’s good news is heard most clearly. Rather the question is whether the gospel

can be heard fully apart from some comprehension of the phrase ‘the forgiveness of sins’ or the words ‘forgiveness’ and ‘sin.’

Christian sermons, taken as a whole, must declare the gospel in terms of the forgiveness of sins. Little children, as well as mature Christians, should be told that God loves them—told again and again. If, however, the mark and guarantee of that love is the death and resurrection of Jesus, the fullness of the gospel is to hear and believe that our sins are forgiven. Little children have their baptism—they are safe in the arms of Jesus; but it is simply a fact that, for a period of time when they are very young, it is not easy for them to hear the heart of the Christian gospel. We may preach to them but it cannot be preaching in the traditional sense.

Preachers seem to know that the children’s sermon must be a sermon of a different kind. Often the sermon centers on an exhortation to be good or to help one’s parents or to think about the less fortunate or to be nice to other children or to work hard at school or to be kind to the earth or even to remember that animals and birds have feelings, too. Sometimes the children’s exhortation is based on the primary text for the day and establishes an unfortunate agenda for the main sermon. On other occasions, the children’s sermon becomes a brief comedy time, with serious questions and bizarre answers and much twisting of little dresses and even an occasional horseback ride on the altar rail. In some ways it’s all very harmless—with a little good advice and a little salutary humor thrown in—but children’s sermons are not traditional gospel sermons and should not be supposed to be so.

If a congregation has grown helplessly fond of children’s sermons, and if they do serve in getting some little ones to church, why not use that worship time to tell Bible stories? An interesting retelling of the many wonderful stories of the Bible would provide necessary nurture for both parents and children, deliver the children from some burdensome exhortations, and keep pastor and parishioners from confusing real preaching with our little homilies for the very young. Even very young children are ready for good Bible stories—for the account of Samson and his last, heroic renewal of strength, or of Moses, whose reluctance was relieved when God pounded Pharaoh with the plagues, or of Paul, who plunged eagerly toward Damascus, only to be stopped dead in his tracks by the Lord whom he would end up serving, or of Jesus, who when he met the woman at the well was the one in need, but then, quite suddenly, became the one with everything to give. A Bible story well told could be a fine, if occasional, addition to our worship services.

The trick is to tell the Bible story well, with brevity, clarity, and the right addition of meaningless detail. Some have gifts for that kind of telling, and some do not; but even if it is not the pastor, someone in the congregation can surely tell such stories with energy and verve.

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My career with children’s sermons began when I arrived in my last parish and discovered that they were an expectation not mentioned in the letter of call. I found I enjoyed doing them! Despite some misgivings, I still lean toward “yes” on the topic, so my esteemed colleague and I will open a fissure in our harmonious homiletics department by writing on opposing sides. (We

are, however, both skilled at conflict resolution and think we can handle whatever acrimony might be produced between us!)

I say “yes” to children’s sermons for three reasons:

- (1) They give children a “place” in the worship service.
- (2) They are a different kind of communication which does work with children.
- (3) In their different form, they also communicate to the whole congregation.

First, children’s sermons give children a place in the service, and I go for almost anything which will help children enjoy being in church. I do not believe, as some do, that children accustomed to a zippy children’s sermon are more easily bored with the rest of the service. I think it more likely that feeling part of church stimulates children’s interest in worship overall. Pastors also develop a rapport with the children (and the congregation) which they would not have otherwise.

Some people prefer children’s sermons confined to children, that is, in opening Sunday School service, and in some parishes the morning schedule lends itself to that. But I like them in the regular service. Not only do they give children a place in the service, but adults can profit from them as well as children.

Second, children’s sermons are different from regular sermons, because one speaks differently to children. In contrast to the monologue of a normal sermon, they involve the children, sometimes with unpredictable results. One needs to be informal with children, so we use all sorts of corny, attention-catching stuff—pictures, objects, question/answer, skits—which we don’t normally use in regular sermons. Done well they can deliver the message very effectively, and our services can use a touch of humor. One of my friends says, “If that silly stuff helps the message, use it in the regular sermon; if it doesn’t, it doesn’t belong in a children’s

sermon either.” That’s not realistic, because I’m sure that in his regular sermons he doesn’t use the sort of little gimmicks one uses in children’s sermons.

Little kids don’t listen very long, so children’s sermons must be short. You have them for 30-45 seconds, then good luck. Make your point clearly and fast, and send them on!

Since they are a different type of sermon, not everybody should do children’s sermons. I have one friend, an excellent pastor and superb preacher, who has others in the congregation do them. Even the best pastors can’t do everything well, and wise pastors draw lines.

I was fortunate that we did not have children’s sermons obsessively every Sunday. It’s hard to come up with that many good ones a year. Creativity and good preparation apply to any kind of sermon.

Third, of course one is really preaching to everybody. If a slightly zany children’s sermon serves to highlight the day’s gospel or another message for the whole congregation, so much the better. My mirror-in-the-bottom-of-the-box children’s sermon for All Saint’s Sunday, when I told the children they would see a saint in the box and then lined them up to look, probably gave the entire congregation a better idea of the All Saints’ theme than my regular sermon. (I thought it was an original idea until I heard Mark Hanson at University Lutheran Church of Hope in Minneapolis give a similar one, though he used a garbage can big enough to hide a real saint in).

The congregation will probably remember some of those children’s sermons more than the regular sermon. If one asked my former parishioners what sermons of mine they remember,

they would probably think of some children's sermons before any normal sermon would come to mind.

That means of course that a good children's sermon should harmonize with the day's gospel, the time of the church year, or something current to that Sunday. My congregation won't remember what I said about the lost sheep or the lost coin one Sunday a few years ago, but they'll probably remember my sweeping the chancel with a broom and asking the children to help me find the coin hidden somewhere. I hope they remember how happy the one child was who found that big silver dollar.

Since the message of a good children's sermon is a message for everybody, the same principles of law and gospel apply to them. It is all too easy for children's sermons to degenerate into kiddie-moralisms: "This leaf reminds us we should pray, because God created everything." We're probably all guilty of some of those "See-this?-Then-do-that" type of children's sermons, but they're on a par with dreary legalisms and harangues from the pulpit.

It also means doing children's sermons where the whole congregation can see and hear. Two Sundays ago we visited a church where the pastor unhooked his microphone and sat down with the children, disappearing from sight or sound. The people in the front pews strained to see and hear. The rest of us counted rows of bricks on the wall.

My concluding advice for children's sermons is the same as for any sermon: If you do them, do them as well as you can!