

Tell Me Something Good

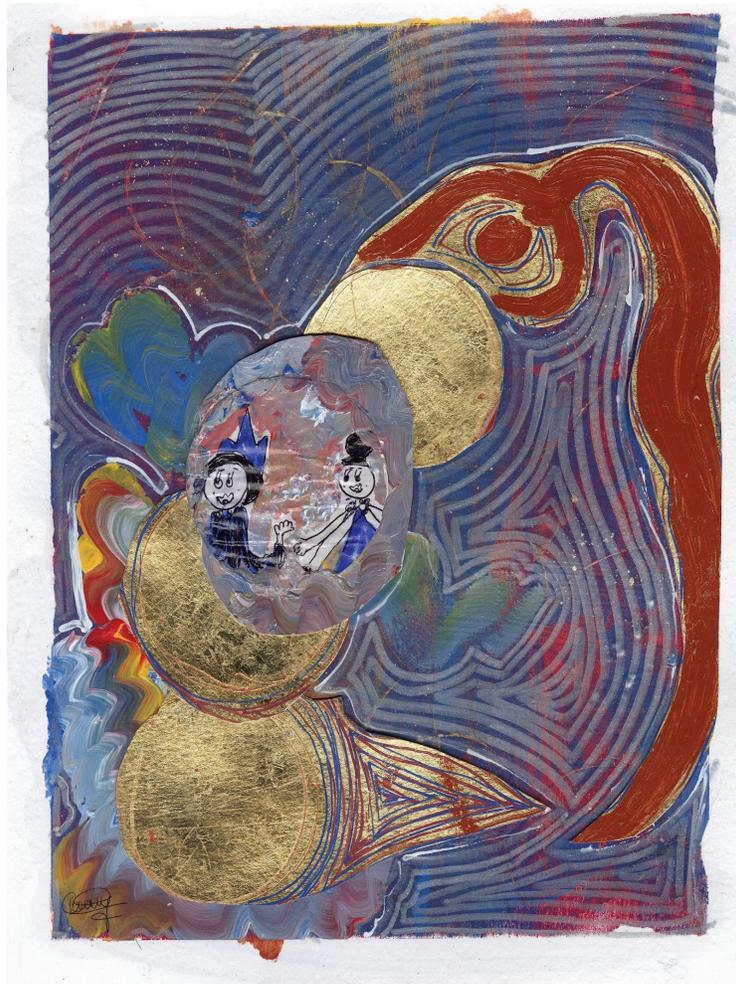
The Good News Is . . .

. . . protection and care for the vulnerable

Southminster Presbyterian Church

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By Rev. Karin Kennedy Hejmanowski



Let the Little Children Come by Carmelle Beaugelin Caldwell
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Texts: Matthew 19:13 - 15, Deuteronomy 24:17 - 22

Opening Prayer

Holy One,
sometimes the simplest of your commands
are the hardest for us to hear.
You say, "Love your enemy."

“Turn the other cheek.”

“Care for the widow and the orphan.”

And we want to know: How? When? Where?

Today as we turn to your word, open up space in us to simply hear your truth for what it is. Open up space in our hearts to dream new dreams, to imagine new realities, to draw closer to you and closer to love.

With hope for a better tomorrow,
we listen, we pray.

Amen.

Sermon

The poem that Julie read for us is such a reflection of our culture. Far from the days of yore when children were to be seen but not heard, we stop for children. We value their words and their presence. They remind us that there is hope. They remind us to look for joy in the ordinary as they marvel over insects that we would pass by or stop to say hi to someone we, in our busyness, might not have noticed.

And so it is easy to imagine Jesus being taken by the littles in the crowd. They're just so cute. Of course he would bless them. We pay attention to them in coffee shops, in grocery stores, and everywhere we go.

But it wasn't so in Jesus' day. Life and culture were so different. Children were not doted on and stopped for. They didn't have rooms prepared for them before they were born or gift registries created or showers or gender reveal parties...or birthday parties, for that matter.

When the disciples send the children away, telling parents Jesus doesn't have time for them, it strikes *us* as rude. They were so dismissive. Maybe they weren't parents themselves and didn't get it. But things just weren't the same back then.

Children were just a fact of life. But life didn't slow down for them. There was no parental leave. No day cares that cost one's whole paycheck. No, they were carried along out of necessity. They fended for themselves in ways we would never allow our children to do.

The late Dr. Michael Joseph Brown sets the scene for us when he writes, "We should dismiss ideas of childhood bliss when we read this passage. Childhood in antiquity was difficult. Fifty percent of children died before the age of five. They were the weakest members of society. They were fed last and received the smallest and least desirable portions of food. They were the first to suffer from famine, war, disease, and natural disasters. Many, some say more than 70 percent, would have lost one or more parents before reaching puberty. A minor had the same status as an enslaved person, and it was not until adulthood that they would be considered a free person."

As I sat writing this sermon at a coffee shop, there was a child about two and a half years old who was the center of attention anytime she spoke. She felt valued and respected and cared for. It's what we hope for our kids. But that's far from the experience of the children who were in the crowd that day that Jesus was teaching.

When the disciples sought to send the children away, that was expected. But these parents, these moms, wanted more for their kids. They wanted them to receive a blessing from this rabbi. Maybe they thought it would improve their chance of living. Maybe they just wanted a good word for their children in the midst of lives that were always lived on the brink.

Jesus breaks with cultural norms and tells his disciples to let the children come. And he blesses them. He sees them. He values them. And then he sends them on their way. But in that moment, in the recognizing of their value, he took everyone by surprise. No respected rabbi would take the time to bless mere children. No rabbi but Jesus.

Maybe Jesus did this on the regular. Often the gospels are arranged more to tell a story than to relay the order of events. In the previous chapter, the author tells the story of Jesus calling a child to him and saying that to enter the kingdom of heaven, people must become like this little one. And that whoever welcomes such a child welcomes Jesus. What sounds sweet, was actually radical. Children were not welcomed, they were tolerated. But Jesus is saying that those who are invisible and who are not valued are to be sought out and cared for. It's one example out of many where Jesus shows a preference for the marginalized, the poor, the invisible.

In our passage today in Deuteronomy, a similar value is explicated. Here the laws of God are put forth and time and time again, the vulnerable are called out. The alien, the orphan, and the widow. The people of Israel are reminded that they were aliens. They were immigrants. They have been dependent upon the goodness and generosity of others.

We are quick to forget our stories. We can be quick to forget what it's like to be a child. We can forget what it was like to be an immigrant. I'm the grandchild of an immigrant. It's easy to forget that coming into a new land, regardless of what brought one here, can be difficult. But it's even more difficult when you come with nothing. Or if you arrive here because you're fleeing violence or war or danger in the land you have always called home. A place you always intended to call home.

Scripture tells us time and time again that those who have nothing, those who lack status, those who are looked down upon, deserve more. They need more. They are to be valued and helped. In Deuteronomy this meant leaving some of the crops. Don't do a second gathering of wheat that has fallen or a bale that was missed. Don't do a second picking of the grapes or the olives. Leave them for those of the lowest social and economic status to gather or pick. Don't deprive those struggling to make it. Their life is hard enough and you have what you need. Give them a chance.

I wish we had a longitudinal study of the children Jesus blessed and their parents who were there to see them

blessed. When Jesus blessed them, I imagine it being this poignant and transformative moment of belonging. That his blessing affirmed beyond the shadow of any doubt, that they and their families belonged. They belonged to the community Jesus was forming that was seeking to live out faith differently. Seeking to turn things upside down. Where outsiders were insiders. Where children were more than tolerated—they were loved. Where widows were taken care of and protected. Where refugees were seen and helped. Where aliens were welcome.

As a culture, we've come to value children. As a church, we try to care for those who have lost a partner whether to death or divorce. It's hard to parent; it's really hard to single parent. And we're learning to value the immigrant just as *our* families were valued—or longed to be valued—when we were immigrants.

I think we have a lot of work ahead of us to learn how to do that. How do we continue to expand our hearts, expand our love for and our care and protection of immigrants. I've heard and read of the hard work this congregation did over the years to work toward full inclusion of the LGBTQIA+ community at every level of the church so they no longer needed to hide among us, but are welcome at every level of leadership. It was good work. It was hard work. And that work isn't finished, but you played a significant role in changing the official policy and culture of our denomination. That's impressive. Living into that change is on-going work.

I wonder what this community might be called to next. We are located in a neighborhood where there are people being made to feel like they don't belong. There are people in our congregation who feel less safe than they did in the past. And we are seeking to help those scared to leave their homes by partnering with the schools to help provide food to those families afraid to go out to grocery shop. But how do we increasingly decrease the distance between ourselves and those we help? Because as long as it's them and us, we still also embody the problem. What might God call us to?

What I know right now is that when we *know* we belong, we are more able to extend care and belonging to others. It's one of the reasons we still value membership in a church community. When you know you belong, you can welcome others because you have a confidence that you have a home. And I don't primarily mean people coming into our church community, though we love it when people do. But bigger than that, when we know we are accepted, we can extend gracious acceptance to others. We begin to understand and live into a gracious inclusion of those too often excluded.

So today, I want you to know yourself as blessed. I want you to know yourself as one who belongs. And that isn't a means to an end. Belonging is important. But a natural result of belonging is wanting others also to feel blessed, protected, and know that they, too, belong. Everyone. Everyone needs

to feel they belong. But especially those who wonder if they will ever belong anywhere. We belong. All of us. Amen.