

June 24, 2018  
Series: Summer in the Psalms

Dr. Susan F. DeWyngaert

**Psalm 127**  
**Mark 9:33-37,42**

### Regarding Children

*'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 hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea.'* – Mark 9:42

*Then they [that is Jesus and the 12] came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?"<sup>34</sup> But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest.<sup>35</sup> He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."<sup>36</sup> Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them,<sup>37</sup> "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me. ...<sup>42</sup> "If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me,<sup>[k]</sup> it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea."*



Look to Your Children – Minerva Teichert

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Let us pray:  
O God, may the words of my mouth, and the thoughts and actions of each of us be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

For a long time I have been fascinated with a tradition of the Native American people of the Hopi Nation. It's called the Children's Fire. When there is a question or decision to be made, the community of elders gathers to sit around the Medicine Wheel. At the center of the wheel is the Children's Fire. Next to the Children's Fire sit the grandmother and grandfather – the oldest and most revered people in the community.

The question is placed before the gathering, and each elder has the opportunity to speak. The last to speak are the grandmother and grandfather. These two are acknowledged as the guardians of the Children's Fire. If the grandfather and grandmother decide that the thing is good for the Children's Fire, then it can be done. They are the only ones around the circle who have complete veto power. It is elegantly simple: Is what we are about to do helpful or hurtful to the children? If the thing can pass this test, it can be done.<sup>i</sup>

Now that I am a grandmother, I have more appreciation of this practice.

The Maasai people of central Africa are known as some of the fiercest hunters and warriors in the world. Interestingly, when the Maasai greet each other they do not say, “How are you?” Or “How did it go for you in battle?” When the Maasai meet, they greet one another with, “How are the children?” They acknowledge that the well-being of the children determines – not only the future, but the present well-being of all.

Jesus would have appreciated both customs. He held a radical view of youth. He did not consider children to be property or potential adults as most everyone else in his day believed. In his mind children were not distractions from the real work of adults.

“Fuzzy caterpillars to be fed and sheltered until they could turn into butterflies . . . [Instead] took them in his arms and blessed them. . . .He never asked their parents to take them to the nursery. On the contrary, when his disciples scolded people for bringing their children to church, Jesus was indignant. The kingdom belongs to such as these, he said. They are full-fledged citizens of God’s realm – not someday but now.”<sup>ii</sup>

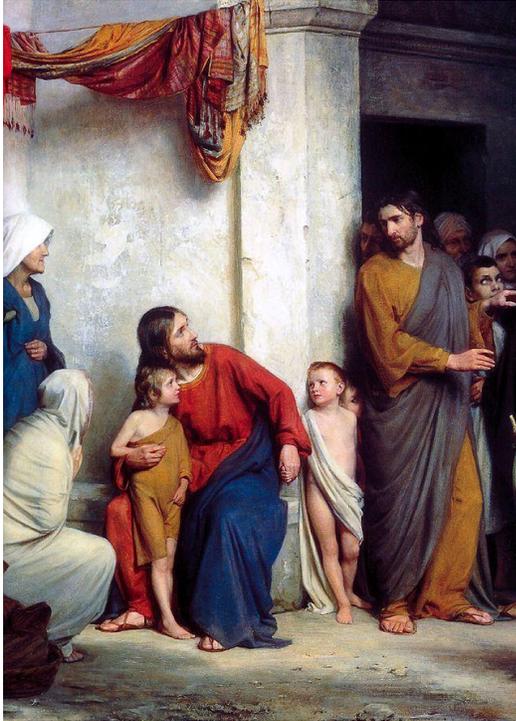
There was nothing sweet about it. I know we usually paint misty portraits of Jesus with the little ones, but in fact, for those who use, abuse and neglect children, for those who take advantage of them for the purpose of gaining economic or political power and status, for people who maltreat children, and in order to enhance their own greatness – toward these, Jesus’ anger is fierce and strong.

Two weeks ago, Pastor Nancy taught us that it is a sin to idolize and worship our children or their accomplishments. She’s right, and that is a huge problem in our day . . . but that was not the problem Jesus was addressing when he took a child, placed it in the midst of them and declared that everyone who wants to be great must be the least, humble, and powerless.

In his day, children were not the center of attention and adoration. Rather, ancient people regarded children as nuisances who were to be disciplined and “tolerated” until they became “useful” adults. In Greco-Roman culture, children were utterly without status, and they possessed no rights, no power, and no position. Infants, particularly infant girls, were regularly abandoned by families and left to die . . . a scenario, which unfortunately is still with us in many cultures, including, far too often, our own.

And so, when Jesus took a child and put him in their midst, it was not unlike one of our mission team members feeding and rocking a child with AIDS at one of the feeding centers or the orphanage we sponsor in Malawi. It is not unlike Pope Francis reaching out to touch someone with leprosy, or the dozens of you who reach out and offer hugs to our homeless neighbors each year at Winter Relief. Jesus took someone from the lowest rung of society and placed a child in the midst of a bunch of squabbling adults and said, “Whoever wants to be great, whoever wants to be first, whoever wants to be right -- needs to be like this lowly one . . .”

Last and least was his definition of greatness.



In one depiction of this scene by Carl Block, you can see the confusion and frustration on the face of a disciple. They are all still wrapped up in their argument over who is the greatest. They don't want to be reminded that Jesus' ministry is about welcoming the very lowest into Jesus' kingdom. They are absorbed by their fight over rank and order, over who will win and who will lose, over who can be "first."

Jesus' definition of greatness runs smack in the face of the world's way of defining greatness. We had better listen carefully to what he has to say. His warning is deadly serious:

*"If any of you harms one of these little one, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea."*

Concrete shoes. Those are strong words, and they should be! These have been a horrible few weeks for children. Even those who fully support the current immigration policies are expressing outrage at the large-scale warehousing of immigrant children.

Unless this is your first Sunday with us, you know that my granddaughter, Louisa, is the light of my life. The idea of something like this happening to her is incomprehensible to me. Are you a parent? Or a sibling? Can you imagine the trauma of a breast-fed infant taken from her mother, the only life-source she has ever known? You know, if you have ever been the father or mother of an infant, that you cannot simply switch a child from mother's milk to formula. No child can go from being with a mother he knows and trusts to being with a complete stranger. A child in that situation can easily die.

There are conflicting reports about how the refugee children are being housed, some that include cages. Others say that detention centers are well maintained, even full of toys. Some report that caregivers are not allowed to pick up or comfort frightened children. If even some of these things are true, we cannot stand by. As my friend, Scott Levitt said this week, "Children kept in cages is evil." Period.

Here at Woods we are blessed to have many children and their families involved in the life of our church. Many of you have heard me say that my favorite 5 minutes of the week is the time I usually spend sitting here on the steps with our little ones at Children's Moment. The idea of something like this happening to one of these little ones is absolutely unconscionable.

"The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good people to do nothing," said the father of modern conservatism, Edmund Burke. He also said that "whenever a separation is made between liberty and justice, neither, in my opinion is safe."

So where is liberty? Where is justice for these refugee children?

I am not an expert on immigration law, nor do I claim to know as much as many of you about public policy. What I know is the Bible...that is where I excel. I've dedicated my life to it. Opposing sides are hurling scripture verses at each other like rotten tomatoes. We don't have nearly enough time today to go into everything the scripture says about children, refugees, immigration, and respect for the laws of the land. Suffice it to say that it is hard, very hard indeed, to find biblical support for turning away those who are fleeing violence and oppression. The Attorney General quoted Paul in Romans chapter 13 this week, the very same verse that has been historically quoted in support of slavery, apartheid, by white supremacists and anti-Semites. It is further worth noting that Romans, chapter 13 also says:

“Love your neighbor as yourself. Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfillment of the law.”<sup>iii</sup>

I realize that public safety is the administration's reason for tightening border security. That is the government's job, and I am grateful for it; but I am also aware, as are you, that each of the 9/11 hijackers entered this country legally on business, student, and tourist visas. It is past time for our leaders to cooperate in order to fix a broken immigration system.

The current situation on the border bears a striking resemblance to the one depicted in our New Testament reading, in two ways. First, it took place in the midst of an argument about who is the greatest. I don't like having to get political from this pulpit, but at this point in history to say nothing would be biblically and morally wrong. The leaders of our country have been caught up in that dangerous game, contending over who is greatest. When members of Jesus' leadership team were acting like 4-year-olds, Jesus took an actual 4-year-old, put him in the midst of them, and taking him up in his arms Jesus said, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.”

Secondly, our situation resembles the one in the gospel reading in that with both situations the welfare of the ones Jesus points to as the moral examples – in both cases the children – becomes entirely lost in the adult argument over power. That is unacceptable.

This morning, USA Today reported that...

“Executive order ensures children won't be separated from their parents; it doesn't help families of the 2000 children who have already been separated.”

And the Texas Tribune announced that...

“Attorneys and advocates say there's no clear path for reuniting families. Under the zero-tolerance policy, parents and children are being held by different government agencies. It's not clear how the agencies will work together to reunite the families.”<sup>iv</sup>

Susan Johnson and Herbert Anderson wrote an insightful book several years ago called *Regarding Children*. In it they say that in order to be true to the teachings of Jesus the church has to advocate for children and others with little power. This is our litmus test, they said.

Listen:

“Jesus placed a child at the center of the circle. [Likewise] the faithfulness of the church’s witness to Jesus Christ is measured by how we regard the weakest and most vulnerable in our midst. When a society understands and is in sympathy with childhood, it will not ... valorize violence, practice idolatry, teach hate, destroy the environment or preach materialism or indifference toward anyone. ... Our compassion for ... children is a life sign. With it we take our pulse as humanity.”<sup>v</sup>

Friends, we have to get over our fear of disagreement and talk – dialogue is required of us.

It may sound trite, but the very real and persistent question is: what would Jesus do? This is not only a political question but a moral one. As a Christian I am called by my faith to put the needs of others before my own. Children are not pawns. They cannot be used as collateral; their purpose is not to teach adults a lesson. Make no mistake about it:

*“If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones ... it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea.”*

It’s time to let go of our millstones.

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<sup>i</sup> As heard from the elders of the Hopi Nation and quoted by Kathleen A. Guy, *Welcoming the Child*, in *Imaging the Word*, vol 1 Kenneth Lawrence, ed. United Church Press, 32.

<sup>ii</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *Bread of Angels*, Cowley, 1997, 131-2

<sup>iii</sup> Romans 13:9b-10

<sup>iv</sup> Marilyn Haigh, What's happening at the border? Here's what we know about immigrant children and family separations *The Texas Tribune*, June 21, 2018 [www.texastribune.org/2018/06/18/separated-immigrant-children-families-border-mexico/](http://www.texastribune.org/2018/06/18/separated-immigrant-children-families-border-mexico/)

<sup>v</sup> Herbert Anderson and Susan W. Johnson, *Regarding Children*, John Knox Press, 111