

“Whose Voice Do We Hear?”

Jeremiah 31:15-17 – October 11, 2009

INTRO: In this passage, the prophet Jeremiah was offering a word of hope to the people. “Jerusalem was under siege, disaster had become inevitable, and yet Jeremiah held out a word of assurance and hope from God concerning a new beginning for Israel.” (R.E. Clements) It’s a reminder to us, that when problems in our world may seem very huge and even unsolvable, there may be another word from God on the subject.

On this Children’s Sabbath, a day to lift up the needs of children and youth in our world, it may be good for us to hear some typical statements often made by children or youth in our congregation. “Hey, Mom, what’s for dinner tonight?” “Can I hang out with my friends?” “I’m bored, there’s nothing to do.” “Can I play video games?” “I’m done with my homework, can I watch TV?” “Can I have some money?” “But I don’t want to go to bed yet.” “Why can’t I go to the mall?”

In addition, here are some stories of other children, some of them may be voices we may not have heard before. If 9-year-old Kyle were here, he might tell you how hard it is sometimes for him to breathe. Kyle has chronic asthma, as well as migraines and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder that require ongoing medical attention. His mother, Lorna, is a small business owner who cannot afford private health insurance. Before Kyle enrolled in SCHIP three years ago, he had no pediatrician and often went to the emergency room when his asthma and migraines flared up. Without treatment for his ADHD, he also had difficulty at school. Lorna never would have been able to afford the \$770 in medications that Kyle needs each month to keep his ADHD and other health conditions under control. Now with SCHIP coverage, Kyle has been earning A and B grades, making friends, and even attended summer camp for the first time.

Unfortunately Frankie can’t really share his story with us, since he’s in prison. He was born into the child welfare system. Removed from his mother at birth, Frankie spent his first eight years moving from foster home to foster home, getting angrier and more depressed. His angry outbursts landed him in a foster home placement for kids with behavioral problems. He continued to act out. He hit staff. The police were called. Frankie came before a judge at the age of 10. He was arrested and charges were filed. Over the next 5 years, this pattern repeated itself several times. His lengthy criminal history, created from his behavior in foster care, sentenced him to 4 years in juvenile state ‘prison.’ By the time he is released Frankie will be almost 18. He has literally been moved through the pipeline from the cradle to the prison system.

Deamonte Driver’s voice was silenced over two years ago. He was a seventh grader living just outside of Washington, D.C., who died because he couldn’t find a dentist who would accept Medicaid and his mother couldn’t afford an \$80 tooth extraction. The inexcusable loss of this 12-year-old’s life started when he complained of a toothache. His mother, Alyce, who works at low-paying jobs, had been focused on finding a dentist to see Deamonte’s brother, who had six rotting teeth, when Deamonte began complaining of pain. After an unsuccessful search for a dentist who would accept Medicaid, Alyce took Deamonte to a hospital emergency room where he was given medicine for a headache, sinusitis and dental abscess and then sent home. But his condition soon took a turn for the worse, and he was back at the hospital being rushed to surgery where it was discovered that the bacteria from his abscessed tooth had spread to his brain. Heroic efforts were made to save him, including two operations and eight weeks of additional care and therapy. Unfortunately, it was all too late. The outrage is that Deamonte’s life could have been saved by a routine dental visit and an inexpensive extraction. (Children’s Defense Fund)

These are not easy stories to hear, but until we can attach a name or a face to stories like this, we may continue to not pay attention. The statistics paint a grim picture, for children who are facing poverty, lack of health care, or a life headed in the direction of prison. 13.3 million children in our country, 1 in 6, live in poverty. 7 out of 10 poor children are in families where someone works full or part-time for at least part of the year. In the richest nation on earth, more than 9 million children, one out of every 9, has no insurance. Every 39 seconds in our country, a child is born without health insurance. Most uninsured children live in two parent-families, and almost 90% have one parent who is employed. Uninsured children are almost 5 times more likely to go more than 2 years without seeing a doctor. Every 11 seconds, a high school student drops out. Every 19 seconds, a child is arrested. A Black boy born in 2001 has a 1 in 3 chance of going to prison in his lifetime, a Latino boy a 1 in 6 chance, and a White boy a 1 in 17 chance. (Children's Defense Fund)

Our denomination has established Four Areas of Focus which are meant to guide our ministries. Two of these are: combating the diseases of poverty by improving health globally and; Engaging in ministry with the poor.

Today we think about how children's lives are impacted by poverty and a need for health care. We need to pay attention to their voices and their lives, for they are struggling.

Because the people of Israel were struggling, we hear Rachel's voice, one of the matriarch's of Israel, who is weeping for her children. Rachel, the wife of Jacob, was the mother of Joseph and Benjamin. She can't be consoled because of the destruction of her children—and of her neighbor's children. The Babylonians sacked Jerusalem and marched families into exile. "Rachel is heard weeping over her children, who were either killed or deported." (*Harper Collins Study Bible*)

The ancient rabbis tell a story (midrash) of why it's Rachel's voice we hear. Jeremiah, they say, called up the ancestors in the faith, to bear witness to God about what was going on. God is not moved--by Abraham or Isaac or Jacob or Moses himself, until finally Rachel stands before God, and her words alone turn the tide. Although Rachel is a biological ancestor for only two of the original twelve tribes, she is recognized in Jeremiah as mother of all, and even God has to respond to her insistent plea for mercy. It is the promise of one parent to another: your children will come back. (Dan Clendenin)

And the word from Jeremiah is that there is hope—all is not lost. These dearly loved children of Rachel's will come back from the land of the enemy, and the future will be brighter.

Especially when we may become overwhelmed with the plight of our world's little ones, we need to hear Jeremiah's word of hope, because our world's children are figuratively in exile, in the land of the enemy, even as they live amongst us. "Almost every country in the developed world ensures that all its citizens have access to some kind of care when they need or want it. The US is the exception. Most countries also manage to provide that healthcare for about half the cost of the US and with better overall health outcomes, such as lower infant mortality rates." (*The Christian Science Monitor* 10/11/09)

"While God hears our grief and pain at circumstance of injustice that demand change, God's response is to call on God's people to create the change that is needed. It is not enough to cry out and be heard. Rachel is told that the change will come as a reward for her work."

"So, God calls us to work for change—as parents, as people in privileged circumstances, as mothers, as individuals, as people who don't even recognize our potential to create change." (Children's Defense Fund)

UM Bishop Richard Wilke calls the church to accountability. "*Childhood* as a time when youngsters are specially protected and carefully nurtured is fast becoming extinct. The postmodern church that recognizes this and takes seriously its responsibility to its

children, their spiritual and mental education, their moral and physical well-being, is the congregation that will thrive and grow, even as its youth does.”

So, who are the children for whom we have responsibility? Fred Craddock tells of his prayer time one night, when he questioned God. “God, don’t you have too many children?” That’s what’s being said around our area a lot, “she just has too many children.” And I know God is a single parent—doesn’t God have too many children. And God said “No.”

Fred goes on to tell about Molly Shepherd, an Arapaho Indian who adopted 57 children. She died at the age of 88. Molly adopted all kinds of children, not just pretty little babies, but smart-mouthed adolescents, difficult to deal with kids, that would make you wish you were somewhere else, with somebody else. And Fred asked Molly once, how did she do what she did? How did she handle it? Molly said she had one rule. The older ones helped the younger ones. Those that are able helped those that aren’t able and it worked out fine.

Fred says: “That oughtta catch on—it would be nice if it would catch on. But we’re going to have to stop saying they’re not my kids. We’re all children of God. Let those that are able help those who aren’t.” Fred believes that in fact, is a primary function of the government as well as the church.” (2008 Proctor Institute for Child Advocacy Ministry)

I’m not going to outline the pros and cons of the current health care plans in Congress today, because I think the better way for us to approach this issue is to look at what our faith may say to us. Jim Wallis believes that “Health, not sickness, is the will of God. We can see this from the story in Genesis of the garden, where sickness wasn’t found, and from the vision in Revelation of a city in which death will be no more. When we are instruments of bringing about good health, we are doing the work of God. The gospel stories of Jesus healing people, of restoring them to physical wholeness and full participation in their community, always signaled God’s presence.” (Jim Wallis, 10-7-09)

And secondly, if we are followers of Christ, we are to be people who have concern for our neighbor. I truly believe that part of the underlying attitude around the health care issue is the many people who may say “I like what I’ve got so don’t mess with it.” Those who have insurance, and who are satisfied with that whole system may not want have any conversation, even if their own private insurance would still be available to them. But the “I like what I’ve got” kind of thinking, seems to not recognize all those people who are in the “I’ve got nothing” group.

“The division between those who can afford adequate coverage and those who cannot is a threat to our unity, to the health of our neighbors, and to our nation. 46 million people in our country are uninsured, and millions more who are insured still can’t keep up with their bills. Our moral and religious standards say no one should be left out of a system simply because of not being able to afford good health. The common good requires a system that is accessible to all who need it.” (Jim Wallis, 10-7-09)

If “the scriptural test of a just nation is how it treats its weakest members” then we need to take seriously healthcare reform. (*The Christian Century*, 9/22/09)

We may need to do a lot more to care for our smallest and weakest members. And when we hear the voice of somebody asking for our help, to respond.

A mom was concerned about her eight year old son Timmy walking to school. He didn't want his mother to walk with him. The mother wanted to give her boy the feeling that he had some independence but wanted to know that he was safe. The mother had an idea of how to handle it. She asked a neighbor/friend if she would please follow Timmy to school in the mornings, staying at a distance, so he probably wouldn't notice her. Her neighbor/friend said that since she was up early with her toddler anyway, it would be a good way for them to get some exercise as well, so she agreed. The next school day, the neighbor and her little girl set out following behind Timmy as he walked to school with another neighbor girl he knew. She did this for the whole week. As the two walked and chatted, kicking stones and twigs, Timmy's little friend noticed the same lady was following

them as he seemed to do every day, all week. Finally she said to Timmy, 'Have you noticed that lady following us to school all week? Do you know her?' Timmy nonchalantly replied, 'Yeah, I know who she is.' The little girl said, 'Well, who is she?' That's just Shirley Goodnest,' Timmy replied, 'and her daughter Marcy.' 'Shirley Goodnest? Who the heck is she and why is she following us?' 'Well,' Timmy explained, 'every night my Mom makes me say the 23rd Psalm with my prayers, 'cuz she worries about me so much. And in the Psalm, it says, 'Shirley Goodnest and Marcy shall follow me all the days of my life,' so I guess I'll just have to get used to it!

Our names may not be Shirley or Marcy, but maybe some of God's hope for the world's children, is that neighbors keep watch over them better. That we pay attention to children who live in poverty, who might be headed down a path to prison, who are lacking health care and that we listen more carefully to hear their voices, and then respond.

--Sue Burwell

