

“What If You Could Do One Thing?”

Date: November 15, 2015

Place: Lakewood UMC

Texts: Job 1:1-11; Matthew 19:13-15

Occasion: Intro. To Religion Matters

Themes: Hedge of protection; children and youth; parenting

Do you care about children? Do you care about *your* children, *your* grandchildren? Of course you do; that’s what parents and grandparents are supposed to do. Do you ever worry about your kids’ grades, about the kind of problems facing our children and youth today – things like violence, teen pregnancies, drug and alcohol abuse, depression/anxiety or worse, suicide?

If you’re a disciple of Jesus, of course you care. Now let me ask you this – what if you could do *one thing* to buffer kids from problem behaviors, and help them succeed in life? Would you like to know what that one thing is? I’m going to tell you this morning.

In our New Testament lesson we learn that Jesus had a heart for kids. The other adults in their lives, the disciples, tried to push them away as if they weren’t that important. Wait until they’re older. Jesus bid the children to come to him. Children and youth matter to Jesus. They should matter to us, to all of us.

Sometimes we wish we could bubble-wrap our kids before we send them out into the world. You know that plastic stuff you wrap valuable things in before you send it through the mail? We want to protect our kids from the bad things of the world.

Well, what if there was one thing you could do that would buffer them from the bad things, that would create a hedge of protection around them? By the way, do you know where that phrase comes from – a “hedge of protection?”

In the first chapter of Job, God points out to Satan that Job is a blameless and upright man, who fears God and shuns evil. Satan replies, “Does Job fear God for nothing? Have you not put a hedge around him and his household and everything he has?”

It has become common for Christians to adapt this verse and pray a “hedge of protection” around a friend or family member, but few people understand the origin of the phrase. In the time of the Old Testament, wild animals were more common than they are today.

Now, stone walls would have to be very high to keep predators away from households and livestock, and they would take a long time to make. Wood was not plentiful enough to waste on a fence. Instead, a hedge of thorn bushes could be grown around a living compound.

Thorn bushes would be too dense to crawl through and would thus keep the wild animals away and their families and animals safe. A thorn hedge is an appropriate metaphor for the protection God gives his followers.

What if, what if you and I could do one thing to help create a hedge around our children today? Would you be willing to do it? Social science research has identified that youth who participated in organized religion for one or more hours a week are less likely to participate in problem behaviors including violence, teen pregnancy, delinquency, substance abuse and depression.

Friends, I have been a part of a project for the past several years called Unified Erie. It is a secular program that was initiated by the US Attorney’s Office here in Erie to make a difference in our community, in terms of problem behaviors in our youth.

The three prongs of their effort were determined to be 1. Prevention, 2. Enforcement; and 3. Re-entry. Using the tools of social science, they have determined risk factors that cause kids to get into trouble as well as protective factors that are proven to buffer youth from problem behaviors and help them succeed in life.

Listen to this – the government is coming to the churches and other communities of faith asking for our help in changing things in our community. The social sciences are telling us what we in the church have known all along. Religion matters!

Participation in a faith community makes a difference. Science tells us that as little as one hour a week can make a difference, creating that buffer, putting up that hedge of protection for our children and youth.

I have some slides I'd like to show you that make this point. But the bottom line of this whole message is simple. If you could do one thing to assist your child in life, it would be to have him or her involved in at least one hour of organized religion per week. Not once a month, not once in a while. One hour a week, every week.

Let's look at the slides. Slide 1 – Title page. Slide 2 – simply tells you briefly about the survey that was taken in Erie County in 2014. 428 students participated. Slide 3 – shows us how often these students participated in organized religion. It's very interesting.

63% of the students surveyed currently participate less than once a week, or not at all. 20% say they have never attended at any time. A total of 34% participate sporadically, or did in the past. Only 37% of the students report weekly participation in their faith community. Friends, our students are not well-protected.

The good news is that participation has amazing results. Slide 4- says that youth who responded they participate in religion one or more hours per week show significantly higher rates of positive family communication. Their families have clear rules about alcohol and drug abuse. If they had a personal problem, they felt they could ask their mom or dad for help. Religion makes a difference.

Slide 5 – students who participate in organized religion one or more hours a week show stronger commitment to moral order than those who do not participate. They are less likely to start a fight, feel that it's very wrong to attack someone, and they feel that it's wrong for someone their age to drink beer, wine or hard liquor.

Slide 6 – if they don't participate in religious activity, more than twice as many students think its ok to ignore the rules that get in their way, 50% who don't attend versus only 20% who do attend. Almost twice as many students who don't participate in religious activity will do the opposite of what people tell them to do, just to get them mad.

An astounding 60% of non-religious attenders think it's okay to take something without asking, as long as you get away with it. Only 19 % of church-going kids think that way.

Slide 7 - Parents – you're going to love this one. Kids who go to church get better grades. Those attending once a week or more were more likely to get A's and B's, while those who never attend were much more likely to get D's and F's. What if you could do one thing to make a difference in your child or grandchild's life, would you do it?

Slide 8 – reinforces this message. Slide 9 – There's a relationship between the level of religious activity and depression.

Almost twice as many kids who don't go to religious activities considered suicide than those who do attend. More than twice as many felt sad or depressed than the kids who do go. And 17% more of the non-attenders think that overall they are a failure.

What if we could do one thing to put a hedge of protection around our kids? One hour of organized religious activity a week can make a difference. Sunday School, Worship services; youth group; Bible study – the activity itself doesn't matter. One hour of organized religious activity makes a significant difference in kids' lives.

There's more good news. Slide 10 – Only 37% of youth said they participated weekly, but **51%** of the youth taking the survey said that religion is important and it matters a lot. That means a large number of students who don't currently attend regularly are open to it, and think it's important. So how do we get them there?

Slide 11 - The most significant influence to participate or not participate in a youth's life is MOM, followed by siblings, and then Dad. As seen in the chart, if Mom attends or does not attend, youth attendance will likely follow suit.

Slide 12 – The data shows that most youth who do not participate weekly were also from immediate families who do not participate. **HOWEVER**, they were likely to know neighbors or grandparents who **DO** actively participate in religion.

That means for many youth not participating, a neighbor or a grandparent might be the one who could help them get connected. Do you have grandkids that aren't going to church every week? Are there any kids in your neighborhood who aren't going to church? Ask

their parents if you could take them. If you could do one thing, would you?

Here's the best news of all – Slide 13 – Most youth participate because they want to. 73% of the youth surveyed who said they already participate one hour or more a week – said they go because they want to go. The other 27% said they were told or were expected to go. In that same group, 92% said they like it enough to invite a friend to join them. Made to go, but still willing to invite a friend.

Slide 14 - We need to work at reaching the kids early, and then work to keep them. Why? The age they're most likely to quit attending? It's 10 to 12 years old. We can do better than that.

What if you could do one thing to buffer your child, or your grandchild, or the neighbor's child down the street from the risk factors that threaten our students today? What if you could put a hedge of protection around them that would give them a fighting chance to succeed in life?

You'd do it, wouldn't you? Then I wonder why our Sunday School classes aren't filled every Sunday morning. And I wonder why we don't have more youth participating in youth group. It's not because we don't have caring staff who work hard to make learning fun and interesting. They do. I know them. Their hearts are in it.

If the children and youth, or you as parents have tips on what we can do to make our programs more inviting, I encourage your feedback. But I will tell you this, we can provide the programming, but we can't get them here. Moms, Dads, grandparents – you have the biggest role in encouraging them to participate. We need your help.

What if you could do one thing? Know this – religion matters.