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Sermon Brief
Text: Psalm 127:3-5
Title: God's Gift
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Seeking to faith-
fully proclaim
the whole coun-
cil of God in
scripture!



INTRODUCTION

Today is another of those very special occasions when we have the privilege to dedicating to the Lord one of the new born babies in our church. God has blessed our church over the past several months with numerous little ones being born. We are grateful to Him for this.

The psalmist celebrated such blessings in Psalm 127:3-5. Hear his words of gratitude to God for the blessing of sons.

3 Sons are indeed a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb a reward. 4 Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the sons of one's youth. 5 Happy is the man who has his quiver full of them. He shall not be put to shame when he speaks with his enemies in the gate.¹

The setting of this psalm is not clear from the Old Testament era. Clearly it is a 'wisdom psalm' reflecting popular religious belief of that period. It was associated with Solomon as a "Psalm of Ascent." Psalms 120-134 form this collection of psalms, that possibly celebrated religious pilgrimages to Jerusalem.² The psalm is made up to two sayings: vv. 1-2 and 3-5.

The first saying, vv. 1-2, affirms the universal dependence of all humanity upon God for everything in life:

1 Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the Lord guards the city, the guard keeps watch in vain. 2 It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil; for he gives sleep to his beloved.

Notice the three times the phrase "in vain" appears. All human labor, and especially in the family, is 'in vain' unless the work comes from God's leadership and help.

Then the second saying, vv. 3-5, affirms the dependence upon God for children to come into the family. It is this second part that I want to emphasize today in light of our dedication service. Some helpful reminders are present to help us realize how God works in our lives.

BODY

I. Sons are God's gift, v. 3

3 Sons are indeed a heritage from the Lord,
the fruit of the womb a reward.

Family. The psalmist sees sons, or perhaps children, as 'the fruit of the womb,' with the synonymous parallelism of the first two lines in verse 3. Children indeed are born into a family, as a part of God's plan of human procreation first set forth in Gen. 1:27-28 (NRSV):

27 So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he

¹LXX: Ὡιδὴ τῶν ἀναβαθμῶν τῶ Σαλωμων.

Ἐὰν μὴ κύριος οἰκοδομήσῃ οἶκον,
εἰς μάτην ἐκοπίασαν οἱ οἰκοδομοῦντες αὐτόν·

Ἐὰν μὴ κύριος φυλάξῃ πόλιν,
εἰς μάτην ἠγρύπνησεν ὁ φυλάσσων.†

²εἰς μάτην ὑμῖν ἐστιν τοῦ ὀρθρίζειν,
ἐγείρεσθαι μετὰ τὸ καθῆσθαι,

οἱ ἔσθοντες ἄρτον ὀδύνης,
ὅταν δῶ τοῖς ἀγαπητοῖς αὐτοῦ ὕπνον.†

³ἰδοὺ ἡ κληρονομία κυρίου υἱοί,
ὁ μισθὸς τοῦ καρποῦ τῆς γαστρούς.†

⁴ὥσει βέλη ἐν χειρὶ δυνατοῦ,
οὕτως οἱ υἱοὶ τῶν ἐκτετιναγμένων.

⁵μακάριος ἄνθρωπος, ὃς πληρώσει τὴν ἐπιθυμίαν αὐτοῦ ἐξ αὐτῶν·
οὐ καταισχυνθήσονται, ὅταν λαλῶσι τοῖς ἐχθροῖς αὐτῶν ἐν πύλῃ.†

²Most scholars consider the "Songs of Ascent" psalms to be postexilic in origin. These psalms were brought into their present form during the time after the Babylonian exile. Normally, however, much of the material in these psalms reaches back to earlier periods of Israelite history. Probably, this is the case with Psalm 127.

created them. 28 God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.”

God so designed us that we need a family for a stable and healthy life. This is God’s plan and one that we need to strive toward. Later the New Testament would amplify this with specific admonitions to the father on the raising of his children:

Eph. 6:4 (NRSV): “And, fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.”

Col. 3:21 (NRSV): “Fathers, do not provoke your children, or they may lose heart.”

I want to give thanks today for Jason and Sandi who are providing Griffin with just that: a strong, stable, loving family in which he can grow up and learn to cope with life.

God’s Gift. Also the psalmist sees children as ‘a heritage from the Lord’ and as a ‘reward.’ For ancient Hebrews, having a heritage was very important. Through one’s children was your family perpetuated; without children your family came to an end. God’s favor in giving children was indeed a ‘reward’ from Him and reflected His blessing upon the parents.

One should remember that in the ancient world children weren’t always viewed in such positive ways. Both ancient Greek and especially Roman culture reflected vacillating attitudes toward children, especially toward baby girls. One of the worst traditions of the ancient world was the Roman ‘exposure of new born babies,’ where the father decided if he wanted to keep the child or just get rid of it when it was born.³ The Jewish culture and religious tradition, however, placed importance upon children, and especially upon sons. Early Christian teaching emphasized this value even more, beginning with Jesus’ blessing the children brought to him.⁴ This should be how we view our children today: as a gift from God.

To be sure, in the process of raising our kids we may at times wonder whether they are ‘gifts.’ Particularly will this be true during their ‘teenage’ years. But ultimately they do stand as divine gifts and a blessing. Today in our dedication service we reaffirm this spiritual reality, and we re-commit ourselves to our children as God’s gift to us.

II. Sons bless their parents, vv. 4-5

4 Like arrows in the hand of a warrior
are the sons of one’s youth.

5 Happy is the man
who has his quiver full of them.

He shall not be put to shame
when he speaks with his enemies in the gate.

In a manner appropriate to the Old Testament world, the psalmist saw his sons as a blessing that gave him security when facing his opponents. The picture of grown sons standing with their father ‘at the city gates’ can express two possible meanings. One, the ‘city gate’ was the place where court was held. The sons would

³“Cultic and genetic factors lie behind the exposure of children, but economic considerations are also important. Depopulation comes with abortions and the prevention of pregnancies. Children are regarded as unimportant. Laws are passed favoring larger families but with no great success. Philosophers tend to shun marriage, poetry magnifies free love, and the novel depicts adultery, jealousy, procuring, and pederasty. Another trend is toward continence even in marriage.” [Gerhard Kittel, Gerhard Friedrich and Geoffrey William Bromiley, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1995), 759]

⁴“1. *Affirmation of the Child as a Creature of God.*

“a. Jesus. Inheriting the OT belief in the Creator and the implied affirmation of human life, Jesus finds some place for ascetic concerns (Mt. 19:11–12) but he also endorses and sanctifies parental love (Mt. 5:36; 9:19; 7:9ff.).

The community obviously agrees with the teaching of Jesus in the sayings that it transmits. It supports missionaries and their dependents (1 Cor. 9:5). Paul accepts marriage as an order of creation in spite of an ascetic inclination (1 Cor. 7). The family teaching in Eph. 6:1ff. displays a positive attitude to children and their upbringing. 1 Tim. 2:15, which does not mean that childbearing is a basis of salvation or a means of doing penance, calls the bearing (and nurture?) of children a work that promotes salvation.

“2. *Affirmation of the Individuality of Children?*

“a. Jesus evaluates children highly (Mt. 18:2ff.; 19:13ff.). This is not because of a Hellenistic sense of their relative innocence, but because their littleness, immaturity, and need of help keep the way open for God’s fatherly love.

“b. Paul alludes to childlike innocence in 1 Cor. 14:20, but mostly his comparisons stress the immaturity and inferiority of children (3:1; 13:11; Gal. 4:1). Heb. 5:13 is to the same effect. In regard to regeneration, however, the relative innocence of children is an important motif in exhortation (1 Pet. 2:1).” [Kittel, *ibid.*]

defend their father's integrity when he faced his accusers in court.⁵ But a second meaning may be preferable in light of the additional details of 'quiver of arrows.' This approach sees the image of warfare as the point. That is, many sons stand with their father at the gates to drive off enemies who come to attack. In either of these meanings, the point is basically that the sons assist and defend their father. In the beatitude form of verse 5 the father realizes victory through the help of his sons. And this is seen as a blessing from God: "how blessed is the man..."⁶

One of the importances of sons in a family for ancient Israelites was that they would take care of their parents in their old age. Also, the sons were important as sources of help and labor for the Hebrew peasant trying to make a living off the land. Thus a large family offered security and stability to the Israelite family in ancient times.

Attitudes toward children have changed in contemporary western society. Some of this has come about because of changing social situations. In my father's generation in the 1920s and 1930s a large family, especially of boys, was considered important because their help was needed in farming and ranching. Thus my father had five brothers and a sister. But in recent times economics play a dominant role and the extremely high cost of raising children has resulted in much smaller families with only one or two children. A growing number of individuals intentionally opt out of having children at all. This has many possible reasons. Some just don't want to be bothered by the time and effort required by parenting. Others look around at the corruption of the world and don't want to bring children into such a morally perverse world. Still others just don't think they can afford children, at least in giving them the level of lifestyle they feel is important. I'm not sure of all the motivations present here in Germany. But the size of the family has declined to the point that last year Germany had a small population decline, in spite of substantial immigration of foreigners into the country.⁷

One of the consequences of all this, that I have noticed on both sides of the Atlantic, is that children either by neglect or by being worshiped have less and less discipline and self control in western society. Consequently we're seeing children committing mass murder in the schools, juvenile gangs are mushrooming all over the place with increasingly violent patterns of behavior, growing numbers of teenage suicides are taking place etc. The family is in serious trouble today in western culture.

The challenge to Christians is to develop families that run 'against the grain' with positive qualities. We need to be setting the example to the unbelieving world about family life and how it should be lived out. Our dedication service today is one aspect of a witness by this church to the world to say, 'Families are important.' But we will develop strong families only by living out the principles of God's Word in our families. And one part of that is to see our kids as gifts and blessings from God. Knowing this helps remind us of our stewardship responsibilities of them before Almighty God. God has 'loaned' us kids for a few years and expects us to raise them properly by His guidelines.

CONCLUSION

Christian families! How needed they are in our world. God, give us Christian homes!

⁵Cf. Deut. 21:19; Isa. 29:21; Amos 5:12,15.

⁶The beatitude literary form is brought out in the LXX: μακάριος ἄνθρωπος, ὃς . . .

⁷"Today, emigration and sub-replacement fertility rates are the principal issues related to any regional population decline. A number of nations today are experiencing population decline, stretching from North Asia (Japan) through to Eastern Europe through Russia including Kazakhstan, Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Bulgaria, Georgia, Armenia, Bosnia, Croatia, Slovenia, Hungary, and now Italy. Countries rapidly approaching population decline (but currently still growing, albeit slowly) include Greece, Spain, Cuba, Uruguay, Denmark, Finland, Austria and Lesotho.

The population of former Soviet Republics, with the exception most of the Muslim majority nations (Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Azerbaijan), is falling due to health factors and low replacement. Much of Eastern Europe has lost population due to migration to Western Europe. In Eastern Europe and Russia, natality fell abruptly after the end of the Soviet Union, and death rates generally rose. Together these nations occupy over 8 million square miles and are home to over 400 million people (less than six percent of the world population), but if current trends continue, more of the developed world and some of the developing world could join this trend.

Many nations in Western Europe (and the EU as a whole) today would have declining populations if it were not for international immigration. The total population of the continent of Europe (including Russia and other non-EU countries) already peaked around the year 2000 and is currently declining.^[3] Japan began depopulating in 2005; Japan's situation is related to low fertility rates and an extremely low level of immigration.

AIDS plays some role in population decline; however, data available suggest that, even with high AIDS mortality, fertility rates in Africa are sufficiently high, so that overpopulation trends continue" ["Population decline," Wikipedia online]