

The Good News is...Love and Protection for Children and the Vulnerable

Lent IV: Tell me Something Good series

Matthew 18:13-15; Deuteronomy 24:17-22

Multiple times this week church members asked me “Did you survive? Have you recovered?” You see, at the end of last week, I went down to Maryland to help take care of my boyfriend Andrew’s nephews. Two delightful toddler boys, ages 2 and 4 16 months apart, Shai and Kiva whose parents were overdue for some R&R. (may it go on the record that they reluctantly left their sweet boys) Andrew’s dad and I were on the clock for morning and evening responsible for wake up, potty, getting them dressed and fed and on their way to/from daycare. We had an intricate google sheet that told us everything we needed to know and Louis had done this before so he was more prepared than I was. Each time we greeted the boys, we weren’t sure what was ahead of us. Would there be an accident and we need a wardrobe change? Would Shai eat enough chicken nuggets? Could we avoid a Kiva meltdown? The stakes were high.

Now, the goal was pretty simple: keep them alive and, if possible, keep the toddlers happy. Keeping the kids happy? Now that I could do. Holding them accountable? eehhh-Over the years I have discovered my role with kids often is the “fun aunt” role. I’m the easily manipulated one that loves you so much and thinks “sure this will be fun!” and then realizes the results of my actions. I’m the one you can talk into extending your bedtime, getting extra grapes, and running wild around the house screaming at the top of your lungs. I can’t help it. I may not always be the star “parent” figure but I am surely the star “aunt” figure. Because kids are SO much fun.

All week, Andrew and I have been quoting our favorite Kiva and Shai colloquialisms—and telling seemingly pointless stories but relishing in their cuteness regardless. If kiva said he had to go potty, we were smitten with the way he said it, the expressions he made and how good he was at telling us he had to go. These boys are the center of the Stesis family life.

Rev. Brian Blount writes that “children are the closest thing to a miracle in most of our modern human lives. They are blessings we indulge with the best of our energy, support, protection, attention and acceptance. We not only welcome them into our company—we make them the center of our attention. We watch what they do, marvel at how they grow and attend to everything they say.”<sup>1</sup>

Let’s face it—we all live for what will happen each week during the children’s sermon. And as the pastor, one can only hope for controlled chaos. There may be many of you here today so excited and proud to see our kids leading worship. We love our children, we love to see them and we love to watch them grow up. It is our honor and privilege to share the love of God by loving them.

But this wasn’t always the case. Matthew’s scripture reading gives us a few short verses in a point in time—<sup>1st</sup> century Judaism under the reign of the roman empire. In Jesus’ world, children were not sentimentalized the way they are today. Nearly half of them never reached their fifth birthday. They had no legal status, no social power, and very little protection. They were among the most vulnerable members of society. They were important when and if they became adults to help the empire. And the way a society treats its children often reveals something deeper about how it treats anyone who is vulnerable.<sup>2</sup>

Matthew chapter 18 begins with the disciples asking “who is the greatest”. Jesus commands his disciples to welcome children in his name, that those who receive entry into the reign of God are those that embody the humility of a child. He follows this up with saying that by welcoming a lowly child, one of the most vulnerable people in society, they are welcoming Christ, himself. In God’s kingdom, all are welcome—rich and poor, men and women, grown-ups and little children.

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<sup>1</sup> Sanctified Art’s “Tell me Something Good” Sermon Guide Commentary, Lent IV.

<sup>2</sup> True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary, edited by Brian K. Blount, Gay L. Byron, and Emerson B. Powery, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2024). 120.

Our scripture reading is just a few short verses and this seems to be such a minor thing, but the actions speak volumes. In our passage, parents bring their children to Jesus so that he might bless them. Their caregivers bring them from the periphery to the center and by doing so the children become the center of this story.

But the disciples are totally inconvenienced by this disruption and start to rebuke those who brought the children in. Then, it is *Jesus* who rebukes the *disciples*, not the “perceived disrupters” –and reminds them that this is just as much holy work as his teachings. Jesus says “let the little children come to me, and do not stop them for it is such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs.” He stops everything, welcomes them, lays hands on them, and prays for them. Two things stick out to me most here: how Jesus responds and how the disciples respond to the children.

- 1) Jesus rebukes the disciples for trying to push away the distraction of the vulnerable, the lowly—those they had perhaps deemed “not worthy” due to their lack of contributions to society. They refuse to entertain the radical truth about God’s reign that Jesus is very clearly showing them: that it belongs to children, and those who are like children in our communities—those who are not granted full respect and acceptance.
- 2) Jesus however, welcomes them, lays hands on the children. In scripture, the laying on of hands is often a sign of blessing, authority, and belonging. It is something leaders do when they set someone apart for God’s work. Jesus is not just tolerating the children. He is honoring them.

Jesus’ actions communicate to the disciples and us that *children*, are not only valuable when they become adults, but also *now*. That they deserve as much authority and value as the rest of us. So often that is harder for us in practice than we think. Churches are notorious for thinking that seeing children in worship is hope for their beloved church that they fear would die without them. That children represent the future of the church. Children are not the future of the church, they are the church **now**. In welcoming these children, Jesus shows that they are just as much a part of his kingdom as adults are—they, and we belong to God not because of their faith or discipleship but because of God’s love.

Today, we welcomed two children forward with their families and surrounded them with love, placed our hands in blessing, and reminded them that they belong to God. When we baptize a child, we are making the same claim Jesus made when he laid his hands on those children long ago:

### **You belong to God.**

Not because of what you believe.

Not for what you can offer.

Not because of what you understand.

Not because of what you will someday become.

But because God's love claims you now, no strings attached.

The great good news of God’s love is that it is for those of us who seemingly have it all figured out (for now) and those of us who are still on the path—for those who are old those of us who are wise those who are young and those of us who are still exploring. The great good news of God’s love is that the kingdom of God is a place where all belong, especially the children and especially the vulnerable.

So, what do we do with this Good News? Just sit here in our sacred space and feel warm and loved? Yes, but the reality is that the second we walk out these doors, the world will disrupt this and challenge us to do more than just hear and agree about God’s love. Because we live in a world where the vulnerable are not protected, those considered on the margins are not brought into the fold.

We live in a world where adult decisions in an adult centric world are hurting children and the vulnerable. I hate this, but it is true: the world *will* disrupt our cute little children’s Sunday and ask us to boldly show what this love looks like and *it is up to us* to embody this love for everyone the minute we walk out this door. So what do we do with the great good news of God’s love today?

We protect and we care for the children. We protect and we care for the vulnerable. We protect and we care for those whom our society pushes to the margins and deemed not as important. And the way a society treats its children often reveals something deeper about how it treats anyone who is vulnerable.

Our second scripture reading in Deuteronomy God commands the people to care for the socially downtrodden, because they themselves knew once what it was like to be vulnerable—those who may remember a few short generations ago where life was treacherous under the tyranny of the Egyptians. They weren't full members of society, their value was determined by their labor, and their rights were second rate simply because they were Israelites.

They lived under an oppressive regime and God's love set them free. God harkens them back to this identity of vulnerability reminding them and us ***that at some point, we have all needed to be taken care of—and God's call is for us to remember that—and to become the one who takes care.*** The work of the church is to share that radical love of God with all, especially those in this world who are in deep need of refuge.

The question I was asked numerous times this week was “Did you survive? Have you recovered?” We all survived. And when mom and dad walked in after naptime, Kiva stood up in his crib smiled a big smile and shouted joyfully to mama and dada “You came back!” Shai and Kiva—are surrounded by people who adore them. Their family delights in them, protects them, and pays attention to every little thing they say and do. They are loved in the kind of way every child deserves to be loved.

Earlier I told you that our goal for the week was simple: keep Shai and Kiva alive and (mostly) happy. But the truth is, caring for our children is not just the work of an aunt or a grandparent. It's the work of the church.

To make sure children are fed.  
To make sure they are safe.  
To make sure they know they are loved.

Our scripture readings don't just show us that God loves children and the vulnerable—though that is certainly true. It shows that God also calls *us* to love them too.

To protect them.  
To welcome them.  
To make sure the world is a place that reflects the love and compassion of the very God who created us, who welcomes us into the fold, and calls us to love our neighbors.

It's just that simple and it's just that hard.