

The Message for Sunday, October 24, 2010 Children's Sabbath

Title: "A Happening or a Hindrance?"

Scripture: Luke 18:15-17

I. Sin to celebrity... I want to tell you a story about a man who was born in the Bronx in 1959. He attended Princeton and then Harvard Law School. After a few years in a prestigious law firm on 6th Avenue in New York City, he moved over to the Manhattan District Attorney's Office. There, he became part of the team that pursued organized crime. Eventually, he was able to launch an investigation that brought down the control the Gambino family had over the garment and trucking industries. Following another stint in another law firm, he was elected the New York State Attorney General. Eventually, Eliot was elected Governor of New York.

The rest is history—a history that quickly became a tarnished story of just one more politician in trouble. Eliot Spitzer simply became another in a long list of politicians who made wrong moral choices and ended up in disgrace. But, the story does not end there.

The story took a completely different turn this summer. Look him up on the internet. Wikipedia says that he eventually became a "political entertainer" in June 2010 when CNN offered him his own show. The show premiered just a couple of weeks ago (October 4, 2010) and is a round-table discussion with a political conservative named Kathleen Parker. The title of the show is "Parker Spitzer."

Now, to be honest, the show has not done well. But, the point I want to make is this. Writing in the *Rolling Stone* magazine in 1998, P. J. O'Rourke said that "We all learned an important lesson from the Monica Lewinsky story. [I.e.,] If you do something bad in America, you get to be on TV a lot..." (P.J. O'Rourke, "The True Adventures of a Participant in the Right-wing Conspiracy," *Rolling Stone*, March 19, 1998, quoted in a sermon entitled, "The Difficult Child," 10/18/1998, www.homileticsonline.com)

Lately, we have seen a lot of bad press turn into a personal gold mine for some high-profile hi-jinks. The public lesson should have stopped with this caption: "getting caught leads to public disgrace, followed by some kind of punishment." Instead, the lesson we are actually being taught is that notoriety can lead to personal gain and celebrity status.

Writing more recently in the *Washington Post*, Laura Kipnis has said of Spitzer—and others—that we have "...put them on TV, 'forcing them to perform their contritions as mass entertainment.'" (quoted in "Scandal isn't what it used to be," *The Week*, October 15, 2010, Vol. 10, Issue 485, p. 18)

II. No escaping the news... Perhaps some might wonder, "Why in the world would he pick such an illustration for Children's Sabbath?" I hope the answer should be obvious after a moment's reflection.

Never in the history of the human race have we been so connected to news events—and that includes our children also being connected. I remember when I was a child we had two sources for the news. One was the radio and the other was the newspaper.

Only after I was in the 1st grade did we get a television. The news came to us in neat little packages that were as dull as the prayers of the retired minister who assisted in my home church.

As children, we did everything possible to escape having to listen to the news. The news in the paper was always easy to avoid: Just turn to the comics. News on the radio and television came at predictable times. Supper time was a perfect way of escaping having to listen to a news program.

As most of you who were alive in November of 1963, I remember where I was when I heard that the President had been shot while in a motorcade in Dallas, Texas. For about an hour, the school intercom played the radio accounts; and we all sat there mesmerized. But when we finally got home from school, all of us kids wanted to turn on the television and get our regular, afternoon broadcasting.

The Mickey Mouse Club had long been off the air, but there were other programs all of us kids liked to watch. Instead, we were bombarded for the next few days, including the weekend, with nothing but news on all the network channels.

The children and youth of my generation were basically not into news. Today, it is different. I can not say that children and youth would pick news over the latest and greatest programming marketed for their segment. But, I can say that avoiding the news is nearly impossible. It may be national news; or it may only be social networking news of a personal nature; but our children and youth are bombarded by news. In fact, bullying on the social networking media is the cover article in a recent issue of *The Week*. (“No Escape: Adolescent cruelty in the age of social media,” *The Week*, October 15, 2010, Vol. 10, Issue 485, p. 18)

Did you read the story on the internet just a few days ago where the parents of a young girl who was killed in an auto crash were horrified to see a video of a part of that crash on the internet just hours after it had happened? Perhaps worse than that, because of texting and social networking abilities, our children and youth are able to know, instantly, what is doing on all round them—including their own lives. There is a fight after school. Someone whips out a cell phone, and it is recorded and broadcast, immediately. Someone breaks up with another, and the other learns of it almost immediately because of a Facebook status update. Our children are victims of the international obsession to be in the know, regardless of the subject or content of the news.

They may not want to talk to their parents or their grandparents about it. But, you can be assured that most of our young people will have heard the name, Eliot Spitzer; and they will have some sense of his misdeeds. And, the real tragedy is that they will also know that he, and many other like him, have not only messed up. They have also gained celebrity status because of it.

III. A mandate... What is it like to rear a child in an atmosphere like that? I can not relate. But, I can imagine; and what I imagine scares me. We have a 39-year-old daughter who would like to have children. One day, her children will have to deal with situations that involve public morality. But, even without grandchildren, I already have a stake in the game because I am living under a mandate issued by Jesus.

Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs” (Luke 18:16).

If you think about it, the child was a part of the Gospel message from the very beginning. The gospel story begins with the birth of a child. It always amazes me to realize that God could have placed a Messiah among us any way God might have chosen. But, God chose to use the institution of motherhood and give us the baby, Jesus. And, although we do not know a lot about Jesus when he was young, we do have a few stories.

We know, for example, that when he was a boy, his parents took him to the Temple in Jerusalem. I never wonder how he could have gotten lost. I have told this story on any number of occasions, but it remains one of those pivotal moments burned into my memory. Our back yard was connected to the back yard of my paternal grandparents. Although my grandmother and grandfather were not like Ray’s parents on the sitcom, “Everybody Loves Raymond,” there were moments of tension.

I never saw the tension being any greater than the late afternoon when my sister and I were playing out in the back yard we shared with Mama Lucy and Granddaddy. They came out into the back yard and asked us to go to the drive-in with them.

Nothing could sound any better to a couple of kids who loved their grandparents and rejoiced at the prospect of breaking the monotony of backyard play. In stark contrast to today’s hassle of making the rounds every afternoon after school, in the early 1950’s there was basically NOTHING going on. We jumped at the chance to pile into Granddaddy’s 1937 Chevrolet coupe that we lovingly called “The Bluebird.” We salivated at the thought of a grilled cheese sandwich and a milk shake. My sister and I were all in.

When we returned from our little serendipity, we found our parents in the back yard looking as worried and harried as anyone could imagine. There were no cell phones. There was no way of tracking down my grandparents. All my parents knew was that my sister and I had vanished—sometime earlier in the afternoon. I understand how Jesus could have gotten separated from his parents who undoubtedly thought he was in the company of family. Instead, he had been “left alone.” As it turned out, the boy, Jesus, was found in the Temple, talking with the learned scholars. His parents, like any loving parents would have been, were worried and then relieved.

And then, there was this time when people were not only trying to see Jesus, but were trying to do the best they could for their children. They were bringing them to see this miracle worker. Even though my parents could not afford many things for themselves, they did what they could to see that I and my sister had all we needed, and some of the things we simply wanted. The disciples thought that these parents were wasting Jesus’ time.

When Jesus discovered what was going on, he said, “Don’t hinder these people. Bring the children to me.”

He could have stopped there. Instead, he said, “To such belongs the Kingdom of God.”

What that means ought to be clear. The Kingdom of God belongs to people who think and act with childlike trust and enthusiasm—to children who have a natural tendency to hope and to look for the joy and goodness in life, and whose lives are not cluttered with the things only adults seem to elevate to the status of moral good when everyone knows that they will only lead to destruction.

V. The impact of an adult... Let me ask you a question. What do you think it says to our children when evil is projected as the pathway to celebrity, or is at least the source for entertainment? Is that a happening or a hindrance? What do you think is the lesson they carry away when they see professional athletes get caught “sexting?” How do you think they process the choices they see adults make.

It would be easy for me to limit the discussion to misadventurous adults who get rewarded with huge salaries, television shows and reinstatement to former professions. But, I want to include the adults in the lives of these little ones. Of course, I am talking about the parents and grandparents. But, I am also talking about the adults who have an impact on children’s lives outside of the home.

When I was a child, I was always thrilled to see one of my teachers in worship. My second grade teacher is still alive and probably sitting on the pew just a couple of rows in front of the pew where I sat for the 1st eighteen years of my life. Don’t you know Miss Cook had an unknown impact on my life? What about my Boy Scout leader? Or, my barber? My barber was not a member of my home church. He was a Pentecostal preacher in a small church on the weekends. It used to impress me that the guy who cut my hair was a preacher. I remember the day I wanted to know which came first: Jesus or the Indians. My father suggested that I ask Bro. Bond. He did not have any better answer than did my father. But there he was, an adult who was able to have a positive impact on my life.

VI. The bottom line... The bottom line is this. I do not believe we will soon see the end of public scandals being turned into fairy tale endings. I do not understand the public attraction to so-called celebrities whose constant run-ins with the law over drugs, rehab, or wrecks seem to produce constant fodder for internet headlines. But, I believe they will be with us for a while.

What that leaves for us is the responsibility of damage control. As Christian adults we have the responsibility of keeping the children in our community from being collateral damage. It is up to us, specifically, to do these few things—but to do them well.

Number 1: Who is in control in your home? It may be time for you, particularly as parents or guardians, to take control of some of the exposure to which young people are subjected. That may mean regulating when and how they use a cell phone; what they watch and do not watch; and with whom they associate. That may also mean you are going to have to take the heat for it. Tough up. No one said parenting—or being a responsible adult—was a cake walk.

Number 2: When you feel as though a scandal has made some kind of impact on the children in your care, you are going to have to step in and help them interpret it. You may have to de-celebrity some of the public villains who get glamorized. (I made that

term up.) Your witness to your children counts for more than you imagine—especially if you are consistent, tactful, and can approach the situation with level-headedness, and with Christian grace.

And, number 3: What you have to say must be backed up with the way you live your life. Perhaps we all need to be reminded that the early word for the church is “ecclesia.” It literally means “to be called out.” The church is made up of those whom Christ has called out from the world to live the life he mandates in his teachings. One of those was to bring children to him, and not hinder them.

What you decide to do when you leave this sanctuary this morning—whether you like it or not, or whether you realize it or not—is going to have a direct bearing on the life of a child. It is one thing if you decide to mess up your life. It is another, entirely, to mess up the life of a small, innocent child.

My prayer is that you will chose Jesus’ way. Amen.

The Rev. Michael D. O’Bannon, Pastor