WHAT A NICE THING A BABY IS

(A baptismal sermon)
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Pilgrim Church, Duluth

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Psalms 8: 2
Matthew 21: 16

A few days ago an SOS came to my home. A baby-sitter called to say a crisis had arisen. The baby, she reported, was "sitting up and spitting." My wife went to investigate. However, since I thought more expert assistance might be required, I went along too. Despite my expertise, I was a little panicky at the prospect. It had been a long time since I had much to do with babies, and I was afraid that my knowhow might not come back. He was sitting up and spitting, That sounded bad. Then I said to myself "But that is what babies do most of the time except when they're sleeping." After that insight I felt better.

When we got to the home we found a big, fat baby, old enough to sit up and spit, but not old enough to walk. He wasn't spitting anymore, but he was bewildered. These were not the people he expected to see. When he looked at me he stopped crying, but I could tell that was mainly due to shock. So I let my wife take him out of the crib, and I proceeded to show the baby-sitter how to heat up his milk. It surprised me that this procedure came back to me as if instinctively. But then my experience went back a long way. I used to heat up milk in a doll's bottle for my pet rats. Feeding a pet rat is good training for feeding a baby, except that rats have better manners and do not need to be burped. They usually don't sit up and spit either.

But seeing that baby reminded me of what a nice thing a baby is--especially a big, husky one like that whom you can play football with on the floor and throw up in the air and generally prepare for the hard knocks in life. I miss having one of those things around the house. Rats are cleaner and better looking and less of a bother. But there is something about a baby that keeps the vital juices flowing.

Babies are good for people. By and large, I think, they improve people's characters. They have a maturing effect, especially the first one who comes to young parents, and especially on fathers. Many men are boys until they have babies. In a paradoxical way they have to have a child in order to grow up.

Another thing a baby does for us is to enlarge our perspective on time. The present takes on new urgency. A baby is always right now. So far as a baby is concerned he has no past and no future. He lives in the present and he makes you live there too. But although he is not aware of it, a baby enriches the other dimensions of time. The lives of his parents are turned now to that future that lies before him. They are continually envisioning what he shall be.

Upon examining my first child, I decided that she would

be a Wagnerian soprano. She had the chest for it. She has not fulfilled that expectation but I still believe I was right.

By the time my son was a few months old I decided that he would be a javelin thrower. He had the arm for it. That is why we moved to Duluth. I told him, "Duluth is full of Finns and the Finns are the world's best javelin throwers. Think of Myrra, Jarvinen, Rautavaara, Nevala, all olympic champions." Shortly before coming here, we talked to a track coach. "Remember boy," he said. "It takes plenty of practice and hard work, and those Finns are all seven feet tall." Then it turned out that Duluth was the only town I ever lived in where they did not throw the javelin on the high school track teams.

Babies open up the future . Our expectations are not always fulfilled. But even so our horizons are extended.

But babies also open up the past. It is no accident that the baby books usually include a family tree. It is with the birth of a child that the interest in geneaology often awakens for the first time. When a baby is like a new strawberry plant at the end of a runner. When he begins to set roots down, we start tracing back the runners from which he came. And we set down the new child's name in the family Bible so that others may track their runners back to him.

I never knew my mother's father. A tragic man, he came in time to alienate most of his children. But I shall pass on to my children an ancient piece of paper on which he wrote down so carefully in German the names and birthdates of all eight of his children. The list is the more interesting because in the case of the last child, my mother, he did not use her legal name chosen in the hopes of pleasing a wealthy aunt with the same appelation. Rather he wrote down his own name for her and the one under which he insisted on enrolling her in school. When a baby is born, old oddities like that are rediscovered. My first baby was given the name her great-grandfather chose.

Another thing a baby can do for us is to make us less selfish. Either that or he will bring our selfishness more clearly to light. Good Times Charlie and Good Times Sally may abide blissfully together in their self-indulgent ways so long as their respective views of good times do not conflict. But a baby puts an end to much of that. He makes demands on their time, their attention, their purse, their emotions. If they rise to the challenge they will become better people than they used to be. Some of their old pals may resent the change, but Charlie and Sally will be glad of it. Their selves will grow richer because they are joined in looking after another.

What a nice thing a baby is! There is no event equal to a birth. During the first year of my ministry I preached a sermon complaining that the local newspapers devoted so much space to deaths and practically no space to births at all. Some people misunderstood, but I think I had a point.

A birth shuts out everything else. During the summer before I started theological school, I had a job in a fire extinguisher factory. Two events stand out. The first was a fire that broke out in some canvas outside the plant. After everyone ran around for half an hour, trying out the local product, someone finally put out the fire with a pail of water. The other event occured on my last day on the job. My mother called to say I had a daughter. After the call I started back to work, but the boss said, "Get out of here and go see your wife." So I left, forgetting my beautiful, black lunchbox. When I got to the hospital, my wife asked, "Where is your lunchbox?" She was very angry about my leaving it. That is all she remembers about that day.

What a nice thing a baby is! A baby is high among those things that make the lives of those who aren't babies worth living. That is why the Psalmist put babies first in speaking of those things that declare the glory of God.

"O Lord, our Lord,
how majestic is Thy name in all the earth:
Thou whose glory above the heavens is chanted
by the mouths of babes and infants."