

Other People's Children

Readings: 'September, the First Day of School' by Howard Nemerov
'Wedding Cake' by Naomi Shihab Nye

There is no such thing as other people's children. We know this. It is part of our faith as Unitarian Universalists. If we believe that all have inherent worth and dignity and everything interconnected, there can't be anything as other people's children. All children are ours. Each one is our responsibility; we are called to create a world in which every person will grow old surrounded by beauty, embraced by love, and cradled in the arms of peace. What does this look like? What does this mean?

The belief that there is no such thing as other people's children permeates the culture here in Kalamazoo in ways that have surprised and delighted me in my first few months here.

I have several stories for you about this.

Once upon a time, 151 years ago and a few miles east of here, in downtown Kalamazoo, there were four fourteen year old girls who loved Sunday school. They attended First Presbyterian Church, right on Bronson Park. One Sunday, they noticed that none of the kids who lived on the northern edge of town, in the woods on what is now the North Side, ever came to church with them. They loved Sunday School so much that they thought every child should have access to this source of joy and meaning. Who cares if their parents were poorer or didn't have time to make the trek to First Presbyterian?

These girls knew there was no such thing as other people's children. They knew they had to share the truth as they understood it. So, one Sunday after church, they gathered up a bunch of hymnals and walked north. They set up a makeshift church in a clearing, putting planks across tree stumps to make pews. They held their services and taught their lessons, often repeating what they were taught just hours earlier. The girls often had to scare away wandering cows who wandered into their clearing. They became quite skilled at teaching – and at scaring away wandering cows.

The girls didn't tell their pastor or their parents about this endeavor – and their Sunday school began to thrive.

One day, several months later, the Sunday School Superintendent noticed that a number of the hymnals regularly went missing. A few weeks later, he noticed those fourteen year old girls gathering up the hymnals. He decided to follow them. He walked across town to the clearing in the woods, not quite sure what to expect, and found a flourishing Sunday School program, led by the four fourteen year old girls. There were about 30 children in attendance and a few of their parents. This was quite a sight. It was nearly 100 years before the Presbyterians ordained women, but here were four teenage girls teaching the truth as they understood it to a crowd.

Now, the superintendent could have responded in a number of ways. He could have taken back the hymnals. He could have been concerned about those girls associating with people from the other side of the tracks. He could have been worried about the aggressive cows that kept wandering through their clearing... but he too believed that there is no such thing as other people's children, that all children deserve to learn about what is most important. He supported this new Sunday school, which came to be called the Mission Woods Sunday School. The people of First Presbyterian took up special collections to help the Sunday school – and allow them to buy their own hymnals.

That Sunday school grew and flourished. Fourteen years later, they called their first pastor and renamed themselves North Presbyterian Church. First Presbyterian encouraged some of its membership to go join that new church, to help get that fledgling church off the ground, to help them build a strong congregation that would serve other people's children for generations. First Methodist, First Congregational, and First Baptist did the same. The next time you're passing by North Presbyterian Church on Burdick at Ransom, a block north of the Amtrak station, remember that it was founded by four fourteen year old girls who believe there is no such thing as other people's children.¹

And another story:

Meanwhile, a public high school had opened in Kalamazoo. Perhaps the founders or early participants in the gathering that became North Presbyterian attended. It was the only public school in Kalamazoo offering education beyond the eighth grade. The school existed for 14 years with minimal complaints. Then, in 1873, just a year before the North Presbyterians called their first pastor, three of the biggest landowners in Kalamazoo, Charles C. Stuart, Theodore P. Sheldon and Henry Brees filed a lawsuit seeking to prevent the Kalamazoo School Board from funding the public high school with tax money. These men asserted that their obligation to other people's children lasted only through the eighth grade. If other people wanted to provide anything more than that basic education to their children, they should pay for it themselves.

The suit went to the district court, where the school board won and then the Michigan Supreme Court, where the school board won again.² They ruled that there was no such thing as other people's children, that it is to everyone's benefit for us to use tax money to pay for public high schools. They used some of the same arguments based on economic self-interest that we heard from Tim Bartik in the video we showed earlier as well as the fact that funding public high schools with tax money was not explicitly against the law.

This public high school case out of Kalamazoo, sometimes just called The Kalamazoo Case didn't proclaim that there was no such thing as other people's children only in Kalamazoo. The case took on national significance. In the years that followed, many other communities in many other states faced lawsuits about funding public high school – and this early case was cited in the U.S. Supreme Court, as well as state Supreme Courts in California, Georgia, Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Louisiana, Maine, Minnesota, Mississippi, Nebraska, Nevada, North Dakota, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, and Wisconsin.³

The next time you're passing by the old Central High School on Westnedge at Vine, look for the historical marker that references The Kalamazoo Case, and celebrate the legal precedent that there is no such thing as other people's children. The next time you pass a public school you can celebrate that in some very real ways, we as a society have decided that there is no such thing as other people's children, that all of us should grow old surrounded by beauty, embraced by love, and cradled in the arms of peace.

The Kalamazoo case and those that followed were decided by arguments related to economic self-interest and the fact that there were no laws prohibiting the funding of public high school. Those are compelling arguments. As the late Minnesota Senator Paul Wellstone has said, "We all do better when we all do

¹ Lee, J. Barrett. Pastor, North Presbyterian Church, Kalamazoo, MI. Personal Conversation. October 8, 2015.

² Timmerman, Elizabeth. 'The Kalamazoo Case: Supporting High School Education.' *Kalamazoo Public Library*. Retrieved from <http://www.kpl.gov/local-history/education/kalamazoo-school-case.aspx>

³ Bartik, Tim. Email communication. October 5, 2015.

better." That is especially true when it comes to funding programs for young children. The research shows us that a dollars invested in high quality preschool for children living in poverty, saves taxpayers about \$13 later in those kids lives, as the preschool attenders are more likely to graduate high school and have well-paying jobs at age 40, and less likely to commit crimes.⁴

That is all true, but it is not enough. If we were at a public meeting or a legislative hearing, economic self-interest would be sufficient argument, but we are gathered in religious community. Policy outcomes matter to us, but so do values, so do ethical and religious commitments. Diane read earlier that "it is our faith that each child born is one more redeemer." As Unitarian Universalists, we believe that every person, every child is important and deserving of love. We believe that every child born is one more redeemer. That is not limited to Ella, Weaver, DeForest, Arianna, and Alexandra, the little ones we dedicated ourselves to today. Each child born is one more redeemer. We believe that all children and all people are called to the work of redeeming the world. We are all called to join our thoughts, words, and deeds together to make the world more beautiful, more just, less full of suffering and more full of love.

I've told good stories this morning about Kalamazoo, about how this is a community that has believed for generations that there is no such thing as other people's children and has acted on that belief. And there is more stories like this I could tell, including the story of the Kalamazoo Promise, the generous anonymous donors who provide scholarships to the graduates of the Kalamazoo Public Schools. This promise is changing lives in our community.

But we know that that is not the whole story. This world is full of promise and also full of pain. We are nowhere near the Promised Land. We have not yet fully lived into the belief that there is no such thing as other people's children. One of the areas of pain in our community is the infant mortality rate. In Kalamazoo County, an African American baby is four and a half times more likely to die before his or her or their first birthday. Four and a half times more likely to die in their first year of life.⁵ This is the highest infant mortality racial disparity in the state of Michigan.

There are many reasons for this – poverty, access to healthcare, and the mother's level of education. Those who study the persistence of racial disparities in infant mortality rates believes that the disparity is also explained in significant part by racism. More education and more access to healthcare are only part of the problem. Studies show that black women with doctoral degrees are more likely to have babies that die in the first year of life than white women who didn't graduate from high school. Experts assert that infant deaths must be linked to the chronic stress of experiencing racism, that the chronic stress of racism is causing pregnancy complications, sicker babies, and is literally killing the littlest, most vulnerable children in Kalamazoo.⁶ Maybe we have decided they are other people's children, and we bear no responsibility. Maybe we think they are all of our children, that each one should grow old surrounded by beauty, embraced by love, and cradled in the arms of peace but we haven't yet taken effective action.

⁴ 'Lifetime Effects: The HighScope Perry Preschool Study through Age 40.' *HighScope*. Retrieved from <http://www.highscope.org/Content.asp?ContentId=611>

⁵ McMichael, Earlene. 'WSW: Momentum Builds on Black Infant Mortality Reduction Initiative.' *WMUK*. March 23, 2015. Retrieved from: <http://wmuk.org/post/wsw-momentum-builds-black-infant-mortality-reduction-initiative>

⁶ Hall, Jr., Rex. 'Black Infants 5 Times More Likely than Whites to Die in Kalamazoo, and Disparity is Growing.' *MLive*. September 12, 2013. Retrieved from: http://www.mlive.com/news/kalamazoo/index.ssf/2013/09/infant_mortality_in_kalamazoo.html

If we believe that each child born is one more redeemer. If we believe each night a child is born is a holy night, a time for singing, a time for wondering, a time for worshipping – then singing and wondering and worshipping are not enough. We are called us to action. If we believe there is no such thing as other people's children, that all children are our collective responsibility, then our beliefs must turn into action. We must continue to treat one another like the world's most sensitive cargo. We must continue to remember that each one of us holds the prayers, dreams, and breath of ancestors that came before. We must remember that each of us are lovers of life and builders of nations, seekers of truth and keepers of faith, makers of peace and the wisdom of ages. We must become—or continue to be—the secret guardians of babies dressed like wedding cakes we hold on airplanes, the secret guardians of other people's children.

There isn't much good about a problem as intractable and complicated as infant mortality, a problem as intractable and complicated as creating a world in which there is no such thing as other people's children, a world in which where every child will grow old surrounded by beauty, embraced by love, and cradled in the arms of peace. The good thing about such a big problem is there are so many ways to address these big, complicated, intractable problems.

If you are passionate about infant mortality, there are a number of initiatives seeking to address it in our community. Healthy Babies Healthy Start, the YWCA, the Nurse-Family Partnership, Healthy Families America, and others are working on this issue directly in our community.⁷ If your call is to work to reduce racism and the chronic stress it unleashes on so many in our community, members of this congregation are already doing great work on this issue through the anti-racism, anti-oppression and multiculturalism committee, affectionately known as ARAOMC. ISAAC, a congregation-based community organizing effort in Kalamazoo, that People's Church is deeply involved in has committed to working to reduce racism, educational disparities, and youth violence in Kalamazoo. And so many of you tutor at Lincoln School, showing some of the most vulnerable elementary schoolers in our community that they are deserving of love. There are probably dozens of other ways that you are acting to make sure there is no such thing as other people's children.

So many of you have already appointed yourselves the secret guardians of the children in our community, holding firm to our faith that every child is deserving of love. Again, this story isn't perfect, this story isn't over, but we have the power and the opportunity to carry on the legacy of those that came before and create a community where there is no such thing as other people's children.

May we have the passion of the fourteen year old girls who founded North Presbyterian Church.

May we have the commitment of those who defended public high schools before the Michigan Supreme Court.

May we loudly proclaim that each child is one more redeemer and there is no such thing as other people's children until everyone grows old surrounded by beauty, embraced by love, and cradled in the arms of peace.

May it be so. May we make it so. Amen.

⁷ Hall, Jr., Rex. 'Reducing Race Gap in Birth Outcomes Focus of New Initiative Being Led by YWCA of Kalamazoo's CEO.' *MLive*. November 17, 2014. Retrieved from http://www.mlive.com/news/kalamazoo/index.ssf/2014/11/shes_a_champion_reducing_racia.html