

# “The Children’s Empire” by Pat Conover

September 6, 2009



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It was easy to choose the part of the lectionary that spoke to my concern about improving our experience with our Sunday School. I read to you Proverbs 22:15 from the Revised English Bible

*Folly is deep-rooted in the hearts of children; a good beating will drive it out of them.*

This scripture spoke to me and I have determined that the

number one goal of our Sunday School must be the improvement of discipline. I have ordered two things as a result.

First of all, it is important that we model good behavior for the children during worship. It is not always easy to remain alert and attentive during worship despite the best efforts of Celebration Circle. With their support I have ordered two staffs from a Pilgrim Replica supply service. You can find anything on the internet these days. It is a simple long hickory rod with a feather on one end. The original model was used in churches by ushers who would tickle the ladies with the feather end to wake them up and jab the men for the same effect.

I have also ordered a set of tee shirts from a Beach Store in Beaufort, North Carolina, to be worn by our teachers. Beaufort celebrates it's American heritage when pirates were our indigenous defense against the cruel oppression of the British Navy. The tee shirts have a message on them which reads:

The floggings will continue until morale improves.

Along with improved righteous attitudes by our teachers, I expect these two moves to reduce complaints about our discipline and morale problems. If you have any questions please raise your hand and I will call on you.

(First planted question) But I thought in Seekers we were supposed to love our children. Where is the love in your

plan?

(First Answer) We are talking about tough love here. To quote Proverbs 13:24: Spare the rod and spoil the child.

(Second planted question) Beating a child can make a child submissive and compliant, but it can't but it doesn't build inner discipline. I'm opposed to your proposal.

(Second Answer) This response, is not really a question, and I only asked for questions. Your comment illustrates why we need to firm up our discipline among adults in Seekers as well as children. To quote Proverbs 13:1: A wise son heed's his father's instruction; the arrogant will not listen to rebuke.

(Pause)

Let's all take a deep breath.

What might we learn from this staged conversation?

When we as adults enter the Children's Empire, and Jesus reminds us that the empire of children is the Empire of God, we need to look for God's activity with two lenses: judgement and grace. It feels better to look for grace, so I'm going to start with looking for judgement. This will help us appreciate grace all the more when we get to it.

I think most of us in Seekers do not like to exercise coercive force. In the United States we lodge legitimized coercive force in the hands of the police and the courts, in our military and intelligence agencies. Our laws set the rules for the use of coercive force by owners and managers of businesses, by principals and teachers in our schools, by administrators and boards in a host of non-profit organizations, etc. Seekers even has a constitution and a president in case we have a falling-out among ourselves and turn to the courts to see who gets to keep our building.

I've pointed out in several sermons that the emergence of the rule of law is partly grounded in the emergence of laws as a basis for governance in the scripture that is sacred to Jews and Christians. This painfully won transition from the arbitrariness of kings, patriarchs, and fathers, was a gigantic emergence of possibility for humankind to align ourselves with the eternal lures of justice and fairness. In our politics, in our organizations, in this Christian community, our best selves guide us toward living together by justice and fairness, and, in Seekers, we try to leave plenty of room for common sense and mercy.

However, a lot of us have negative feelings about police and others who exercise coercive force, who penalize us for breaking the rules, and sometimes are unsympathetic to our excuses, sometimes biased or unfair in the exercise of their power. I didn't like it when I got a \$35 parking ticket or Friday for being a couple of minutes late in putting another quarter in a parking meter.

Still, when we reflect, we remember that we want the freedom and opportunity that comes with safe driving in traffic. We want to have fair access to parking spaces. We even want the coercive extraction of money from our bank accounts through taxes to pay for public schools, the production of swine flu vaccine, and so much more.

We tend to take for granted that it is obvious that democratic control of the design and use of coercive force, with constitutional protection for the rights of minorities, is the best way to manage our common life together, even if we have to pay parking fines sometimes. This was not obvious, maybe not even imaginable, back in the 6th century bce when the slogans of Jewish families and clans were written down and became included in our Bible as part of the wisdom literature. They didn't even have parking meters back then.

When the Jewish people were nomads and lived off their herds, fathers and patriarchs ruled families and clans and slogans provided whatever order, justice, and mercy was to be found. By the time the proverbs were written down the Jewish kingdoms had come and gone and Jewish leaders fought and negotiated for the right to live by Jewish laws and courts within larger empires. Jesus was born while Caesar Augustus, the "Great Caesar," was shaping a new Roman empire. The Jews had fought for the right to live by Jewish law and most of the day-to-day laws were controlled by Jewish courts in Jerusalem within the context of over-arching Roman law.

The on-the-ground reality in Galilee still relied heavily on the authority of family and clan, of fathers and patriarchs. The stories of Jacob and Esau, of Joseph and his brothers, of the prodigal son, and more, were important guidance for

everyday life. The kerygma, the saving truth, in the slogans in Proverbs is that fathers are supposed to use their power in the best interests of their children and not out of random arbitrariness, favoritism, or mean-spiritedness. Though these passages sound harsh to our 21st century ears, they were a significant step along the way to balancing justice and mercy.

In the gospel of Mark, Jesus took another major step toward balancing justice and mercy by pointing to, by embodying, the saving power of forgiveness. The ritual Christians use to mark the beginning of the Christian life, baptism, points to the truth that we are forgiven for our sins, not because we have appeased God with sacrifices, not by making a special deal with God by contracting with God for rewards based on obedience, but by accepting the forgiveness that is offered. The catch is, and we are caught over and over again, we must truly claim and internalize the forgiveness we have been given and part of the claiming requires us to align ourselves with God's purposes, to live by the guidance we have received, to deeply appreciate the love and hope we have been given.

The dailyness, the details of trying to live by our understanding of God's grace, by the lures to both justice and mercy, is illustrated over and over again in working with the children in our Sunday School. Children are more raw, less sophisticated, as they come face-to-face with the good news that we carry in Seekers. Watching and supporting Tommy as he works with and articulates his frustrations over having to wait for a turn on the swings, and then supporting and working with him as he articulates his solutions to taking turns on the swings, is to see and support basic gospel work, basic salvation work.

We have content goals in our Sunday school. Teachers work with the same lectionary scriptures we all work with, and plan stories, activities, crafts, and games, that aim at making the scriptures come alive, that aim at experiencing saving truth and not just talking about it. Teaching content requires listening and caring in students and that in turn requires good relationships between students and teachers. Content goals are good. Being ready to claim the teachable moments that come in relationships between students, and in relationships between teachers and students, is often the opportunity for experiencing saving truth directly.

When relationships break down, when we have to exercise coercive control to defend our vision of the freedom and opportunity in our Sunday School, we are doing simplified work of the same kind we do as adults to support loving and accountable relationships. When our children do not pay attention to us we get frustrated just like we do when adults do not pay attention to us, are not really interested in what we have to say. Seekers has worked hard at supporting caring, honesty, and accountability in conversations between adults. Teaching Sunday School is largely about doing the same things within the Empire of Children. This work is not just good for our children, it is full of teachable moments for teachers as well. When we feel frustrated as teachers we should look for the teachable moment for the children and the spiritual learning opportunities for ourselves.

The hardest moments with our children are often the biggest opportunities for relational learning, big chances to welcome children into the fellowship of Christ's body, to become citizens in the Empire of God. The hardest moments with our

children, as marked by our frustrations, our confusion, our irritability, our feelings of powerlessness, are opportunities for our own ongoing transformations at the points of some of our biggest needs. Maybe such needs go back to unfinished business from our own childhoods, maybe they rub raw current frustrations, maybe they challenges values we have not recently or fully worked through. In short, I urge you to consider working in our Seekers Sunday School as an opportunity for your own personal growth.

Now for a couple of stories that illustrate what I am driving at.

[Brenda and Trish tell stories about their experiences with the children.]

I usually have a very good and happy time with the children on Sundays. They like to see me and I like to see them. I care about what is going on with them just as I care about what is going on with you. I like to get caught up on what is going on in their lives just like I like to get caught up with what is going on in your lives. I'm sixty-nine and it is harder to keep up with their young energy. I try to regard that as just one more reason to keep up with my exercise, dieting, and rest.

What I like best about being with the children is how happy they often are, how out front and unreservedly happy. They now how to play. Tommy was making Trish a pretend breakfast bagel out of Play Dough. Trish said, "Oh I like bagels, but I'm afraid they will make me fat." Tommy said, "Don't worry



it's only Play Dough." He knew how to make the transitions between fantasy and reality without missing a beat and he knew which was which.

A few Sundays ago, Mykayla hid under the table where we usually do our drawing. She's not the first Seekers child who has played that game. I had the time so I decided to regard her hiding as a game. I sat down at the table and wondered aloud about where Mykayla was. Tommy and India told me she was under the table. I didn't respond to them, I just stretched my leg out and gently nudged her with my shoe and said, "It's too bad Mykayla didn't come today because I like her and I miss her. Mykayla giggled.

Then I said to Tommy and India, "You know sometimes you like to play hiding games. Do you suppose Mykayla is playing a hiding game?" Then I nudged her again with my foot and I said, "If Mykayla is hiding, I hope she will come out when she sees we are having a good time with what I have planned for this class.

I started on the class activity and soon Mykayla was with us and fully participating. This is a simple story but think of all things that were going on.

Myakyla got to rebel in a safe way and feel acceptance even though she was not fully cooperating. She got to enter the activity because she wanted to and not because she was forced to. She got to play a little game with me that was fun for her. She got to experience simultaneously that she was part of the class even while she was on the far margins of the

class. She was reminded that I like to play too and that helps us be friends. Welcome to the Childrens Empire.

In addition, I relearned for the tenth or so time how important it is to be on top of transition times with the children. I have emphasized this point in an email to all the teachers we have identified so far. The hiding game had its good points but I would rather have the opportunities that come with moving right into planned activities. I will be teaching her class again for three weeks starting next Sunday and I will do my best to establish some guidelines that will help us have better cooperation and more content focus in the disciples class this year. We will be sharing what we learn from our teaching with those who come on in October, helping the new teachers plan ahead.

Whether my plans work, and whether other plans work, or not, God will be waiting for us in each time we get together. As we get better at providing order, at providing content in engaging ways, and at taking advantage of the teachable moments that come with disorder, when we remember to take time to care for each other and not just to be task focused, when we remember we are teaching children and not just transmitting information, we will become more and more comfortable, happier and more thankful for the good connections we make, more appreciative of being allowed to spend some time in the Empire of Children.

Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me. Don't stop them. There's is the Empire of God." Jesus wanted to spend some time in the Empire of Children. I hope more of you will want to spend time there too.

