

“Somebody’s Child”

“Pure and genuine religion in the sight of God the Father means caring for orphans and widows in their distress and refusing to let the world corrupt you” (James 1:27).¹

Last Tuesday, one of the other lactation consultants at Jill’s hospital scheduled a breastfeeding class for prospective parents and then went on vacation without noticing that she had not scheduled anyone to teach the class. So, at 6 p.m., the hospital urgently called Jill, who was about halfway through what turned into a fifteen-hour day, and pulled her off the floor to teach this class of eager parents.

Jill had no warning about this class. She didn’t have her laptop, her notes, her handouts, or the PowerPoint she’s been developing and refining for twenty years. Someone has pointed out that real knowledge is what you have left when you’ve lost all your notes, so that’s what she used. The next day, one of the Moms-to-Be in that class wrote the hospital to say that

Jill. Was. Amazing. This was one of the most informative classes (of any kind) that I think I’ve ever taken! She had so many great tips and tricks to share. She was personable, knowledgeable, and professional. Being a first-time Mom, I’m well aware that I’m “blissfully ignorant” when it comes to what is in store for me in the next few weeks, but I am so glad to have met Jill and know that she is an available resource for my future breastfeeding endeavor.

I’m obviously proud of Jill, and this young woman’s note is a good reminder of the obvious fact that what turns a woman into a mother is having children. (That’s important. You should write that down. 😊) Given this, I’d like to think with you for a few minutes on this Mother’s Day morning about children.

I suspect that there was a time when, for virtually every one of us, our soon-to-deliver Mothers were just as excited about our coming arrival as this young woman in Winchester currently is about her child. And I frequently wonder to myself, when I see a person whose appearance I regard as, well, “unusual,” what sorts of life experiences would take a bouncing baby boy or girl and turn them into the person I see before me.

While that may be my first thought, my second thought is to remind myself that, no matter how weird this person may seem to be, he or she is nonetheless **somebody’s child**, created in the image of God, and pursued even in this very moment by God’s fierce and passionate love. And the thought after that is to wonder what might be the best way to move this person closer to Jesus.

One of the verses we read together a moment ago was Zechariah 7:10, where God told us, “Do not oppress the **widow** or the **fatherless**, the **foreigner** or the **poor**.” My first thought for a title for this sermon was “The Vulnerable Quartet,” but the more I thought about it, I was struck by the fact that every widow, every orphan, every immigrant, and every person in poverty, whether man or woman, boy or girl, is **somebody’s child**. Every widow, every orphan, every immigrant, and every person in poverty was once a baby like the one soon to be born in Winchester, but for whom life hasn’t turned out as its mother had hoped.

It’s clear, just from the few verses that we read together—and there are many more—that God has a particular concern for widows, orphans, immigrants, and the poor. And we would seldom be wrong if we routinely acted on the assumption that where there are decisions to be made, God is nearly *always* on the side of widows, orphans, immigrants, and the poor. God is

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on May 14, 2017. Mother’s Day.

not against wealth; but wealth has an insidious way of separating us from God's purposes in our lives and in the world. To use one of Tim Day's words, wealth is "omnisneaky."

Most of you know that our congregation has now paid for eight wells to be dug in Ghana so that villages can have safe drinking water, and the organization through which we do this is World Vision. Richard Stearns, the President of World Vision, has written that "It is not our fault that people are poor, but it is our responsibility to do something about it. God says that we are guilty if we allow people to remain deprived when we have the means to help them. It is our moral duty to help our neighbors in need. . . . Every one of these hurting people is created in God's image and loved by Him. Every one of these challenges has a solution. Every one of us can make a difference."²

Researchers tell us that there are about 340,000 Christian churches in the United States and about 155 million regular churchgoers. And according to Mr. Stearns, the total annual income of American churchgoers is in the neighborhood of \$5.2 *trillion*. Did you get that? That's more than five thousand billion dollars.³ Think of the possibilities! Ponder the potential we have to change the world if all of us took our commitment to love our neighbors to a higher level.⁴

There are two particular groups of neighbors who have captured my attention in the past several weeks. The first group is one of The Vulnerable Quartet—orphans—and the other group is persons with intellectual and developmental challenges.

Jill and I have three sets of friends who run orphanages on three continents. Gennady and Mina Podgaisky have the Village of Hope in Kiev, Ukraine. David and Laurel Cheromei have The Grace of God Children's Project in Eldoret, Kenya. And Mark Wakefield has the Youth Ranch in Huehuetenango, Guatemala.

Many of you have seen Mark's *Facebook* post from last Sunday, but it is so powerful that I want to include it in these thoughts this morning. As you know, Mark runs—all by himself, with God's help—an orphanage for street boys in the mountains of western Guatemala. He is the placement of last resort for the most incorrigible and most broken young men of that region. Here's what he wrote last week:

We sat down as a family. The boys were propped around in chairs, on couches, sitting on the floor, or squatting and leaning on a wall. The question was simple. As is the case whenever we receive a new boy in the home, we talk beforehand about him and what to expect. But this time I didn't give them the information. I asked, "Please tell me the profile of the new boy we will soon receive." At first, there was silence. Some looked around and giggled. Others stared at me as though I were crazy. Silence.

Then, one boy spoke up. "He was sexually abused." I nodded and said, "Thank you." Then the giggles stopped and everyone grew pensive. A few grew grim.

"He doesn't have a family. They threw him out"

I nodded. A cloud of sadness enveloped the room as the boys realized that this was for real. They were being asked to dredge up their past, to speak the unspeakable. Then they whispered and uttered a list of ideas. Their darkest thoughts began to flow.

One almost cried. "He lived on the street from a young age. He's a street kid who wants a home."

² Richard Stearns, *The Hole in Our Gospel* (Nashville: Nelson, 2009), pp. 123, 151.

³ Stearns, p. 216.

⁴ Stearns, p. 237.

“If he was on the street, he was probably abused there.”

“He may have accepted money for sex. Or maybe prostituted for food.”

“He has been in other homes but hasn’t been successful there.”

“He was locked in the federal orphanage, the “Safe Orphanage.”

“If he was *there*, he was probably abused there by other boys, or maybe by [employees].”

“He is afraid to come here because he thinks we will hurt him as well.”

“He has stolen food and probably thinks he will have to steal things here too.”

“He’s behind in school. He may be in first or second grade.”

“He probably has bedbugs and lice.”

“He doesn’t know how to bathe properly. His feet probably stink.”

“He probably has lots of scars on his body.”

“He may not have received many hugs in his life.”

“He’s not going to trust us or listen to instructions until he can trust us.”

“He may not know about God, or have ever read a Bible.”

“We need to be good big brothers, because he’s probably only had men who do mean things to him”

“He may chew with his mouth open, but he’ll be really glad to have three good meals a day.”

Silence once more filled the room. Many stared at the floor. A couple were seriously bothered by the profile, and I could see tears in a few eyes. I thanked each for their input and closed the meeting with a prayer, praying for the new boy who would come, and others who will be a part of our home. When I was done, Romeo piped up. “So, tell us, which ones of our guesses were correct?”

I smiled and responded, “What you have described is our profile. This is why our home exists. Almost every guess was correct, or very well could be for most of our guys. This is why God has us here, and why each boy who is a part of the Youth Ranch Home is important and has a part to play in the lives of new boys who join the home. You must simply assume these things are true and treat this new boy as you would like to be treated. Accept him, love him, and understand where he may have been. And now, welcome him home.”

Every one of Mark’s “Lost Boys,” my friends, is **somebody’s child**. Jesus put it this way: “*The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free*” (Luke 4:18). That’s what Mark does, too.

One of the hazards of helping to provide care for widows, orphans, immigrants, and the poor is that it’s pretty easy for us to follow the route of giving money—which is most certainly needed—while keeping ourselves and our lives at as much distance as we can get from The Vulnerable Quartet. But such distance actually causes us to miss most of the blessing.

Some of you may be familiar with *L’Arche*, a global network of residential homes for the disabled. Jill and I have known two young people who gave two years each to serve in one of the *L’Arche* homes in D.C.

L'Arche was founded in France in 1963 by Jean Vanier. A Canadian who had served as an officer in the British Navy, Vanier was deeply moved by getting to know several mentally challenged men in the care of Father Thomas Philippe, one of Vanier's mentors. "Each man had so much life," Vanier wrote. "He had suffered so profoundly and thirsted so deeply for friendship. And within each gesture and each word was the question, 'Will you come back? Do you love me?' Their cry of pain and their thirst for love touched me deeply."⁵

Jean Vanier started the first *L'Arche* home as a response to the needs of a small number of persons with intellectual disabilities. He was the helper; they were the helped. But rather quickly he began to realize that the helped were helping him to grow as a human being:

"Believe it or not," he wrote, "it has been this life together that has helped me become more human. Those I have lived with have helped me to recognize and accept my own weaknesses and vulnerability. I no longer have to pretend I am strong or clever or better than others. I am like everybody else, with my own fragilities and gifts."

For those of us who are blessed with gifts of intelligence, competence, beauty and strength, we find it natural to approach life as an arena for competition and striving. Because we desire the approval of others, we become focused on achieving the things that will bring us that approval. And this, in turn, can lead us to focus on ourselves and on "getting ahead," but this pursuit comes at high cost.

Personal relationships get pushed to the side as we concentrate on achievements and goals. What's more, when we focus on intelligence, beauty, strength and competence, we begin to look down, subtly or not-so-subtly, on those who seem to lack those qualities. And we begin to value ourselves only for the good qualities we think we possess.

But the fact is that we all have weaknesses. We all have disabilities and challenges. We all experience failures that bother us. And so long as we value ourselves only for our abilities, there will be parts of ourselves and our histories that make us feel inadequate, and we will try to hide those parts from others and even from ourselves. As we pursue this hiddenness, we put up subtle barriers, steering clear of conversations, interactions and relationships that might bring other persons close enough to see our weaknesses. And we become more and more alone.

What Jean Vanier and many others at *L'Arche* communities have found is that developing relationships with the challenged can take us into another realm, into a whole different way of experiencing life. The vulnerability that challenged persons often display means that we are not likely to think of ourselves as being in competition with them. And as we become less afraid of disapproval, we have less need to hide our weaknesses, and our masks can begin to come off.

Perhaps more importantly, relationship with the challenged allows us to recover the truth that the primary value of a human person does not come from accomplishments. We begin to realize—or to remember—that each of us is valuable just because we are human beings, created in the image of God.

Once this becomes internalized on a deep level, we begin to see ourselves in a new way. We don't feel the same compulsion to succeed or to be approved, and we can begin to accept our weaknesses and failures. We become more open and able to connect more deeply with others. One of the principles of *L'Arche* is that "there is a mysterious power hidden in those who seem powerless to attract and awaken the heart."

⁵ The *L'Arche* material comes from chapter 14 of Michael Rota, *Taking Pascal's Wager: Faith, Evidence, and the Abundant Life* (IVP Academic, 2016).

On Mother's Day, we celebrate the compassionate, self-giving, always-believing-in-us love of our mothers, as well we should. At the same time, we may sometimes think of "compassion" such as our Mothers gave us, such as Mark offers his "Lost Boys," such as *L'Arche* offers its residents, as rather a "soft" attitude, a weak position, "for women only." I hope you can see that such an idea badly misses the mark.

"Compassion" is actually **Christlike care** for persons who are experiencing misfortune and challenge, coupled with the **courageous commitment** to do all in our power to encourage and help them. ***And somewhere along the way, as we pursue compassionate lives, we discover that we have received far more than we have given.***

Remember that we American Christians are stewards of ***five thousand billion dollars, every year.*** Try to imagine how stunning it would be to the watching world for American Christians to give so generously that we brought an end to world hunger; solved the clean water crisis; provided universal access to drugs and medical care; provided education for all the world's children; ended the daily starvation of more than twenty-six thousands of those children; and provided care for the world's *tens of millions* of orphans?⁶

Can you imagine the questions that would follow such transformation? *Who are these people so motivated by love? Where did they come from? Why do they sacrifice so to help those the rest of the world has forgotten? Where do they find their strength? Who is this God they serve? Can we serve Him too?*⁷

My friend, a world such as this is what God has had in mind from the very moment of creation, and God has shaped and prepared you for a unique role in achieving it. The light of even one candle *challenges* the darkness, but God's Light, shining through all of us together, could *obliterate* it. We, my friends, are the answer to the prayers of the mothers of the world for their children. **We are the revolution.**

May we be found faithful!

⁶ Stearns, p. 219.

⁷ Stearns, pp. 278-279.