

LCMS

Worship Library

Title: Reflections on Children's Sermons/Messages

Category: Youth in Worship

In many of our congregations a custom has developed of devoting a portion of the service specifically to the children. The former Commission on Worship offered the following reflections, cautions, and suggestions.

1. The inclusion of a children's sermon/message should not give the impression that this is the only part of the service that speaks to children. It is important to recognize that the entire service is for all of God's people. Naturally, there are some aspects of a service that are not immediately understandable to the children. (The same is true of visitors.) The worship of the Church is by its very nature something that we grow into as it shapes and forms us over a lifetime. It is for this reason that the Commission encourages that children be present for the entire service.
2. A children's sermon/message falls under the category of an adiaphoron. However, when the message aims at being trite and cute or when it is used primarily as a means of entertaining the children (or even the adults), then it is no longer an adiaphoron.

"Neither are useless and foolish spectacles, which serve neither good order, Christian discipline, nor evangelical decorum in the church, true adiaphora or things indifferent." (FC SD 10,7)

3. A typical feature of many children's sermons/messages is the object lesson. The Commission wishes to offer a caution concerning this approach because of its failure to recognize the audience. Considerable research related to child development has demonstrated that children younger than ten or eleven do not readily think in the abstract. This, however, is the primary requirement of an object lesson, which demands abstract thought to make the point of comparison. The result is that children can leave the service remembering the object but failing to grasp the point that was intended.
 - a. Illustrations that are found in the Scriptures (e.g., Jesus as the Good Shepherd of the Light of the world) are certainly of value in teaching the children. Though the younger ones may not fully grasp the point, upon repeated hearing of these biblical texts, they will, over a number of years, grow into a deeper understanding.
 - b. The interest that adults show in the object lesson during a children's sermon/message suggests that perhaps many of them are missing this type of illustration in the regular preaching. As pastors prepare sermons, it is important that they work hard at incorporating appropriate illustrations to elucidate their message.
4. The medium that is best suited to children is that of telling the story. Given the fact that Scripture is filled with the stories of our salvation, it should be obvious that this is the way to speak to children about the faith. We should never assume that children already know the biblical stories or that they

are bored with them. Rather, the Church should strive to tell these stories again and again, remembering that these things were written for our instruction (1 Cor. 10:11; Rom. 15:4).

Pastors who are going to "tell the story" to children should realize that this will require careful preparation. If no thought is given until just before the service, the story will either fall flat or else the pastor will have to resort to theatrics to keep the children's interest.

5. When a children's sermon/message is to be included in a service, the Commission recommends that it be viewed not as an add-on or interruption, but rather that it be designed to flow from the liturgy.
 - a. The Old and New Testament stories that are included in the lectionary are an obvious place to begin in choosing the subject matter for a children's sermon/message. On those occasions where the lectionary does not provide an appropriate story to retell to the children, another biblical story related to the theme of the day may be appropriate.
 - b. In addition to biblical stories, the children's sermon/message can serve as an explanation to some aspect of the liturgy. In this case, it is an opportunity to tell another "story," namely, what we do in our worship and why we do it. Another approach would be to focus on a portion of the catechism (perhaps again on a topic related to the theme of the day).
6. Regarding the logistical question of the placement of the children, it is most in keeping with the "flow" of the liturgy for the children to be facing the same direction as the congregation with the pastor facing the entire assembly. This arrangement will reinforce the understanding that the message is not focusing on the children but on God and that it is a time of proclamation.
7. While there are various practices as to who delivers the children's sermon/message, the fact that the message is the proclamation of the Word of God implies that it is the pastor who should deliver the message. Exceptions to this practice would fall under the same guidelines as situations where a pastor is not available.

"It is taught among us that nobody should publicly teach or preach or administer the sacraments in the church without a regular call." (AC 14)

The following are several practical suggestions based on the preceding guidelines:

1. When the children's sermon/message is a story based on the Gospel or Old Testament reading, consider inviting the children forward to hear the reading, perhaps with the pastor standing at the center of the chancel. This would help to reinforce the understanding that the children should pay close attention whenever the Word of God is read.
2. If the message is based on the Gospel, the children should stand for the reading (like the rest of the congregation) and then sit down to hear the pastor tell the story. Following the message, the children should stand with the congregation to confess the Creed before returning to their seats. (The children should be taught the Creed at home and in Sunday School and/or the Lutheran Day School so that they can participate in this part of the service.)

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