

“In His Hands”

A Sermon by the Reverend Katie Crowe
First Presbyterian Church, Charlotte, North Carolina
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Our New Testament lesson for the morning comes to us from Matthew 18:1-14. Listen now to the Word of God.

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, ‘Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?’ He called a child, whom he put among them, and said, ‘Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.’

‘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. Woe to the world because of stumbling-blocks! Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to the one by whom the stumbling-block comes! If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to enter life maimed or lame than to have two hands or two feet and to be thrown into the eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into the hell of fire.’

‘Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones; for, I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven. What do you think? If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost.’ Here ends the reading of God’s Word.

Children have certainly been much on the mind of the church these days- during the summer months the third floor of the fellowship hall building is busting with them each day with Freedom School. Of course, they have always been close at hand in the ministries of this congregation- thousands of children cross the threshold of our building and our hearts each year through the Child Development Center, the Weekday School, our Camp Grier program, relationships with the Lakewood Preschool and Westerly Hills elementary school, not to mention our children in worship program, Sunday school classes, choirs, catechism and Vacation Bible School, relationships with children through global ministries like The Mayan Children’s School in the Yucatan, the school at OFCB in Haiti, the women’s prison in Russia as well as through local community ministries such as Loaves and Fishes- where about 4500 children came with their parents to our building to get food last year and Room in the Inn where dozens of homeless children slept, to name a few.

This is to say nothing of those ministries in our midst that touch the lives of older children- such as the junior and senior high ministries, scouts, confirmation classes, prayer

partners and the list goes on. We have an old Tiffany stained glass window upstairs in the administrative wing of the church building of Jesus blessing the children- a reminder of the centrality of the child in the community and life of faith. Children are onlookers to the scene of the Good Samaritan depicted in the fresco in the front lobby.

Yes children are much on our minds and hearts and we often have a lot to say about them and what it means to love them and how we are to minister to them whether or not we actually have any of them ourselves because it is our call as a community of faith by baptism to surround all of those who pass through the same waters of Christ's redeeming grace with love, and to be especially mindful of the youngest among us.

"This church has a real heart for children" I was told my first day on the job- a truth that has been reinforced by your actions and commitments every day since. But are we sure we know what a statement like this even means? What does it mean for the community of faith to surround a child, and what does the child mean to the community of faith?

The image of Jesus with the children is so benign to us now-relegated to peaceable images in classic art and children's songs- 'he's got the little bitty babies in his hands'. But I wonder if we are prepared to take on the fullness of the call that Jesus intends by bringing one such as these into his midst. The disciples are notoriously misguided on the point of children. In two of the gospels we see a story unfold that illustrates the great disparity between Jesus' understanding of the role of children within the community of faith and the disciples' take on the matter.

In the scene crowds press in on Jesus and his disciples, acting as handlers in essence, encourage the sick to come forward, the dying, the demon possessed. But when children are held out to Jesus simply so that he would touch them- the disciples treat them with profound contempt.

When Jesus sees this behavior from his followers Mark says, "He was indignant and said to them, 'Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.' And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them."

And then there is our text for today, where the disciples are once again rebuked by Christ only this time for arguing about who was the greatest among them. And as a lesson to them he brings forward a child- the object of contempt in their sight, and not only teaches a lesson about true greatness but reveals God's deep commitment to the young in faith and years.

Mind you that in first century Judaism the child was considered a legal non-person. Children had no rights, no voice, no status, they were regarded as inferior- treated more like property than people and who would certainly not be associated with the in-breaking of the kind of Kingdom of God the disciples were expecting- one where a Messiah would usher in a reign of social, political and military power for Israel- the kind of kingdom that would need great and

persuasive leaders to keep the ship on course if anything were to happen to Jesus as he seems to think it will.

So the disciples start comparing notes on their spiritual victories- numbers of souls converted, people healed and so forth to see who is the most spiritually mature for leadership in this new order- who among them is the greatest they ask themselves. A question that Jesus answers with a child, fierce indignation and a twofold charge.

First, the call to humble oneself. God's kingdom in Christ is ushering in a new order that has no place for your pride, 'Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven,' he says.

And second, the call to come to the side of the most vulnerable among us with the same fervor you would exercise if you were coming alongside Christ himself in need, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me."

Get Jesus talking about the matter of children and he gets fiery. Get Jesus talking about both the object- the child- and the lesson- care for the young in faith and marginal in the community- and suddenly the Christ of love and compassion, mercy and forgiveness is saying that if you harm one of these little ones with your pride- if you cause the young in faith even to stumble by minimizing their contribution and exalting your own just as if you cause one of these children to fall with your malice or neglect- it would be better for you were a boulder to be tied around your neck and thrown into the sea where you drown- than to have to stand before the Lord with this on your conscience, "So it is not the will of your father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost."

These sound like fighting words to me. And fighting words they are because the great subversion of the kingdom of God is at hand and Christ is insistent that the disciples have to reframe their work in their minds and readjust the attitudes of their hearts if they are to get on board.

If Jesus and his followers do not do battle for the children and let them know just how deeply they are loved, if Jesus and his followers do not take up the cause of the vulnerable, of those who are pushed to the margins, if Jesus and his followers do not give voice to those who will not be heard, and meet the gaze of those who will not be seen, if they do not recognize that all of God's children have a contribution to make to the kingdom than you can bet he knows that no one else will and not because of malice. Not because these are despised by everyone else but because of disdain.

Without Jesus these 'little ones' will die the slow death of disregard... and be devoured by the juggernaut of the world's pursuit of its own interests irregardless of its impact of the most vulnerable members. This is what the world does. But this is not what the Kingdom of God is about. The stained glass image of Jesus and the little children does not depict a scene that is a source of comfort to the disciples and it cannot be for us. It is a call to humble yourself- to meet the most vulnerable among us where they are and in that place reveal through your witness the immense heart of God that is on fire with passion and concern for his children and that will not

rest until each and every one of them is drawn into his embrace and knows that they are infinitely precious in his sight and that they are beloved.

Our Old Testament text is the perfect articulation of what is at stake in the battle being waged against the wellbeing of the least powerful among us- the actual children- not the object lesson children, but flesh and bone children who are the embodiment of dependency-the kind of dependency we, incidentally, are to have on God. It is a tough passage.

Two prostitutes living in the same home bear children and in the night one of the infants is smothered and killed. And the disdain of one of the women- the blind pursuit of one's own needs and ambitions- the disregard for this little one's value nearly costs this child its life. The plaintiff would have been fine had this object in question been divided equally among the two women as long as she got her due.

It is a stunning illustration of just how terribly vulnerable a child can be. They are so subject to the sin and weakness of adults, so easily overlooked in the course of the human drama, so prone to being caught up in the undertow of our society's sweeping ills and fallibilities.

In the grown-up battles being fought in this grown-up world, the infant of this text stands as the silent victim, solely dependent on the wisdom of God-fearing Solomon to lead child and adults alike from the brink of destruction and despair. The child's life is completely in his hands which brings a measure of comfort in one way but also draws into focus just how dangerous the unchecked patterns and habits of disdain- disregard for these little ones among us- can be.

You don't have to look very far to find other victims of the culture of disregard that surrounds us, a culture that bears the fingerprints of our culpability. Sure you can look to the statistics of our country to find them- where a child is arrested every 19 seconds, or in NC is killed by gunfire every four days or suffers from abuse or neglect every 18 minutes. But if you don't want to go to the stats to learn about the depth of our children's vulnerability then the third floor of our Fellowship Hall building any day of the week is a good place to start.

Where youth group gathers along with young Freedom School scholars, children's Sunday School classes and Room in the Inn infant guests. Wittingly or unwittingly this world in which we are a part is laying out stumbling blocks for these little ones like it is its job. All you have to do is listen to their stories and you come quickly to this conclusion.

If those walls could talk they would tell you that the children they surround on any given day are dealing with the pressures of sex. And the shame and anger of illiteracy. They are struggling with the fear of abandonment and the diminishment of never being good enough and the anxieties of being overscheduled at age 8.

They are making decisions about depression medication along with the other 10 percent of their peers and if they should steal or starve themselves or do drugs to fit in. They are receiving text messages with pictures of body parts and being pressured to send the same. Not just other people's children. Our children are bearing these impossibly heavy loads. And with them so many of the young in faith and the most vulnerable among us. They were not born with

these burdens. They inherited them. From a culture that not so long ago in its quest for greatness forgot what it meant to be community and left its concern for the most vulnerable among us behind.

Dr. Marion Wright Edleman is the founder of the Children's Defense Fund, the creator and curator of the Freedom Schools program nationwide. A known civil rights activist Dr. Edleman has dedicated her life to giving voice to those most vulnerable among us- the children- so easily overlooked in our society's pursuits of other interests.

I had the good fortune to hear Dr. Edleman speak at an event hosted by Freedom School Partners- the local administrator and advocate for the program recently and while we were there she told us a story. Apparently one of the staff people at the Children's Defense Fund had been sent a YouTube video by a friend and insisted that everyone come and see it. So, Dr. Edleman said, she soon found herself standing with their entire office staff all huddled around a computer screen mesmerized by what they were watching.

Of course, after she told the story the first thing I did was rush to watch the video. So the video was called "The Battle of Kruger Park"- it had amassed over 58 million hits and unfolded exactly as she described. The footage is taken from a handheld camcorder and shot by a member of a group of tourists on safari in South Africa.

The vehicle the group was on had come to a halt on the edge of a riverbed and sat idle while the group of tourists oohed and aahed and snapped photos of a giant herd of water buffalo that gathered at the bank on the other side of the river. The group cooed as a family of three buffalo- a mother and father and tiny little baby meandered peacefully from the pack over to the water's edge for a drink unaware that several hundred yards away a pride of lions that had been lounging in the sun are now stealthily easing up to attack.

Sensing the danger too late, the water buffalo parents and calf immediately turn and run away but the child cannot keep up. The six swift lions lunge and overpower this slowest and most vulnerable member, tackling it and tumbling into the water. Startled, the herd of water buffalo turn and scatter, racing out of the camera's field of vision while the four then five lions in the meantime each grab a portion of the baby's body and are now pulling and dragging it onto the shore while the baby water buffalo bleats in distress and attempts to put up a fight of its own, kicking its free legs and crying out.

But then a crocodile that had been drifting just under the surface of the water unseen by the lions launches up and snaps its huge jaws around one of the baby's free legs and at this point you know that the baby water buffalo is doomed as these predators all pull at it like a tug-o-war from every angle for what seems like an agonizing eternity. Suddenly there is a gasp from the vehicle- "Look!" one of them says. "Look at the herd!"

From the left of the screen, a cloud of dust rolls in- and with the sound of hundreds of thundering hooves emerges the entire herd of water buffalo returning to get their baby back. Instantly the crocodile lets go and slips back into the water, and the herd surrounds the lions who are snarling and recoiling when a few brave buffalos- you can bet they were mothers- Dr.

Edleman adds- rush forward from the pack charging the lions, stomping and snorting until one of them lunges forward, head low and tosses one of the lions into the air with its massive horns and chases after the shocked lion until it is out of sight, then another buffalo gathers its courage and does the same- one by one the lions are picked off and amazingly the baby water buffalo who had been lying motionless on the ground hobbles to its feet and stumbles forward. The crowd of tourist's cheers and the baby is enfolded by the herd -and the community, now that it has reclaimed its child, continues on its way.

To the crowd huddled around the computer screen in our minds, watching the scene on the plains of South Africa unfold Dr. Edleman asked, "Where is the community stampede for our children?"

There are predators hunting them, preying upon them, reaching for any part of our children they can get a hold of and competing for their lives, for their minds, for their future, for their very souls. Where is the community stampede for our children? "Powerful predators go after the weakest and the most vulnerable first." She said. "Vulnerability is a despised earthly value but a protected and esteemed heavenly one." You and I must be heard for the most vulnerable among us, children and adults alike, and rise up so that not one of these little ones should be lost.

The question we must ask ourselves day in and day out, Christian people, as a family of faith that is committed by the waters of baptism to embrace the 'little ones' among us, as a church that 'really has a heart for children', as the body that is bound by the covenant relationship of membership to be 'For Christ in the Heart of Charlotte', as disciples who worship a living God who is continually breaking us down and building us up and calling us out as we seek to respond in faith to the ongoing work of grace in our lives, the question Christ puts before us by placing a child in our midst is will we be stampede or stumbling block for all God's children today? Will we be gospel stampede or stumbling for one another and this community of faith and the city of Charlotte today?

So I ask you: Where is our stampede? Where is our stampede for our community? Where is our stampede for the poor, the vulnerable, for the youth, for the homebound, for the sick? Where is our stampede for the condo-dweller, for the seeker, for those who mourn, for the one who has given up hope? Where is our stampede for the stranger, for our families, for our colleagues and our friends? Will you be stampede or stumbling block to the great enterprise of love that places you and all God's children in his hands today by the way you lay down your pride and take up the call of discipleship and follow our Lord?

"Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me." As disciples our charge is to be the gospel stampede that surrounds all God's children in love and lets them know by our humility and the way we act, speak, love, and pray that we are not afraid to enter into their most frightening realities or stand beside them when their deepest vulnerability is exposed and neither is Christ. By doing this we will both bring Jesus with us into the world, and meet him waiting for us there inviting us to risk opening ourselves up to being changed by his heart of love as children in our fathers house who rest safely in his hands.

Let us pray. God we pray that you would hasten the day when all your children- young and old alike- would know your love that will not let us go and will not rest until we rest with you in glory. When forces pull on us and our children from all sides help us to recall that you are stronger still and that you claim us as your own and give us the power as partners in your service to stand and speak and work for you. So grant us the courage to embody your saving love today we ask in your son's holy name. Amen.