

HIS VIEW: For Heaven's sake, stop preying on little kids

Posted on: Thursday, September 24, 2009



Brock

Pssst, evangelists, could I have a word with you, please? Pay attention, because this is important.

Leave the little kids alone!

In case you missed it, I'll repeat the message. Leave the little kids alone!

My warning is prompted by a steady drumbeat of incidents, and the latest thump occurred Saturday at the Moscow Farmers Market. A friend of mine, whom I'll call "Sarah," was there with her daughter and a little friend.

The girls were enjoying themselves on the play structure in Friendship Square when Sarah's attention was diverted momentarily. When she respotted them, the girls were near a door to the bathrooms in New Saint Andrews College.

The girls, ages 4 and 5, were accepting balloons - pink, no less - from a 50ish-year-old woman. The girls had eyes only for the balloons, but the woman was bending close to speak to them. As Sarah approached, she heard balloon lady declare, "and then you'll be saved."

Sarah is among the most mild-mannered and reasonable people I know, but this incident overloaded her civility circuits. I can't say if flames shot out her ears, but she let balloon lady know in unambiguous terms that she was wildly out of bounds.

Amen, sister.

In fact, peddling big ideas about spirituality to little kids isn't simply out of bounds, it's creepy. And using balloons and ice cream to lure them in is a little bit sleazy. You read that right: creepy and sleazy.

Local evangelists may think their \$22 weekly outlay for balloons, ice cream and Dora stickers qualifies them as philanthropists, but they are wrong. Plenty of child molesters spend more than that, but they don't try to pass themselves off as do-gooders.

Like rats to a granary, there's no shortage of people who want to nibble at the minds of succulent children when Mommy and Daddy aren't looking. This is why a lot of people in Moscow and Pullman are revolted by evangelists who target elementary and preschool kids.

Why? Because if you want to talk with young children about anything more sophisticated than finger painting, then you need to talk with their parents. Period.

Why? Because parents, or their surrogates, are the ones who feed and shelter and nurture these children. Parents are the ones who buckle them into car seats. If you are interested in "saving" or "protecting" a child, then all roads lead to Mom or Dad.

This holds true if you're talking about swimming in the river, riding a bike without a helmet or that pesky matter of eternal damnation. When I tell my 3-year-old to look both ways before crossing the street, I don't want her to reply, "I don't need to, Dad, because the balloon lady says I'll be saved."

Regular readers will recall my last column, framed in mild and conciliatory terms, was about this very topic. As I did then, I'll repeat now that I am not criticizing religion. I'm genuinely happy for members of the flock who have found spiritual faith.

But faith isn't the issue here. The issue is predatory behavior toward children. Those of you who think such behavior is OK need to step forward and identify yourselves to the police.

In case you're not sure, here's a hint: It is not - nor has it ever been, nor will it ever be - OK to prey on young children, no matter how altruistic you think you are.

Unfortunately, some folks cannot grasp this concept, which means they will do whatever it takes to put the word of God - or the fear of God - into the ears of children.

Developing a system of spiritual belief is a delicate and personal process, particularly for youngsters who are still learning how to use the potty. That's why it's a job best left to parents and family intimates, not strangers handing out balloons and ice cream.

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