

“No Small Matter”

Children’s Sabbath

Job 38:1-7, Hebrews 5:1-10, Mark 10:35-45

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From the Pulpit

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Children's Sabbath, October 21, 2018, Proper 24, dedicated to Dr. Marian Wright Edelman, Founder and President of The Children's Defense Fund, Ms. Tracy Najeras, Executive Director of CDF- Ohio, my grandsons, Benton Myles and Rylan Antonio Ahrens, to all children in their early years of life and development and to all the men and women (including parents!) who work with them in this critical time of development and always to the glory of God!

*“No Small Matter” **

Job 38:1-7, Hebrews 5:1-10, Mark 10:35-45

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Beginnings really matter. No matter what we do or what we say, what we do at the beginning of anything really matters. For example, an architect does not ignore the blueprints on a new house just because she feels like making it up as she goes

along. Or a basketball team doesn't begin a basketball game by playing no defense at all. Beginnings really matter.

The beginnings of our children's and grandchildren's lives REALLY, really matter. I say this as a parent and grandparent and pastor, but I mean this far beyond the personal connection. The beginnings for all the children and grandchildren of our nation and our world really matter.

In ages past, children's beginnings were found in villages or in urban settings with family circles of support close at hand. But, today, all the networks of family systems and familial circles of support aren't there the way they used to be. Often with two parents working, extended family spread out and social systems not in place to really support our young children and families, we show a diminished capacity to support our children when they are small. This really matters.

In fact, our inability to support our infants and toddlers as their brains and personalities develop translates as our inability to support the most important people in our society – the ones that need us most of all – human beings who are birth to 36 months or three years old.

In a new film soon to be released publicly and now showing in special settings across the nation, **“No Small Matter”** tells the story of our protecting and defending our nation's interest –

from birth to full childhood. The enemy that most of us don't even know we need to fight is under-developed early childhood development. Early childhood is – in fact – a grown-up issue. It is no small matter.

In “**No Small Matter,**” preschoolers are asked about the brain in their head. One three-year-old boy says, “If I didn't have a brain my head would go “squish.” Another little preschool girl, when asked, “When did you start learning?” answers, “The day I was born.” She continued, “That's the day I started to play.” Dr. Andrew Meltzoff, co-director of The Institute for Learning and Brain Sciences tells the story of studying a 42-minute old baby. He says, *“I stuck out my tongue and she stuck out her tongue. I opened and closed my mouth and She opened and closed her mouth. She didn't learn to respond like this in embryo. She came out eyes wide open and learning. Babies are brain machines.”*

In the first three years of a child's life, there are 100 billion neurons being connected by synapses at a rate of 700,000 per second. Each is reacting and interacting with each other. It's like the Big Bang of Baby Brains. Babies brains are taking in statistics, calculating measurements, words through your reading to them, integrating sound and facial expressions and so much more. They are preparing to talk with you or

communicate with you without words – just with their bodies. **It is actually like rocket science.**

Through one **experience** after another their brains are connecting. They either connect or they don't connect. The Experiences are the key to the brain's wiring. And the biggest impact on how the brain gets wired is US! Every day, the babies back and forth interactions with healthy and interactive adults are shaping the development of their brains. So, the brain food for baby's development is the everyday interactions and experiences that are shaping the baby's learning. It forms the foundations for all things. They must have healthy interactions and experiences every day in every imaginable way. If we don't get this right, then from then on, we as individuals and as a society are fixing things that are broken.

So, if babies and toddlers need healthy interaction with their parents and healthy adults AND parents are being pulled away from their babies any number of things – work, heads buried in iPhones or computers or some technology, how will they develop? Coupled with our current system in which childcare availability is slim to none and we have no established system of care for infants and toddlers, then it seems like this big matter of raising and developing small children becomes a lot like life in the wild west.

Do you know that in 28 states (more than half of America), it is more expensive to put a child in childcare than to pay for a year in a public college? That's crazy. Something is broken in our system of raising our littlest and most vulnerable members of society and our families.

For one thing, there is an opportunity gap. If you can afford to stay home with your child (and some of our families, like mine scrimped by with very little money for a long time by choosing that) or if you can afford childcare options that are available, your child will receive the interactions and experiences that aid greatly in developing their intelligence, creativity and simply their BRAIN. But, if you can't (and a growing number of people can't) you have set in motion a present condition of under-development for the child. Everyone doesn't get the same opportunity. Every child does not get a fair start – a HEAD Start if you will. There is an opportunity gap. And it is widening.

With the deck stacked, the statistics of difference are staggering. By age 3 – higher income children/families or those who have had opportunities for interaction and learning have heard 30 million more words than their poorer peers. By age 5, these children have spent 1300 more hours in libraries and museums as their parents have spent thousands of dollars on preschool and enrichment. The day they walk into

kindergarten, they are two years ahead in language development. Gap of opportunity then translates into academic and achievement gap. The population at the low end of the gap is ten times more likely to drop out of school. And the drop-outs are eight times more likely to go to prison. 40% of the men and women who end up in prison come in without a high school diploma. So, early childhood development and then keeping kids in school is actually a grassroots form of crime prevention.

In “**No Small Matter,**” we meet Shay Gattis. Shay is the executive director of the Flatbush YMCA in Brooklyn. He grew up poor in North Carolina, raised by a single mom. But, Shay was part of a long-term study which started when he was 3 months old and has lasted for 4 ½ decades. He remembers working with puzzles at 3 months old. Adults would bring him puzzles to figure out and he would work with them. Shay still loves puzzles. 100% of the 40 children coming out of poverty in this long-term study are successful today as opposed to those in a similar study group over the generations who did not attend the program. In the second group of 40, only 30% have made it with a college education and successful jobs, eight of those or 20% have served prison time or are currently in prison. The correlations couldn't be clearer – or starker.

In addition to the deficits, our littlest ones often face executive function delays and toxic stress when raised in environments which are under-interactive or negatively interactive. When a little one comes from a toxic environment, their stress response system can't handle something as simple as "walking into a classroom." When their brains are not trained to respond creatively or healthfully to elevated stress (and in fact some are under such stress seemingly all the time), this undermines their biological and behavioral health. One psychologist told of a child in one of her classrooms who had been suspended 26 times from school in one year – and he was a kindergartner. She said, "He had absolutely no coping mechanisms and he was a risk to himself and everyone else based on his brain trauma and toxic stress of his life for his first five years.

Years ago, when I was 19 years old, I had 75 five- and six-year old children I was in charge of while working in the housing projects on the northside of St. Louis. I had a five-year-old girl in my group who cursed, and kicked, hit and screamed at everyone most of the time. I had no idea what to do with her. I went to the head of the program and begged for help. My director smiled and said, "*Her father is a pimp and her mother a prostitute. She had learned really well in a terribly toxic environment to interact with others. But, she is really smart and*

gifted. Work with her brilliance.” I wasn’t trained for rewiring synapses, but I worked with her brilliance and we began to make break-throughs.

While many of us face toxic stresses and stressful interactions in our families or in our workplaces which affect our metabolism, our immune systems, our cardiovascular systems, and the development of cancer cells in our body systems, most of us have learned to play well with others and can play in the sandboxes of our lives. We have been able to develop, from the earliest stages of life, coping mechanisms and strategies. But, what if you don’t have those skills? What if your brain and your body never learned how to play with others as a newborn, an infant or a toddler? What if your body has no strategies to combat these problems? It will affect your body and brain for the rest of your life. That is what we are up against.

Near the end of the film, three military leaders come on the screen. They present the problem of under-developed infants and toddlers as a national security issue. Currently, 71% of all 17-24-year-olds are ineligible to be in the military because of their gaps in learning, ability to serve and other health reasons. This statistic is staggering. As one general says, *“If they can’t qualify for the Army, how will they be able to get a job at GM or IBM or Apple?”* He goes on to say, *“We rank 35th in the world for our education and development of children ages 0-5 years old.*

We lack high quality child development. We are failing our babies, infants and toddlers. We can do better. We are the United States of America.”

35th in the world? Is this really how we want to run our country and face our future? Do we want to be known as an underdeveloped nation for developing our children?

We know how to do this. The science is all there. The evidence of success is clear. We need classrooms and homes where there is a lot of interaction between children and healthy adults. We need homes and classrooms where kids are on the ground and moving around, not propped in desks. We need parents and teachers who are playing with children and building scaffolds of brain development, not just talking at them. We need teacher-to-child ratios which are small led by teachers with BAs. We need brain builders, not baby-sitters. And we need to pay for this. We currently have a system where our child care and child development professionals are paid less than the people who walk our dogs and wash our cars. This is stupid. We can do better.

We can either be a healthy society and pay up front to get our best and brightest connecting with babies, infants and toddlers at their times of greatest need, or we pay later through the

criminal justice and health care systems where the stresses of under-development eventually show up in unhealthy ways.

When Jesus says three times in the Gospels, *“Let the children come unto me for to such as these belongs the kingdom of heaven,”* I don’t think he is saying this so he could pat the kids on the head or make them feel good for a little while with kind words. I believe he was saying something like this: *“I want to influence and interact with the most special and precise gifts God has created... the little ones. I want to love and care for and experience up close the shining light of God in the eyes and ears; the hands and feet, the voices and presence of the children.”* I believe he understood better than any of us that beginnings really matter.

I know this sermon has been different today – more like a child development talk than a reflection on Holy Scripture. But, I wanted to share, on this Children’s Sabbath that our this is no small matter. Perhaps this sermon is a way of paying forward, as you and I find ways to look in the eyes of the children who are seeking to develop and grow into healthy and happy adults and relate to them in purposeful and loving ways. They are right in front of us. Let’s all find ways to do this – remembering that beginnings really matter. After all, this is No Small Matter. Amen.

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- I have drawn much of this sermon from “No Small Matter.” It was produced by a collection of child care advocacy groups. For more information go to nosmallmatter.com.

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