

“Protection and Care for the Vulnerable” - Rev. Adam Hange
Matthew 19:13–15 | Deuteronomy 24:17–22

I. The Center of Our World

To be honest, in today’s modern family, it’s often the children who run the show

We have rearranged our entire lives around them. Our calendars and schedules are a major logistics operation — with soccer practice at nine, piano at eleven, a travel tournament three states away, and somehow everyone needs a snack.

We drive minivans and SUVs that cost more than our first apartments. We download multiple apps to track their activities, assignments, and moods. We agonize over how much screen time they get, and then inevitably “give in” because we are exhausted... and need a minute.

Some of these kids — bless their hearts — seem to have figured out that they are, *in fact, in charge*. The “iPad kid” doesn’t ask... The iPad kid commands. And grown-ups scurry around like assistants at a film shoot: “Yes, sir. Right away, miss. I’ll find that next episode immediately. *More goldfish crackers?*”

And look — it is beautiful, really. That we want the best for our children. That we consider them blessings. That we organize our lives around *ensuring they thrive*. This instinct is good and holy. We’ll come back to that.

But it is worth noting: it was not always so. Not even close.

II. The World Jesus Walked Into

When Jesus reached out to welcome children in Matthew 19, he was not doing something sentimental. He was doing something shocking...

In the first century, ancient near east,, there was a strict hierarchy, with the husband and father at the top of every household, and everyone else below.

In that system, children occupied one of the lowest rungs of social life. By some estimates, infant mortality was 20–40 percent of deaths before age six.

While, I'm sure children were cared for by their mothers, fathers, and families... in the eyes of *the society at large*, they were not precious. They were not centered. They were, at best, future labor.

Scholar Michael Joseph Brown puts it plainly:

"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." - Michael Joseph Brown

So when parents began bringing their children to Jesus — pressing through the crowd to get close to this teacher — his disciples did exactly what exactly what we might expect any person in their culture to have done. They turned them away.

"Back up. Move along. He's busy. Important things are happening here."

We can almost hear the edge in their voices: "*Can someone please manage those children? I can barely hear what the rabbi is saying!*"

They weren't being mean. They were being normal. That's how the world worked, and how it still works in many religious communities today - where Children are allowed to be seen, but not heard.

III. The Subversive Move

In this case, Jesus doesn't politely redirect. He rebukes the disciples. Notice - the disciples, and not the children. And not the parents who had the audacity to push forward. *The disciples*, who had once again missed one of the essential teachings of Christ's message.

This echoes something Jesus had already said back in Matthew 18, when his followers asked who was greatest in the kingdom of heaven. He called a child into the middle of the room.

“Unless you become like this,” he told them, “you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

What is it about children that points us to the realm of God, I wonder? Is it their curiosity? Faith? Sense of wonder? Or could it be the vulnerability of their position in that world....

Jesus says, *“Do not stop them. For the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.”*

Rev. Dr. Brian Blount helps us understand the full weight of this moment. He writes:

“The reign of God belongs to children and everyone who, like children, is not granted polite society’s respect and acceptance. ***The children, then, are a metaphor for all who lack societal status***, who so-called decent folk find distasteful and undesirable. The migrant worker. The immigrant. The alien. The homeless. The powerless. The undocumented.”

— Rev. Dr. Brian Blount

This is a radical reorientation of the socially constructed hierarchy. Jesus takes the last and puts them first. He takes the overlooked and places them at the center. He doesn’t just tolerate the interruption — he makes the interruption the lesson.

And this is not new to the biblical story. Long before Jesus, God had already said something similar through Moses. In Deuteronomy 24, the command is clear: care for the widow, the orphan, and the immigrant.

And then comes the reason: “Remember that you were slaves in Egypt.” This is a core message of the Passover meal... Remember... Remember... Remember...

For this memory is supposed to produce mercy. The experience of our own vulnerability is supposed to make us more tender toward the vulnerable. You know what it is to have nothing. You know what it is like to be powerless. Do not forget that feeling. Do not allow yourselves to grow callous to the cries of those on the margins...

IV. Who Are the Vulnerable Here and Now?

So who are the children at the door in our own time? Who are the ones being turned away, told to wait, told they don't belong in the room? Let me name some of them.

There are the immigrant children. You may have seen the photo: five-year-old Liam Conejo Ramos, an asylum seeker from Ecuador, detained this past January in Minneapolis, Minnesota. He was wearing a blue knit hat with bunny ears and a Spider-Man backpack. Five years old. A Spider-Man backpack.

There are the two brothers in Texas — mariachi players — detained, their music silenced mid-song, their futures suddenly uncertain. Our siblings at the United Church of Christ in the Rio Grande Valley know their names.

There are queer and transgender youth, many of whom are losing access to the healthcare they need simply because of who they are. Like those who will lose their drivers license - making them more vulnerable.

There are young girls, whose vulnerability the headlines keep reminding us is not theoretical. The Epstein files were a reminder of how structurally unsafe this world remains for girls and young women.

There are children living in poverty, children without stable housing, children whose mental health is fracturing under pressures we never had to face at their age. There are young people online, navigating spaces no adult has fully mapped, *often alone - and with little guidance on what is true, and what is click-bait.*

There are the children, traumatized by the sound of drones, and other aircraft over head... unable to sleep, praying each night that they will live to see another day.

Praying that they will have a school to attend. A safe place to play. The the chance to live and thrive.

And here is the turn that I want us to sit with for a moment:

Every single one of us has been vulnerable. Maybe not in the same way, not to the same degree — but we have all been the child at the door. We have all been in a room where we weren't sure we were welcome. We all have been in that place where we needed someone to say: "No. Do not stop them. Let them through. They *belong* here."

Some of us are still in that place today.

So this is not a sermon about "us" helping "them." It is a sermon about God's invitation to co-create a world where all can live and thrive. A world where the vulnerable are not just tolerated, but truly welcomed. Not just protected, but cared for, in every way.

V. A Refuge of Radical Welcome

There is a contemporary current in our culture — you have felt it — that would like to return us to something resembling the first century. A world of strict hierarchy. Rigid social order. With the strong at the top, the weaker beneath, and *everyone staying in their place*.

There are those who propose this theocratic vision of the world is God's chosen design. The gospel of Jesus Christ says otherwise.

The early church — what the New Testament calls the ekklesia, the gathered community — is called to be something different from the surrounding culture. Not a mirror of it. A refuge from it. What Dr. Blount calls "a refuge of radical welcome."

There is an important distinction worth naming here. Protection is necessary. If a child is in danger, you step in. You shield. You advocate. That matters. But the call of the gospel goes further than protection. It calls us toward **care** — creating the conditions in which people don't just survive, but truly thrive.

Think about what our congregation already does — and I mean this as genuine encouragement, not just a pat on the back:

We have a SafeChurch policy, which means you've taken seriously the idea that this building should be a place where children are genuinely safe. You support HomePlate Youth Services. You make room for youth musicians. You send support the Boys and Girls Club, immigrant justice organizations, and local schools. You are already doing this work.

The question is simply: Which children are still at the door? Whose spider-man backpack are we not yet seeing? Are there young people without safe spaces after school? Youth navigating their mental health without enough support? Families who have enough to survive, but not not yet enough to thrive?

These are not rhetorical questions. They're invitations. To see, care for, and protect the vulnerable...

VI. Closing: Which Role Are We Playing?

I want to close with an image.

In art, scenes of Jesus welcoming children are common — gentle, warm, almost domestic. Jesus sitting, children gathered around him, arms open. It's a comforting image.

But I want us to notice something the paintings don't always show: Jesus is not just welcoming the children. ***He is rebuking the ones who tried to keep them out.***

There are two roles in this story. The ones doing the welcoming, and the ones doing the blocking. And the remarkable, somewhat uncomfortable thing about this text is that the disciples — the people who had been following Jesus, who had heard his teachings, who were on his team — they were the ones who needed a corrective word.

Proximity to the right ideas does not guarantee we are actually living them out.

So here is the question I want to leave with you today, and it is not meant to create guilt or extra burden. It is an honest, genuine, curious and hope-filled question:

Are we radically welcoming children — and all those like children — in the same spirit that Christ did? And how might we do so ... even more?

That is not a question with a single answer. It will look different in every household, every family, every committee meeting, every policy decision.

But it starts with the posture: arms open.

Eyes watching for who is being turned away or ignored.

Voice ready to say, as Jesus did, “No, don’t turn them away. They are welcome here. ALL are welcome here.”

The kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.

Let us be a community that acts like we believe it. Amen.