

June 19th Message:
Jesus Blessing the Children: The Brokenness of the Vulnerable.
Scripture: Luke 18:15-17 NIV

Through the years, the face of the American fatherhood has changed dramatically in our country, with a shift in the role men play in our families. And we see this portrayed through tv shows we have enjoyed. In the 50's and 60's, men were considered good dads if they were breadwinners and disciplinarians. Tv portrayed this in the sitcom Father Knows Best starring Robert Young who was an insurance salesman and Margaret, played by Jane Wyatt, was a housewife. All final decisions were usually made by the dad in the household, because he knew best.

In the 70's, fathers were praised if they participated in the teachings and guidance of their children as well as helped to shoulder domestic chores. Guys like Michael Brady made it all look so easy-work 9-5 then be there for his kids, and spend time with them teaching them about life and how to do things around the house.

In the 80's and 90's, first-rate fathers began to get in touch with their feelings and discuss the feelings of their kids. They began to become not only fathers, but confidants to their children. Tv portrayed this through shows like Full House, where a widower raises his 3 daughters with the help of some friends.

Today fathers are expected to balance work and family, while their roles become more diverse and challenging including being stay-at-homes dads, step-dads, single fathers, surrogate fathers, Modern Family does a great job of showing this in different families.

Regardless of the times, it seems all these shows point to a common struggle all fathers face: What does a good father do?

In our lesson today Jesus challenges the disciples with the question: What does a good disciple do, and the answer points to our window in our sanctuary as we continue this sermon series of studying the stain glass windows in our sanctuary seeing how broken pieces can become beautiful pieces of art and inspiration.

Here is the background to the Lukan text. Jesus is nearing the cross, and on his way to Jerusalem he is stopped by some mothers who wanted their children blessed. It was a custom to seek a rabbi out and have them bless a child on their first birthday, so they are following this custom, but the disciples are following Jesus and they know the stress and strain he is under. So they suggest the mothers leave Jesus alone. Sort of like, "Don't bother your father, he's busy right now" But Jesus says otherwise. "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.

At this point this is the second time in the gospel of Luke that Jesus presents children as models of God's work in the world. First time it happened was in chapter 9:46-48 ⁴⁶ An argument started among the disciples as to which of them would be the greatest. ⁴⁷ Jesus, knowing their thoughts, took a little child and had him stand beside him. ⁴⁸ Then he said to them, "Whoever welcomes this little child in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. For it is the one who is least among you all who is the greatest."

Now children were not exactly respected in Jesus' day. They were often times treated as property rather than as persons. And yet Jesus holds them as examples twice in this gospel. He does so because he appreciated what children bring.

William Barclay in his commentary on this text said that children have qualities we should pay attention to. Those qualities are "keeping alive the sense of wonder, to live in unquestioning trust, instinctively to obey, to forgive and to forget" p.227

Barclay claims those are the characteristics of children we should learn from in regard to our faith and I agree with that, but notice Jesus says "such as these". What is he getting at?

I believe Jesus not only welcomes and supports the children in this passage, but the vulnerable too, those who cannot care for themselves and need support. From the youth to young adults still learning the ways of life, to the mentally, physically, and emotionally challenged, to the elderly whose living is limited. So that as I read this text I learn 3 lessons of what it means to be a good disciple.

One is: we need to recognize how the Lord wants to bless the children. He welcomes them, because Jesus truly loves the little children of the world. How comforting it is to know we serve a Savior who welcomes and blesses all children, as special gifts, not property as they were considered in his day.

Therefore to be a good disciple we should encourage and support his blessing. And we do in the church.

My favorite part of an infant baptism, beyond holding the child, is the fact that you, as the congregation have to make a pledge to support the child. I ask if you will support the child and their family and nurture their faith. And you respond with these words: We will surround these persons with a community of love and forgiveness that they may grow in their service to others. We will pray for them, that they may be true disciples who walk in the way that leads to life. Isn't that lovely? That means as that child grows and develops, they will be blessed by Jesus, through you, His church.

Another lesson from this passage is we serve a Savior who has regard for the weakest and most vulnerable among us. Did you know that as of today, a child is abused or neglected *every 48 seconds in America, 1,785 each day.*¹ More than *half of those cases are children under the age of 6 years old.* Children who are the weakest and most vulnerable, children who can't care for themselves. And what does Jesus say to them and their brokenness? "come to me" How beautiful. *We as good disciples need to follow his footsteps in regarding the weakest and vulnerable.*

Which leads to the 3rd lesson we need to pay attention to: If we serve a Savior who wants to bless the children and who has regard for the weakest and most vulnerable, our part is to not get in the way of them coming to Jesus.

The disciples tried to keep the children away from Jesus, but he was adamant they come. In Matthew's gospel, his words are a little harsher: 6 "If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea." Now a millstone was 2-7 feet high and weighed on average 3500 pounds. Pretty harsh language. But it makes a point.

How are we with letting the children and vulnerable outside of the church, come to Jesus? I'm not talking about the ones who are here, present for baptism, I am talking about out there. Are we good about bringing Jesus to them? The ones who face abuse, neglect, prejudices, and gun violence.

Were you aware that there have been 38 mass shootings since the Uvalde school shooting? Mass shooting defined where four or more people are injured or killed not including the shooter. In fact not a single week in 2022 has passed without at least 4 mass shootings.² You know what else is scary? We had 700 mass shootings in 2021.

And who are the ones who bring such violence? According to criminal justice professors Jillian Peterson and James Densley, authors of *The Violence Project: How to Stop a Mass Shooting Epidemic*, they claim the profile of a mass shooter is one who had an early childhood trauma of sorts: violence in the home, assault of sorts, parental mental challenges, extreme bullying.³

How do we not lose hope when we hear such statistics? And how can we change this pattern? We as good disciples care for the children, the vulnerable around us, we bring them to Jesus, to help their brokenness be healed by his beauty of unconditional love and acceptance. *Of grace and hope. Of joy and blessings.*

So here is the good news I have for you, Church. Your church is working on this. It already is with its Vacation Bible School it holds annually, reaching children who do not otherwise know of Jesus as they do not attend church.

And this fall, Cassie McCachren, the Director of our Children's Ministry, along with Nicole Gearhart, a teacher of our children's programs, will be opening an after-school program in coordination with Love Inc. They chose to work exclusively with Love Inc because they recognize the struggles many of their clients face in affording childcare, especially the single parents.

Further, your Church cares for those children as they become youth, and attend the Youth program led by Stephen Haverstick and his youth volunteers, where many of its attendees are invited friends of our youth members, friends that have little to no faith background. And this past week, some of those youth went and took

¹ <https://www.childrensdefense.org/state-of-americas-children/soac-2021-child-welfare/>

² <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2022/06/02/mass-shootings-in-2022/>

³

Jesus to Hope Springs Farm. A local farm that offers a day program for adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities and autism. And some worked around the house of our elderly members.

There is hope in changing the landscape of possible violence in this community, because this church is bringing Jesus to the children, youth, and vulnerable in the area.

Going back to the idea of what makes a good father. According to scholars Rosenberg and Wilcox, recent studies show that as the involvement of fathers has increased through the years, in fact tripling since 1965, the outcome of such attentiveness is linked to better cognitive development, educational achievement, self-esteem, and pro-social behavior of children.⁴ Saying that, in answer to the questions, What does a good father do? He's present and interacts with his child.

In answer to the question our scripture poses, What does a good disciple do? Jesus teaches us they are present and interact with the children, the youth, the vulnerable.

Friends, may we continue to strive to become such good disciples. And may that window inspire us to be so, in order to welcome Jesus to heal this world.

Let us pray:

Lord, I pray Your emotional, physical, and spiritual protection over the children, youth, and vulnerable of our community. Keep evil far from them, and help them to trust You as their refuge and strength. Help them to find rest in Your shadow, as they live in the spiritual shelter You provide for them. And may we not get in the way of your will, but follow it as your disciples, welcoming, loving, blessing all in your name,.Amen.

⁴ Rosenberg, Jeffrey, and Wilcox, W. Bradford. United States Department of Health and Human Services. Administration for Children and Families. Child Welfare Information Gateway. The Importance of Fathers in the Healthy Development of Children.