

"MOST OF WHAT WE KNOW"

A Sermon By

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INTRODUCTION

Robert Fulghum is a feature writer for the Kansas City Times. Last Spring that newspaper ran a feature about him. Apparently Fulghum's writing career began to take off when he wrote a short article just a few years ago. Two of you in recent weeks have sent me that article with the suggestion that it might work its way into a sermon. Here's the article:

"Most of what I really need to know about how to live, and what to do, and how to be, I learned in Kindergarten. Wisdom was not at the top of the graduate school mountain, but there in the sandbox at Nursery School.

These are the things I learned: share everything. Play fair. Don't hit people. Put things back where you found them. Clean up your own mess. Don't take things that aren't yours. Say you're sorry when you hurt somebody. Wash your hands before you eat. Flush. Warm cookies and cold milk are good for you. Live a balanced life. Learn some and think some and draw and paint and sing and dance and play and work every day some.

Take a nap every afternoon. When you go into the world, watch for traffic, hold hands and stick together. Be aware of wonder. Remember the little seed in the plastic cup. The roots go down and the plant goes up and nobody really knows how or why, but we are all like that.

Goldfish and hamsters and white mice and even the little seed in the plastic cup -- they all die. So do we.

And then remember the book about Dick and Jane and the first word you learned, the biggest word of all: LOOK. Everything you need to know is in there somewhere. The Golden Rule and love and basic sanitation. Ecology and politics and sane living.

Think of what a better world it would be if we all -- the whole world -- had cookies and milk about 3 o'clock every afternoon and then lay down with our blankets for a nap. Or, if we had a basic policy in our nation and other nations to always put things back where we found them and cleaned up our own messes. And it is still true, no matter how old you are, when you go out into the world, it is best to hold hands and stick together."

Robert Fulghum is right. Most of what we know we learn at an early age. There is, however, a wisdom that can only come from years of experience. I don't want to disregard that kind of wisdom. But so much of who we are and what we know is learned in those fashionable years of childhood. This is good.

And yet, not everything we learn in childhood turns out to be true. As we grow up and mature, we suffer the loss of certain fantasies. For example, this world is not always fair. Bad things can and do happen to good people. The best

candidate doesn't always win, nor does the best team. The best girl does not always get chosen, and sometimes dogs run away from loving homes.

I think, too, that most of our theological beliefs are set in childhood. If we are fortunate, we will redefine our beliefs continuously, all throughout our life, but unfortunately, too many of us fail to really examine our beliefs and make adjustments along the way.

Today's message addresses the problem of sin. We heard about sin when we were children. We were probably told what it was, and we were definitely told not to commit it. But I sometimes wonder just how much we really understand it.

Calvin Coolidge was a man of few words, so they say. One Sunday while in the White House he went to Church and after returning home, his dear wife asked him what the preacher talked about in the sermon. He said, "Sin". She said, "And what did he say?" He replied, "He was against it." In the time that remains, I have three things I want to say about sin.

#### SIN CAN KILL YOU

That's the bad news.

The first thing I want to say is that sin can kill you. Those are hard words, I know. But sin is a harsh reality.

It would be good for us to remember that sin killed Jesus. Try leaving that truth out of the Gospel and all that is left is wishful dreaming. In his letter to the Romans, Paul reminds us that Jesus died "to sin". What this means is that Jesus lived a life resistant to sin and was victorious over it. He was tempted and yet did not succumb to sin. But Paul also points out that Jesus died "because of sin". It was the arrogance, pride, fear and self-righteousness of others that really killed Jesus.

That's what sin can do. It can destroy life. Whether or not it is our own sin or that of another, sin can kill us. It can make us callous, insensitive, defensive, egotistical, etc., and all of these character traits have a way of being self-destructive.

Daniel Ellsberg was in Washington recently for the national peace events held last April. He was asked by a local television reporter what it was that turned the American public against the war in Vietnam. His reply was short, but so graphic. I didn't like his reply when I first heard it, because it was all too true. Here is Daniel Ellsberg's reply:

"What turned the American public against the war? 'Body bags' said Ellsberg. 'Exposure of the official deception and lies didn't do it. Telling the truth didn't do it. Even describing the suffering of the Vietnamese didn't do it. Body bags did it. Not until larger and larger numbers of American boys came home in bags did the American people start to feel the Vietnam War was a mistake, or simply wrong, or just not worth it.'"

Sin can kill us. It can kill us physically, emotionally and spiritually. Sin is that destructive. But there's more. Move on with me to the second point.

BORED WITH THE THEOLOGY WHICH ADDRESSES SIN

bored with most of the theology (and rhetoric) which addresses sin. Perhaps it's because the "medium" has gotten in the way of the "message". Perhaps we ministers have clubbed people over the head for so long now that we have lost their attention. For whatever reason, we have become bored with sin.

The second thing I wish to say is that we have grown

I came across an insight about the Church that I think is relevant and worth repeating. I'm quoting a Dr. Halverson who wrote:

"In the beginning, the Church was a fellowship of men and women who centered their lives on the living Christ. They had a personal and vital relationship with the Lord, and it transformed their lives and the world around them." "But then" he wrote, "the Church moved to Greece where it became a philosophy. And then it moved to Rome where it became an institution. And then it moved to Europe where it became a culture. And now finally it has moved to America where it has become an enterprise!"

Perhaps we have become bored with sin today because the Church has become bored with sin. The main concern of the Church today is self-preservation. Whatever happened to the saving of people? Whatever happened to the "care" and the "feeding" of souls? Whatever happened to sin? We have become an "enterprise" that must be institutionally spared at any cost. Religion in America has been for some time - big business. Religious television and the events of recent months is but a part of the scene.

There will be those who might choose to turn my remarks against me, so I must be careful especially as we approach the big meeting of the year...but I must speak the truth as I see the truth. The longer I am in the ministry the less I care about the Church and the more I care about the people who need the Church. We're arrived at the point of Christianity where the Church, not God, is what we worship. The denomination, not Christ, seems to be our Lord. And the minister, not Jesus, for many is the Son of God. As someone said to me some time back, "I'm looking for a minister to join, not a Church!"

The business of the Church must no longer be maintenance - its business is to tell the people they are sinners and that there is a way out. For those who are searching for a higher power, a more meaningful life, and an assurance that they are not alone, such news is not boring. It comes as a breath of fresh air into the life of a person. Which leads me to this final statement.

LOVED OUT OF OUR SIN

St. Paul,

You and I might not reach a point of being sinless, but we can be loved out of our sin. In the words of

"We know that our old self was crucified with Him so that the sinful body might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin".

Dwight Gooden, the pitcher for the Mets, has been one of the most heralded baseball players in our time. He was in the major leagues at 18, won 24 games that first year, could throw the baseball almost a hundred miles an

hour, and would strike out everybody in sight. In three years his salary shot up to one and a half million dollars a year. At twenty-two years old he is world famous, with a limitless future. But we all know what happened to him along the way. This beautiful, young and uncommonly talented man, had to enter a drug rehabilitation center here in our neighborhood on East 93rd Street last Spring. His future was in jeopardy and still is.

Bob Feller, before all of this happened to Gooden, was asked about this young player's amazing debut. What Feller said turned out to be tremendously wise. He said, "Give him a chance to mess up his life, and then see how good he is". Remember when Feller said that. I do.

Bob Feller was probably the most celebrated pitcher of his generation forty years ago. I remember his picture on the back of a box of Wheaties when I was growing up. He knew that life is not about being on top without any problems. Life is being knocked down, and then climbing back. Most of what we know we learned in childhood, but some lessons are learned only through years of experience. I wonder...have you yet discovered that God can love you out of your sin? Is right now a time when you are needing help, help for whatever reason, to climb back? The fault is not in falling down, it is in lying there. Let God love you.

There is an old Sufi story where a seeker arrives at a monastery in search of a spiritual guide. "People say that you have found wisdom" the young seeker said to the Holy One, "and I have come to ask you if that is true". "You could say so" the Holy One said in a matter-of-fact way. "So what makes a person wise?" the seeker asked. "Wisdom" the Holy One said, "is simply the ability to recognize".

"I know that" the man responded, "but the question is, to recognize what?" "Spiritual wisdom" the Holy One said, "is the ability to recognize the butterfly in a caterpillar; the eagle in an egg; the saint in the sinner."

Perhaps there is some one in the congregation today who needs to hear this once again. Let go and let God. Let God love you. Amen!

PRAYER        Move in our hearts, O God, in these moments. Speak to each of us the word we need to hear.

Gifted with sight, we miss the glory that surrounds us; gifted with conscience, we make our peace with sin; gifted with the power to think, we fall for lies that cater to our prejudices; gifted with imagination, we plod along afraid to dream or to hope; gifted with the quality of love, we so often waste our affection on things that matter little.

Forgive our gross misuse of life, and grant that the very act of penitence itself in this hour may get us started in a new direction, lest we gain the world and lose our souls. In the spirit of Christ, the life bringer. Amen.