

Take Care of the Children!

Mark 10:13-16; Matthew 18:1-6

This church has cared for its children in remarkable ways since its beginnings. Janice Comer (bless you) was the chief architect and inspiration of our ministry to and with children. I have marveled at all this and watched with amazement what our children have become as adults and all they are offering the world these days.

It is no surprise that the first innovative ministry we have chosen to begin this year is for the wellbeing of children and young people in our public schools: Speak Life and Live. The leaders of Speak Life and Live will be with us in worship April 16.

Our model has been the way Jesus interacted with children. In our texts for today we see his love for children, a love both tender and fierce! These texts compelled today's sermon out of me—and its title, "Take Care of the Children!"

I

Mark's gospel brings us the familiar and beloved story of Jesus inviting the children near to bless them.

We see pictures of this scene on the walls of children's Sunday School classrooms around the country. The stained glass windows of medieval cathedrals often included this scene in their depictions of Jesus' ministry, and the history of Western Art includes many famous paintings of this scene.

However, theologians through the years have given scant attention to it. They have been like the disciples in the story who shooed the children away and scolded the parents who brought them. This is changing with the emergence of women biblical scholars and theologians. They are paying attention to Jesus and the children and asking us to as well.

In Mark's iconic text we read, "They were bringing little children to him in order to touch them"—that is to heal and to bless them. Novelist Mary Gordon remarks that Jesus is unique in ancient literature as "an affectionate hero." He seems, she says, *to want the presence of children, want their company.*

Think with me for a moment how many of the healing stories in the gospels are of the healing of children: the child with epilepsy, the daughter of Jairus the leader of the synagogue, the Canaanite woman's daughter, the Roman soldier's child, and the Roman official's son. What an extraordinary mix of people whose children he healed. Who they were in status, race, religion and nationality did not matter! "Jesus loves the little children all the children of the world." Did you grow up singing this song? "Red and yellow, black and white, all are precious in his

sight, Jesus loves the little children of the world.” I think it made a difference, this song.

II

So in our text today, mothers, fathers, grandparents, family friends are bringing their little children to be blessed and healed.

The disciples, however! The disciples did not think Jesus had time for such. The kingdom was at hand! They and Jesus had important work to do, saving the world! But not time for children. So they scolded the adults and shooed the children away. Or tried.

Jesus would have nothing to do with it. He grew “indignant” the text says. Sometimes its okay to get indignant. Sometimes our “gentle Jesus meek and mild” got angry—most often when he saw people being harmed.

Then those indelible words: “Suffer the little children to come to me”. Let the children come! “Do not hinder them”, he said, “for to such belongs the kingdom of God.” And if to such as them, we say, maybe to us as well.

Then Jesus says something like: If you get too big for your britches to accept the kingdom that way, you may have trouble getting in! Or to use phrasing from today: If you think you’re “all that” you may miss the party God is throwing.

Then the passage ends with Jesus, our affectionate hero, taking the children into his arms and placing his hands on them, to bless and heal them.

How do we bless the children? By paying attention to them, stooping to look them in the face, loving them and showing them they belong. As I've mentioned before, Theodor Geisel, *aka* Dr. Seuss, when speaking to aspiring children's book writers says that every children's book should address one of the seven needs of children, and near the top is the "need to belong."

Harvard's Robert Coles, psychiatrist and social psychologist has written a five-volume work on *Children of Crisis* and other works on the moral and spiritual life of children. They were inspired by Ruby Bridges, the little girl who was the first black child to integrate her elementary school. Accompanied by police and government officials, she walked through the jeering crowd. The scene has been immortalized in Norman Rockwell's *Saturday Evening Post* illustration.

Her teacher looked through the classroom window as she came toward the school building and saw her lips moving. Later she asked Ruby what she was saying to herself. Ruby answered "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." This moved Coles deeply. Later, in a book called *The Spirituality of Children*, Coles wrote of children as "soulful in ways that they themselves

reveal.”¹ We love our children by paying attention to the soulfulness each of them reveals.

Our children’s teachers recently were helping our children write Easter cards to our older members who cannot come to worship. One of them wrote, “I’m sorry you cannot come to church. I will come for you.” Where did that come from? Her soulfulness. (Probably her parents had a little to do with it.)

III

Now to the second text in Matthew 18. His disciples asked Jesus: “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of God?” Was this a good question or a bad one? Were they like James and John asking to sit at his right hand and left in glory? Were they like us social climbers in the kingdom of God? Or was it a question expressing a desire to really get what Jesus had been talking about? Are spiritual aspirations okay? I’m sure. I hope we never give up on them.

Jesus had been trying to teach them all along. Like in the Beatitudes, blessed are the poor-in-spirit, those able to mourn, the gentle, the merciful, those hungering and thirsting for justice and righteousness, the pure in heart, the makers of peace.

“Who is the greatest in the kingdom of God?” Hadn’t Jesus said, “the first will be last and the last will be first?”

Jesus didn't go back through all he had tried to say. He asked a nearby child to sit next to him and he said, When you become as this child, you'll be there. If you can get that *little* you will have it. The church is a bunch of little leaguers of the kingdom of God. No professionals allowed.

Then Jesus added a word we cherish:

Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me.

When we welcome a child we welcome Jesus. Simple as that. As revolutionary as that. Not just the hungry and thirsty, the immigrant, the sick, the prisoner, Jesus waits for us in children too.

V

But now Jesus' love turns from tender to fierce. "But", he adds,

...whoever causes one of these little ones to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone fastened around their necks and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.

Jesus as a mamma lion protecting her own.

"Take care of the children!" Jesus is saying to us and to our nation. One of the most remarkable things about our congregation is how many among us are

teachers, principals, counselors, social service providers to children in our community. It by far the largest percentage of any church I've ever been a part of.

We have our hands full today as we work for the welfare of our children in our community and nation. School teachers are among the lowest paid professionals. Teachers and principals deal on the front lines of society's conflicts and ills. Their students come with so many needs. Public schools are increasingly underfunded while public funds are rising for non-public education.

We are banning books and enforcing what teachers can and cannot teach. But we won't take on the N.R.A. and the banning of AR-15s. As we talked about last week, violence is rising in our schools as more and more embrace violence as a means of social change and conflict resolution.

We say we value children in our nation, but how little we value those who take care of children, both paid and unpaid.

The Governor of Arkansas just signed into law a bill loosening child labor laws. Children are working in our meat-packing factories. Frances Perkins, the woman who served as Secretary of Labor under Roosevelt from 1933-1945, would be turning in her proverbial grave.

I could give you a blizzard of statistics from The Children's Defense Fund about how many of America's poorest are children—well over 20% of North

Carolina's children live in poverty. Or about infant mortality rates that place our nation among third world countries. But I don't need to, you know.

Jesus would say to our nation today that every piece of legislation, every policy, local, state, national, we should ask: "What about the children?"

Jesus talked about millstones around the necks of those who hurt children, millstones so heavy it took donkeys to turn them.

As a witness to him, we should haul millstones to every politician's office door with the message, "Take care of the Children!"

On our journey to daybreak, let's take the children. They may take us!

1. Robert Coles, *The Spiritual Life of Children* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin & Company, 1990), xviii.