

“WHO’S WATCHING THE CHILDREN?”

Psalm 121; Luke 18:15-17

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Rev. Jerry Duggins

You haven’t had a solid sleep for months. Your newborn wanted to eat every two hours, or had colic and screamed inconsolably for hours every day. Your teenager looked at you like you were the dumbest thing to hit planet earth ever. Your now adult child won’t see or speak to you and you have no idea what you did. When parenting isn’t thankless, it’s still hard. Maybe your son is incarcerated or your daughter is anorexic. Maybe your trans child is being bullied at school. For some parents, disappointment, frustration, anxiety, even anger, dominates their relationship with their child. For others, circumstances such as poverty, illness, or tragedy contribute to their sense of failure. I get why raising children may not be the reward that many parents envisioned.

It can’t have been much easier to raise a child in the first century, so it makes sense that Jesus would interrupt the disciples in their “gate-keeping” role and insist that they stop preventing the parents from bringing their children to him. But he doesn’t do this for the parents. I’m sure in the end it is helpful as the old African proverb would indicate: “It takes a village to raise a child.” Parents cannot, nor should they, provide all the care that their children need themselves. But as I said, he doesn’t receive the children for the sake or benefit of their parents. He is, in the first place, interested in the welfare of the children themselves, and almost as importantly, the teaching point for the adults present.

“It is to such as these (the children) that the kingdom of God belongs.” He welcomes the infant with colic, the overactive toddler, the defiant child, and the disparaging teenager. A lot has been written about what Jesus means by not being able to enter the kingdom except as a child. Some suggest their innocence, others their vulnerability, still others their curiosity. Those are all worthwhile things to ponder, but I want to focus not on what quality makes children fit for the kingdom of God, but on the nature of the kingdom that makes it suitable for children. The take-home message for the adults present should have been that God loves children and by extension that God loves us from cradle to grave.

The psalmist calls God our “keeper.” God provides shade from the heat of the sun’s rays, protects us from evil, watches over our comings and our goings, doesn’t sleep or even take a nap from taking care of us. God knows just how you feel when the last decent sleep you had was months ago. God knows what it is to raise a child, even a difficult child.

So God loves children... watches over children. But as Teresa of Avila said and as I’ve repeated many times from this pulpit: “Christ has no hands but your hands” and we might add “no eyes but your eyes.” Who’s watching the children... if you aren’t?

At some part in the history of White America, we began lifting up the nuclear family as the ideal social structure for raising children. I put it that way because minority cultures never bought into that ideal. When they could, they leaned on extended families to meet the

challenges of bringing up children. Most families today rely on this structure. Where there are two parents in the household, often both of them work. And where grandparents are unavailable, these couples rely on daycare. Amazingly, we have people of faith who judge women for not being “stay-at-home” moms. These same people criticize single parents, usually mothers, for, well I’m not sure what: the disintegration of the American family?

When women are accused of having another child just to increase the size of their assistance check, we have a problem in this country. When half the children in a county live in poverty, we have a problem. When we’d rather blame these families than address the concern, we have a problem. When free lunch programs are shut down and special education funds are cut; when disparities in infant mortality persist, we have a problem. And when we blame those suffering under these conditions, we fail to live up to God’s expectations. We fail to be the hands and feet and eyes of Christ.

There are countries with generous parental leave policies that ensure a stable income and time for mothers and fathers to devote their efforts to the best care for their infants and toddlers. There are communities that subsidize and regulate daycares so that poor families have access to safe and quality care for their children.

What would happen if we started prioritizing children? What would that look like? Wouldn’t we stop focusing on blaming parents and spend more time assessing and tending to the actual needs of the child. We know children learn better when they’re not hungry all the time. So let’s make sure they get adequate nutrition. We know that infants are born with fewer health issues when women get good prenatal care. So let’s make sure they get it and that families are relieved of financial stress in the first year of their child’s life as Rxkids is trying to do.

If we made the welfare of children a priority we’d invest more in poverty reduction programs, in education, in healthcare. There’d be more effort invested in preserving natural spaces, in curbing pollution, in creating a healthier future for the earth. If we really loved children, we’d stop fighting wars that kill and maim them, that devastate their homes and leave them orphaned. When you’re willing to sacrifice children while destroying your enemy, you have achieved moral bankruptcy. Jesus is pretty clear on this point. Such people will never find the kingdom of God.

“Let the children come to me.” When they’re hungry, feed them. When they’re thirsty, give them something to drink. When they’re sick, visit them. Help them to thrive. Give them safe places to play and learn. Most of all, see them, watch over them, as God watches over them, because, as we know, children should be seen... and heard, tended, nurtured, loved... loved as God loves... from cradle to grave. Amen.