

PROTECTING THE INNOCENT

Deuteronomy 6:4-9, Matthew 18:1-6

May 4th, 2008

My brother, Matt, called me for advice last week. He was upset and confused. His five year old daughter, Madeline, had been the victim of child abuse and he didn't know what to do or who to tell. Normally, you'd go to the police, but the situation was complicated. The perpetrator was one of Madeline's uncles and confronting him might split the family. Especially since what he'd done was neither sexually nor physically abusive. Though Madeline was clearly traumatized, many would think what happened was harmless or even cute.

Let me explain. The night before, when my brother was putting Madeline to bed, she had been afraid. When Matt asked why, she said she was worried about the invisible bad man. After some questioning, Matt discovered his brother-in-law had told Madeline there was an invisible bad man who was always lurking around her and telling her bad things to do. Though he never used the term Satan or the Devil, he was apparently warning Madeline about him. She was supposed to ignore the invisible bad man. Now, as she got ready for bed, ignoring him was impossible. She was scared.

My brother told her that there was no invisible bad man in her room, that her uncle was wrong, and that she needn't be afraid. Eventually, he distracted her with other thoughts and she went to sleep. Then he went and called me.

I wasn't much help. Though I shared his anger, there wasn't much we could do. If we had called the police, they would have laughed at us. No law had been broken. If we had confronted his brother in law, we'd have upset everyone, especially those in the family who think Satan is lurking about. I told my brother he done all he could do. He'd calmed his daughter. He'd told her the truth. He'd reassured her of his love.

Where are the theological police when you need them?

Sadly, theological child abuse isn't a crime. As long as you don't touch someone sexually or physically, you can do whatever you want to a child. You can make them afraid of demons and worried about the Devil. You can teach them the most horrible things about God and God's attitude toward them. You can tell them things that make it hard for them to sleep and no one bats an eye.

Looking back, I was taught some of the ugliest stories as a child. I was told Adam and Eve disobeyed God by eating some fruit and were thrown out of God's garden, that God got so angry at the world that God destroyed every person but Noah and his family, that God saved the people of Israel by killing the firstborn child of every family in Egypt, that God made the sun stop so the

people of Israel could kill more of their enemies, that after the walls of Jericho fell that God ordered the murder of every man, woman, and child. I was taught all of these stories – usually without much explanation - before I was ten.

If I'd had a crazy uncle who told me such violent stories, my parents would have kept me away from him. But, since these were Bible stories, my parents dropped me off at the Sunday School every week with a smile. Once there, sweet little ladies who wouldn't hurt a flea would teach us stories about a bear slaughtering a group of boys for calling a prophet "Baldy."

When I was taught these stories, I didn't realize how inappropriate they were. I don't remember being traumatized. Children seldom know they're being abused. They're innocent and trusting. They assume whatever their parents or other adults say and do must be right. Unfortunately, as adults, we do what was done to us, unaware of how it might impact our children.

Recently, a friend told Angie such a story. He'd visited a young nephew and watched television with him. His nephew's parents carefully controlled what their children watched, protecting them from programs with scenes of violence and sexuality. They limited their children's television watching to Christian videos. On that day, Angie's friend, watched a cartoon version of Noah and the Ark with his nephew.

He discovered Christian videos are not as safe as you'd suppose. In this video, God's voice was always deep and foreboding, declaring God's anger and promising swift and terrible judgment. God repeatedly used words like "kill" and "destroy." Each time God would speak, his nephew would take the pillows from the couch and cover his head, barely peaking out at the television. It was obvious the show was frightening him. It wasn't the invisible bad man he feared. It was God.

Where are the theological movie ratings when you need them?

Sometimes it puzzles me. Phil and I write books and give speeches proclaiming the universal love of God and get called before boards and committees. People teach children that someday, if they don't repent and give their lives to Jesus, they'll burn forever in hell and they get invited to teach Sunday School and lead summer camp.

The longer I live, the more I'm amazed by what religious people do to their children. Think about what's happening in Texas right now. There is growing evidence that a religious group was marrying off their twelve and thirteen year old daughters to forty year old men. How could they convince children this was right and good? Sadly, they probably used the Bible. They probably told them it was God's will, that all the heroes of the Bible had multiple wives. How were children to challenge such behavior when God said it was good?

The Bible sends mixed messages about children. In the Deuteronomy passage we heard this morning, we're encouraged to teach our children the commands of God, to talk about them when we walk along the road, or lie down, or get up. We're to tie them to our hands and bind them to our foreheads. We are to write the commands of God on the doorframes of our houses.

But which commands? Whenever people today argue for a literal interpretation of the Bible, I always like to ask them about Deuteronomy 13:6-10. It reads:

“If your very own brother, or your son or daughter, or the wife you love, or your closest friend secretly entices you, saying, “Let us go and worship other gods (gods that neither you nor your fathers have known, gods of the peoples around you, whether near or far, from one end of the land to the other), do not yield to him or listen to him. Show him no pity. Do not spare him or shield him. You must certainly put him to death. Your hand must be the first in putting him to death, and then the hands of all the people. Stone him to death.”

Is this one of the commands we are to teach our children, to tell them as we walk along the road, or lie down, or get up? Should we tie this to their hands and bind it to their foreheads? Should this be what they read whenever they walk out our door? Is this really a command we want to teach, or obey? Do we want to teach our children to hate or kill?

I remember watching a talk show years ago where the host had invited several neo-Nazis and their children as his guests. During the first half of the program, the host allowed these people to spew their venom at Jews, blacks, Arabs, and foreigners. They defended many of their views with quotes from the Bible, suggesting God's people had always been called to purify the world. When the host asked them about love, they quoted scriptures about hating evildoers. They said they must hate those whom God hated. It seemed God hated everyone who wasn't exactly like them.

After a commercial break, the audience had their turn. Unfortunately, the venom directed at the neo-Nazis was equally poisonous. Many women stood and tearfully berated them for raising their children to hate. Others suggested they should be imprisoned or killed. Some said they were wicked and evil. One man stood and said, “God hates you!” The neo-Nazi spokesman smiled and replied, “So we agree that God hates. We just disagree about who he hates.”

I've thought about his reply often. Though neo-Nazi views are certainly not examples of good thinking, he did recognize what most of us refuse to acknowledge – his children were not the only ones being taught to hate. The

reason those audience members, and so many others, find it difficult to love is because we've been taught hateful stories from the earliest age.

Perhaps it is time for us to admit the Bible is not children's literature. If the Bible was a novel, people would ban it from schools. They'd argue that immature minds aren't capable of dealing with adult subject matter. It's full of violence, rape, murder, and hate. In many of the stories, children are the victims of such crimes. Having vegetables tell these stories may make them less horrible, but it doesn't change the fact that these stories are difficult for adults to understand and interpret. Maybe people under the age of 17 shouldn't be allowed to read the Bible.

Years ago, when I was in youth ministry, I read an interesting statistic. A study had found that 80% of those who accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior did so before the age of 16. The evangelist writing about this study suggested this as evidence of the importance of ministries to children and youth. He noted, "If we don't get people while they're young, we probably won't get them."

At the time, I agreed with such sentiments, but I've begun to wonder if there is a darker side to the study. It suggests the easiest people to evangelize are those who are mentally, emotionally, and psychologically too young to fully comprehend what they are joining.

In this, Christianity is not alone. Judaism says, "Teach a child the way to go and when he grows old he will not depart from it." All of the great religions emphasize teaching children the faith aggressively. Which begs the question, "If the religion is so great, why must it be taught so early?"

Isn't it odd that, when it comes to religion, we are in such a hurry for our children to grow up? We don't let them drive until they're sixteen, vote until they are eighteen and drink until they are twenty-one, but when it comes to joining a faith, the earlier the better. What are we afraid of? Are we worried that, if we wait until they mature, they won't find our religious beliefs credible or our faith compelling?

This insistence that young children make adult decisions is especially odd when you remember that Jesus thought it should be exactly the opposite. He said, "Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."

This is another of those commands of Jesus we've completely ignored. Instead of having a faith like our children, we've insisted that our children have a faith like ours. We've latched onto Deuteronomy with its command to teach our

children instead of taking Jesus' advice and adopting our children's trusting and innocent approach to life and God.

Think about it. No child is born with a fear of an invisible bad man. No child is born with a fear of God. No child is born with any anxiety about whether they'll spend eternity in heaven or hell. All of those ideas have to be taught. We've been told that the earlier we teach them, the better.

This theological child abuse seemed to bother Jesus as much as about anything. As those children gathered around him, he wanted to protect their innocence. He warned us not to do anything that would cause a child to stumble or sin.

When I was growing up, this verse was always accompanied by stories of someone teaching a child to steal or lie, of people selling drugs or pornography, or of someone handing a child a cigarette or bottle of beer. Though I oppose all of these acts of child abuse, I'm convinced that stealing our children's innocence may be the greatest sin.

Perhaps that is the original sin. Generation after generation has weighed their children down with fears and anxieties about life and God that no child need address. Instead of trying to be more like them, we've insisted that they become like us.

Friends, this needs to stop. We must end this ancient cycle of robbing our children of their innocence and filling them with fear and hate. We must put our Bibles on the highest shelves, where they cannot find and read them. We must nurture their natural awe and respect for the world. We must communicate our faith through how we live and not through ancient stories that even we find troubling. And when they become adults, we must respect them enough to allow them to choose their own way.

This week, as I was writing this sermon, I kept wondering what was motivating my thoughts. Maybe it's because I'm going to be a grandpa. I've been thinking about what I want to teach my grandchildren. It's too late for me to raise my children differently. All I can do is ask for their forgiveness. I did not mean to steal their innocence. I did what was done to me. That's the way it is with abuse. The abused child grows up to abuse their own children.

But I know better now. And with my grandchildren I will have an opportunity to make amends. I can choose to protect their innocence. I can learn from them how to be a child again.