



Christian Sermon Suggestions

1. Abundant Life of the Spirit

"I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." (John 10:10 NSRV)

In our society today there are at every turn vendors, advertisements and promises assuring us that the use or consumption of the right product will result in a fulfilling and happy life. In our thoughtful moments we know that such materialistic offers are only empty promises of a consumer lifestyle. By contrast, Jesus' promise of abundant life places before us a compelling vision of wholeness, meaning and integrity. Surely this is the legacy we want for our children and for all God's children.

In faithful witness to Jesus' promise of abundant life the church has historically sought the best for all persons but has undertaken special advocacy for children and youth. It is our commitment that each child might live the life for which they were created that beckons us to seek always the best for all children - both those we know personally and those children of God unknown to us.

Good Schools Pennsylvania is a program which allows church groups to come together to: study the problems and possibilities for quality education for children in our state; engage together in reflection and prayer for the circumstances of children in settings of poor educational opportunities and; join others in effective public witness for the equity of opportunity and educational excellence that are necessary for any abundance of life.

Prayer

O God, Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer of all children, bless we pray those who care for children in homes, schools, churches and institutions. As we hear Jesus' promise to children in their quest for education for meaningful lives. Strengthen us as we speak the truth in love to powers and principalities in our state. Amen.

2. Children Deserve an Abundant Life

Faith will inform and motivate our efforts on behalf of children and will, in turn, be strengthened by this practical effort in discipleship.

As we begin our preparation consider: The Church is called to regard, nurture and treasure each child as a gift from God. Christians make promises to live lives that enable justice and extend mercy to those in need. Jesus said, *"I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."* (John 10:10 NRSV)

The abundant, that is fulfilled, life may be permanently denied to children who receive substandard education. The church and individual Christians are called into ministry with children in Jesus' name. Our efforts are intended to work for the assurance of Jesus' promise that all children should live lives of fulfillment and abundance. Securing a basic education is central to the abundant life. Historically the Church has always been a strong supporter of education. As we take up this new task we continue an important ministry of the Church.

Prayer

God of all children you came to dwell among us as a child. You have taught us to work for justice and to do mercy. As we take up this new effort and ministry for all children in Pennsylvania whom you love give us your grace and wisdom. Bless us and our efforts that all your children may live the lives for which they were created.

3. Wealth and Poverty: The Millstone

The matter of wealth and poverty is a focus of reflection throughout scripture. The Biblical witness in many instances underscores God's love and favor for the poor. Yet, in our society those with fewer resources are often looked down upon and are given less consideration including in relation to the education of their children. But Jesus said, *"If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea. Woe to the world because of stumbling blocks! Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to the one by whom the stumbling block comes!"* (Matthew 18:6-7 NRSV) In our society value is often conveyed by dollar value, how can we express to children their value and worth in God's eyes? How can our community of faith demonstrate to public officials God's radical love for all children? How can we indicate to public officials the ways in which inequitable funding is a stumbling block for children?

Prayer

Our God we pray on this occasion for the strength, insight and courage it will require to move the stumbling blocks which confront our children. Aid us as we seek to educate ourselves and others to those things which cause our children to stumble. Guide us in our planning and action that in your name we may bless the lives of children in gaining the needed resources for their schools.

4. Faith as a Foundation for Action: Speaking Against the Majority

It is no surprise to find that public education in many parts of the United States is in crisis. This crisis is several decades in the making and is attributed to a number of causes. As we explore further the challenges to public education today we will find in many states groups of citizens, state officials, parent groups and others seeking ways to address the problems in public education today. The very existence of such reform groups is encouraging.

Given the depth and complexity of the problems of public education it is tempting to work only locally to ensure our own children have a good teacher, a small class, state of the art books, labs and technology. But the Bible is clear that faithfulness requires us to seek justice for all persons no matter what others may choose. Our faith instructs us to resist the easy way that

only seeks self interest. *"You shall not follow a majority in wrongdoing & you shall not side with the majority so as to pervert justice."* (Exodus 23:2 NSRV) It is both excellence in education and justice and access to such education that is the worthy goal of our striving.

Prayer

God of justice stay near to us and strengthen our resolve to resist easy but inequitable solutions that value some children, some neighborhoods and some schools more than others. Let it not be said of us that we helped pervert your justice and denied your children and schools. Amen.

5. The Role of Faith-Based Organizations in Public Debate

Today, perhaps more than ever, we are engaged in a national debate about the role of faith-based organizations within our society. Our treasured freedom of religion is best preserved by the absence of favoritism for any particular religious group. Sometimes our concern for this appropriate separation of church and state has led some to assert that religious groups should not be involved in questions of social policy. While it is important in our culture that no one religious group seeks or receives special favor or public monies to teach its beliefs and doctrines, religion has no obligation to be absent from the public square. Indeed, citizens motivated by their faith tradition along with citizens of other values and motivations are free to advocate for a community that reflects their values of mercy, justice, kindness and equality. Jesus was asked about the distinctive obligations to the state and to God and responded; "Give to God the things that are God's and therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's." (Mark 12:17) The state government has its system of authority and influence. As good citizens we recognize and affirm these secular roles. Yet we render unto God that which belongs to God including our active, public advocacy for the values of equality and justice.

Prayer

We give thanks, O God, for the blessings of liberty and the precious freedom to worship you in spirit and truth. Even in this land that we love we must cry out when we see policies and practices which work hardship and deny opportunity. Guide us that we may not seek to impose our faith on others or so fear public criticism that in our silence we fail to be your witnesses in the world. Amen.

6. Seeking Justice Now

Often justice delayed is justice denied. This is particularly true of children. In the early years when self-esteem is being shaped and the basis for all future education is being laid, quality education is essential. In recent years medical research has reported great advances in understanding brain development in the early years of life. Educators must find ways to bring these new insights to bear in planning the pre-kindergarten and primary grade programs for children. To do the best possible job for our youngest children we will need the support for appropriate class size, teachers specializing in early childhood and technology and curriculum that maximizes the educational benefits for young children especially those who are poor or from less stimulating home environments. Such young children cannot even in a rudimentary way, be advocates for themselves. Our youngest children must rely on a whole society that will seek their good. The prophet Isaiah described such a society and urged

citizens to work for the well-being of all. "Learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow. (Isaiah 1:17 NRSV)

Prayer

Holy God you gave to us the world's most famous poor child as a helpless infant. You have told us that when we receive such children we receive you. Give us brave and generous hearts to work for a world where young children are safe, secure and nurtured to become lifelong learners. We pray in the name of the child of long ago. Amen.

7. Giving to Those in Greatest Need

Few of us doubt that students today must master information, technologies and complex concepts unknown to an earlier age. In virtually every field of study advances in our knowledge base and the competency expectations of employers and colleges require on-going updating of curriculum. To keep our children up to date funds and programs of teacher training, curriculum revision, new textbooks and resources must be included in budgeting for public education. Smaller, poorer and more remote school districts cannot be allowed to languish far behind their peers for their children are our children and their needs must be met. Throughout the history of the community of faith a simple test of need was the basis of sharing. In Deuteronomy we hear again this focus on need and the community provision of resources. "If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns&.do not be hard hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor. You should rather open your hand willingly"...(Deuteronomy 15:7-8 NRSV)

Prayer

We know, O God, that all that we have is a trust from you. Yet, we sometimes behave as selfish and jealous children. Our society, we confess, often gives greater resources to the priorities of the powerful - not those greatest in need. Help us to be staunch advocates for the material and financial resources our children and schools need in our complex society. Teach us not to be tight-fisted but to open our hands and hearts that children might live and learn fully. Amen.

8. A Measure of Accountability

The greatest natural resource of any society is its children. Those who work with our children assume a sacred trust to nurture and safeguard the child's well-being. We must insist that administrators, aides, teachers and others are accountable to the public for the thorough professional and effective education of our children. In the civic compact for public education the society must provide adequate resources, parents must encourage and support their children and educational staff must conform to the highest standards of teaching excellence. In our society we owe each other accountability and adequate tools to be effective. The Psalms, in essence, celebrates God's steadfastness to the people in an exercise of accountability. "Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne; steadfast love and faithfulness go before you." (Psalm 89:14 NRSV) While we cannot expect of each other a perfection that belongs alone to God we can and must institute programs of training, evaluation and accountability that improve and enhance education.

Prayer

In every age, O God, you call men and women into service as teachers, aides, administrators, nurses, coaches and counselors in our schools. By your strong arm shield those who work with our children from cynicism, indifference and despair. Bless those who work with our children with energy, intelligence, diligence and broadness of spirit. Help us to provide to teachers and staff opportunities for professional growth, time for personal rest and financial support that dignifies and rewards their high calling. Amen.

9. "...These Little Ones shall not be Lost"

When we look at the long arc of human history we often admire and give thanks for those who saw beyond the injustice of their own moment in history. We honor and are grateful for those who acted to end slavery, reform mental health care, abolish child labor, struggle for civil rights for all, fight against racism, injustice or poverty. It is difficult work to bring about social change. Many can and do agree in concept to the notion of a justice and a free society. Few of us are willing to make the hard choices and undertake the painstaking effort to achieve lasting change for justice.

Among the most insistent teachings of Jesus is his extremely strong statements regarding children. Matthew's gospel records Jesus saying, "Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones&..it is not the will of God that one of these little ones should be lost." (Matthew 18:10-14 NRSV) Called by the voice of Christ himself we find our generation confronted with the need to reform and refinance public education if all children are to live the lives for which they were created. In doing the hard work of advocacy for public education we will do well to remember the very high priority Jesus placed on children's well-being. We may draw strength too from one another and from God's instruction to Joshua who, like us faced seemingly insurmountable odds. Repeatedly God commands Joshua to, " Be strong and very courageous." (Joshua 1:7 NRSV)

If we stand together in courage seeking the well-being of all children we, working with others, can achieve a great good for this generation and the next.

Prayer

God of history and God of the futures, attend to us with your Spirit we pray. Quicken in us our sense of vocation and calling to our advocacy for children. When we are frightened, discouraged and lacking in ability renew in us your command to 'Stand and be courageous.' Bless us with a movement for public education reform which is focused enough to be effective and open to the leading of your Spirit. Keep us from arrogance, impatience and superiority. Perfect our efforts by your grace in the strong name of Jesus, we pray. Amen.