

Jesus and the Children

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Scripture: Mark 10:13-16

Psalm 78: 3-4

Deuteronomy 6:6-9

Children Quotes:

-Sarkozy or God should outlaw fights between siblings
(Lara 5jg)

-The evening before her confirmation, one of my daughters announced:
Tomorrow I am becoming a communist!
(Morgane 10jg)

-Mother, is God immortal?
Hm,yes...
Then why is he in heaven?
(Camille 6jg)

-During mass while everyone is taking communion, Hortense asks her mother, who is praying:
Mom, why are you mumbling?
Hortense (4 jg)

-Mother, what does „Ahmed“ mean?
Well sweetie, Ahmed is a first name.
Then why does one say Ahmed, after making the sign of the cross?
(Margaux 6 jg)

-During lessons, a class is trying to find the name of the first woman on earth.
„The woman we are looking for was the woman who bit into the apple“
Julien proudly raises his hand and says:“ I know! I know! It was Snow white!“
(Julien 9 jg)

-Augustin has a consultation at the Necker Hospital. His mother tells him „Augustin, tomorrow we're going to the great doctor of Paris!“
Augustin: “Why, is the one we usually go to small?“

-Lena sees a woman wearing a burqa on TV:
„Oh, that woman has the flu!“
(Lena 3 jg)

Preface

I feel privileged to be able to speak about the medicine of the person here at this conference today. It is also a great responsibility, as I am the first to speak here this morning.

May I introduce myself?

I am a pediatrician and have been living in Geneva for thirteen years.

After completing my studies in Geneva, I did my residency in different Swiss Hospitals, most of my time during my residency I spent in Geneva. My training involved Human Genetics and child psychology, especially the support of children suffering from cancer. I also have a diploma in religion which I received at the free theological faculty of Vaux sur Seine in Paris.

I come from an Indian christian family. As a child I was aware of God's presence; but at the age of fifteen I had an encounter with Christ that changed my life. It also influenced my future decisively as well as my decision to study medicine and pediatrics.

At the beginning of my training I already aimed at work in primary care and not to work in a hospital due to feeling that primary care is more of a holistic approach to medicine. It is the medicine of the person.

Introduction

We only experience childhood once, yet the things we experience, think and feel shape our adult life. Hence the importance of the parents and all the others, who are engaged in shaping our childhood (Teachers, pediatricians, children's psychiatrist, nurses, paramedics, social workers, clergymen, judges of the juvenile court, youth workers, etc.).

Children, as the weakest and smallest members of the human family, often pay the highest price for the mistakes of our degenerated world. Being small, weak, vulnerable and trustful, children are passive victims of our carelessness and our worst abuse. If something does not work out, the smallest pay the highest price. I will only name a few examples: Child slavery and child labor, child soldiers, prostitution, child pornography, children that have been destroyed by parental fights...

While I was preparing this speech, I found a drawing by Plantu, the artist of Le Monde, which illustrates what I told you, well. (Illustration)

Yet Children are often the smallest worry of adults and the institutions of our world. In what circumstances ever - Children always seem to be of less worth. Paradoxically, one cannot say, that the children in our culture are not loved or appreciated, on the contrary. Mothers and fathers love their children and the majority of all adults are touched by children who are unhappy and suffer. Society has never given children so many rights and so much protection as today. However children are often not first priority in adults every day life.

In church and in medicine, this phenomenon exists as well, but it seems to change over the years: In medicine, the people responsible for the children's ward have to constantly fight for an adequate budget with the other medical departments.

Many internists believe, that pediatrics is an internal medicine en miniature. In many European countries, pediatrics has been reduced to hospital care only and is no longer part of primary medicine. This has consequences for the quality of care children receive.

In church there is little material and financial aid saved for the children; only few people are available for Sunday school. At the same time however, children have the same spiritual needs, adults have.

An American study from 2004 shows that 43% of Americans who turned their life over to Jesus did this before turning thirteen, while 21% were between thirteen and eighteen years of age and 13% between eighteen and twenty-one years of age. This means, that about ¼ of Americans, who converted to Christianity made this decision as an adult.

These numbers clearly show, that childhood is the period of time, where one is most open for an encounter with God. Also, these numbers point out that spiritual effort should be aimed at children and young people. In reality our christian communities look different.

I want to tell you a story: D.L. Moody, a famous American evangelist of the 19th century came home very late one evening from an assembly. His wife, Emma was asleep already. As he was getting into bed, his wife asked him "So, how was it?". „Very good,“ he answered, „Two and a half people turned their life over to Jesus today.“ Emma thought about his response for a while, before smiling and saying „How cute and how old was the child?“

„No, no,“ her husband replied „it was two children and one adult. These two children still have their entire life ahead of them, while the grown-up has spent half of his already.“

I believe, that a child, that has experienced faith, is not only a human being, that has been reconciled with god, but is also a being that is being altered on a psychological level.

I am convinced, that faith plays a very important part if a child is under pressure. It gives the child strength and composure in difficult and traumatizing situations.

Yes, children have the same spiritual needs as adults and even have a further developed understanding of the nature of God. I want to share two examples of spiritual experiences made by children, who were close to death.

The first example is the testimony of a child who suffered from Leukemia. It was Diana Komp, a professor of pediatric oncology at Yale university, who reports on this testimony. She turned her life over to Jesus, when she spent time with children who had cancer. The story of her life is stunning. I will quote the words of a dying child, which Diana Komp talks about in one of her books.

„Before Anna died, she took up the last of her energy to sit up in bed and to say: The angels are so beautiful! Can you see them Mama? Can you hear their singing? I have never heard such beautiful singing before! She laid her head down on her pillow and died“.

The second example I want to tell you about I experienced myself: My first god-child died at the age of eleven due to a cerebral tumor. A few days before his death we went to a park. While we were sitting on a bench, he told me how he had really been called upon by God to read the 21st chapter of Revelations, where the new heavens, new earth and the new Jerusalem are described and which includes a glorious phrase: „...He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.“ (Revelations 21,4) He also said, that after reading this chapter, he had a vision: „I saw the new Jerusalem, it really was beautiful,“ he said to me. Then he turned to his father and me and comforted us by saying that he was really looking forward to meeting Christ there, because he knew Jesus was waiting there for him.

A few days later he died in a children's hospital in Geneva.

Reflection of Mark 10: 13-16

„People were bringing little children to Jesus to have him touch them, but the disciples rebuked them. When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it. And he took the children in his arms, put his hands on them and blessed them.“

Everyone knows this story, where Jesus welcomes the children into his arms; but not everyone knows the story behind the story. What Jesus did and said that day was extraordinary. He did not act hypocritical as a political candidate would do. There was no superficial motive that explained his actions. Jesus stretched his arms out to the children quite simply because they were worth it, and that - without a doubt- shocked many people at that time.

It is interesting to see, that the three synoptic gospels describe the occurrence as if to strongly point out this remarkable encounter.

Let us take a look at the text and let us try to imagine this scene: After all Jesus, his disciples and the religious leaders were engaged in a discussion about the hot topic of divorce. I imagine the attentive disciples, when suddenly ordinary people appear from the crowd and bring their children to Jesus. Among these children surely were naughty, excited, loud,..., ones.

Luke, the doctor used the word „Brephos“, which means infant, while Matthew and Mark used the word „Paidion“, which means „little children“. We can assume, that their ages were between 0 and 6 years; exactly the age, where children are especially loud.

You will have noticed, that it was „people“, who brought their children to Jesus and not the disciples. Many passages in the books of the four gospels show us, that the people believed Jesus and knew him better in some ways, than the disciples themselves.

This is very astonishing and surprising. People who have an image, a name or an education do not always know the heart of God best.

What, by the way, did the disciples do? They scolded the people. And how did Jesus respond? He was indignant. This means, that he did not quietly, kindly whisper that the children should come to him. No, he was outraged by the attitude of his disciples, who had not understood the intention of his presence on earth: Which was to help and bless children, ill people, those who had been excluded by society, the poor, widows, etc.

Then Jesus turns to the children and what does he do? He takes them into his arms and blesses them. Nobody could have stopped them now. Jesus has assembled them and embraced them tenderly for a few seconds, I would say eternally when looked at spiritually.

In the end Jesus shows us grown-ups, who our spiritual example should be: The Children!

A back ward world! Yes, the conditions to receive the kingdom of God are trust, a simple faith, modesty and the need to love and to be loved.

That is why I would like to ask you this morning: Are we medical specialists serving children, the way the disciples did, who prevented the children from coming to Jesus or are we like the people, who brought their faithful children into the arms of the Lord?

At the end of this reflection, I would like to tell you the thoughts of a pediatrician, who encountered the medicine of the person.

Medicine of the Person in pediatric primary care

“I clearly see, that in the biological unity of a person, a mutual dependence between all his aspects exists: anatomical, physiological, mental and spiritual.” (P. Tournier)

It would quite arrogant of me, to start this new chapter without a quote from Paul Tournier from his book “Medicine of the Person”. For the challenge for us christian doctors lies in this unity of body, spirit and soul and this challenge is even bigger for us pediatricians. We have the great task of helping to discover “the art, of becoming parents” and to accompany the child on this wonderful way of life; beginning with infancy to adolescence, the period of truth and challenges.

I'm going to dare to claim, with just a hint of provocation, that pediatrics, by definition, is the department of medicine, that comes closest to the medicine of the person and especially pediatrics in primary care.

Pediatrics cannot slice the individual, which is done too often by conventional general medicine.

It cannot pull a child away from its social and familiar environment. Pediatrics must take the whole patient, and not merely fragments. Of course consulting is difficult for us pediatricians, as these meetings take place with three or four people, since the parents presence is requested or essential.

To continue in a provocative tone, I would like to quote the well known American pediatrician Terry Brazelton: “Today a young pediatrician will have to make a decision, after completing his schooling in a hospital: Either he locks himself away in an ivory tower and starts the career of a scientist or a professor, where he would only receive patients when assigned, or he opens a practice and accepts the very challenging part of a family doctor.”

The other challenge of a christian pediatrician is the difficulty of recognizing the spiritual needs of the child. To be able to encounter the child on this area, we must often go to his parents, which doesn't always make the tasks easier. Pediatrics is a medicine of the person, due to the fact, that it has to be a medicine of listening and love.

Now I would like to quote Paul Tournier, who said: “I have understood, that it is more important to listen to the patient with interest, than to think of an answer myself” and “When we do not come up with more love for our patients, more faith and patience than other therapists, then we are not any more christian than they are.”

Listening has to be done systematically and is extremely challenging. How often have I only received a confession from a mother, when I was finishing a check-up, already under stress because I was already running late. I'm sure some of you have experienced this before.

One of the most striking examples for me was when I was doing a six-month check-up on an infant. As you know, us pediatricians are lucky enough to see our patients regularly for a check-up, especially for the first year. I had already seen this infant and its mother three to four times, when she told me at the end of the consultation, that she was at the end of her rope and depressive. This had not only started recently, but she had felt this way since after giving birth to her child.

Yes the medicine of the person in primary care pediatrics requires a lot of time and flexibility in organizations.

We must use every opportunity to listen to the worry of a mother or a father or a adolescent.

Just as Paul Tournier did, I quickly came to the realization, that “the first condition was to give each of my patients more time and to therefore take up less patients.” And really, if I wanted to practice

integral medicine, I had to take more time. In Geneva, we are fortunate enough to have enough doctors to send away patients to have enough time for those we already treat.

This is an exception here however, since in most Swiss cantons my colleagues do not have this privilege. A friend of mine is a pediatrician in Neuchatel and is frustrated due to not being able to dedicate more time to her patients, as she has to see up to sixty patients in just half a day!!

Pediatrics of the person includes the treatment of benign and difficult, acute and chronic diseases. We act according to our best knowledge and conscience with all possibilities modern medicine offers.

But one should also see to the psychological needs of the child and its parents, starting with sleeping disorder of the baby, conduct disorders of older children, fears of school or the supervision of those, who suffer from chronic diseases like Leukemia, Mucoviscidosis and others.

To me, being a pediatrician of the person, in contrast to unchristian doctors, means showing the Gospel in a practical way and how to integrate it into one's daily lives to children, whose parents are religious and who trust us.

This reminds me of a religious boy, who thinks about possibly being homosexual; or of a family, where the parents are separating but are still looking for spiritual help to protect their three children. Then I have to think of the christian family, whose eldest son suffered from streptococcal sepsis and is fortunately well today. At the evening of this incidence, when he stood between life and death, the only thing I did for the family, was to go to their home, comfort them and pray the Lord's Prayer.

Also, I have to think of a young man who came to me for a check-up when he was fifteen. He had been raised by his religious, single-mother; his father had left the family when he was still very young. He was a splendid young man of fifteen years, toughened by many boxing hours and I asked him questions about his life. When I questioned him about his father, he burst into tears. Overcome by a feeling of sorrow, revolt and compassion, I could only take out the bible and read him Psalm 27, which had kept me occupied the last few days:

“You have helped me. God my Savior, don't say no to me. Don't desert me. My father and mother may desert me, but the Lord will accept me.”

I ended this conversation with a prayer for him and his mother – with a lump in my throat and tears in my eyes, while asking myself if it was right to pray for them as a ...pediatrician!

Everyday life of a christian pediatrician is inspiring, but sometimes exhausting. Yet, I am thankful to God for the wonderful privilege of being a part of something that creates well-being for hundreds of children, that have been entrusted to me by their parents.

Finally, I would like to quote the two authors, that I have already mentioned:

Dr. Brazelton and Dr. Tournier:

“Pediatrics really is an inspiring profession for doctors who believe in valuing human relationships and who seek to establish a connection between themselves and the child they are treating. Becoming part of the team, that will support the child in tackling the challenges of life, is a goal that knows no price.”

and

“Medicine will experience the renewal, that it needs today, if it becomes aware of the meaning of the spiritual situation of the human being, anew and if it understands that once cannot treat a person, without keeping God in mind.”

May God see us through our calling. For his glory, Amen.