
The Sound of Children

Mark 7:24-37

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on Sunday, September 9, 2018,
by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery

“Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world, red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in his sight, Jesus loves the little children of the world.” Jesus loves the little children. And you know who else loves children? Mr. Fred Rogers. The documentary, *Won't You Be My Neighbor?* reveals how Mr. Rogers, an ordained Presbyterian minister, started a children's show, “Mister Rogers' Neighborhood” and used it to teach children and commune with children for over 30 years. Mr. Rogers went to his closet, put on his sweater and changed his shoes at the beginning of every episode of his show. He loved children and taught them lessons such as “You are special just the way you are” and that they couldn't fall down the drains in a bathtub. He wanted the best for children, which is not always the case in our world. Mr. Rogers urged others to remember those who always wanted the best for us throughout our lives from childhood onward. Do you remember someone who always wanted the best for you? Right now, take a moment to bring them to mind.

I remember my second-grade teacher, Mrs. Esch. She always wanted the best for me. And I still remember this song she taught us:

*On top of spaghetti
All covered with cheese
I lost my poor meatball
When somebody sneezed
It rolled off the table
And on to the floor
And then my poor meatball
Rolled out of the door*

*It rolled in the garden
And under a bush
And then my poor meatball
Was nothing but mush*

*The mush was as tasty
As tasty could be
And early next summer
It grew into a tree
The tree was all covered
With beautiful moss
It grew lovely meatballs
And tomato sauce*

*So if you eat spaghetti
All covered with cheese
Hold on to your meatball
And don't ever sneeze*

She played the piano in our classroom as we sang this song. I remember Mrs. Esch who even in her 80s received her Doctorate in Education. What an inspiration! She always wanted the best for me and as Mr. Rogers taught, you don't have to do anything sensational to be loved. This is wisdom for both children and adults.

In the gospel story, the little daughter of the Syrophenician woman didn't do anything, literally, to be loved, as she lay in bed with an unclean spirit, but her mother wants the best for her daughter, wants her healing, and loves her. She risks rejection based on culture, religion, ethnicity, and gender but is willing to approach Jesus nonetheless and resist the taboos of that day for her child. She is a super advocate for her daughter just as we all need advocates when we are sick in the hospital. She begs Jesus to cast the demon out of her daughter and in the end her sass saves her child; she's the first woman to speak in the Gospel of Mark. Despite initial resistance from Jesus, her faith remains strong and leads to her daughter's healing. This mother and Jesus are the center of attention in this biblical story. We know who the adults are because they get all the action and words.

Jesus comes across as rude in his response to the woman when he says, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." 'Children,' here, refers to Israel. Jesus is apparently acting out of the culture and norms of the day in his treatment of this Gentile, thus unclean, woman. In this Jewish setting, Gentiles were sometimes simply referred to as "dogs." It's an insult. But the desperate mother doesn't respond angrily but rather with, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Most Markan scholars suggest that some significant change in Jesus' ethnic attitude occurs at this precise moment in his mission. This response alters Jesus' view on his mission among the Gentiles and her clever, faith-filled response is what leads to her child's healing. No fanfare, no fancy "razzle-dazzle" as Calvin Seminary Professor John Rottman says, but the demon is cast out of the child so when the mother goes home, she finds "the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone." Great news, right?

The main characters in this story, the mother and Jesus, are active and speak but even when the healing comes, the child is not heard from nor is there any action from her. She is a passive figure in the story to be acted upon but she has no agency. There isn't one active verb associated with this little girl. Everyone else speaks but the child! Jesus speaks. The mother speaks. The crowd speaks. Even the mute man's tongue is released and he speaks plainly. But the little daughter, the child, never says a word. Are we silencing the children? Are there any children in Duke Chapel this morning? If you're here, please say in your loudest voice, "Good morning, Duke Chapel!" We want to see you. We want to hear you.

Even in the worship bulletin artwork, we see the child in this biblical story on the periphery of the so-called real action, implying the marginalization of children. And in another scene of this artwork when Jesus acknowledges the plea of the woman and heals the daughter, the daughter is actually nowhere to be found in the image. Healed but not heard or seen at all. It is a visual depiction and indictment of how often children's voices and perspectives are muted and their bodies made invisible. If we never hear them, we may come to view them as insignificant because sound signifies presence and importance. If we never hear certain sounds, particular voices, we will never recognize the significance of certain people or cultures and at its worst not even recognize their humanity. Coming to voice matters. You have a voice and metaphorically it means you have an identity—that is, your voice. But without a voice you may have a non-identity, and be a non-being, even non-existent. Your body is there but it is passive, not active; it is healed but not a healing agent, just a body lying on a bed or a sidewalk or in a jail. There but no one cares to hear your voice, especially the voice of children, including the Syrophenician woman's daughter.

And when children are silenced, they can become victims of physical, psychological and sexual abuse, exploitation, poverty, and fear. To be given a voice (as Jesus does for the mute man) is to be set free (Richard Ward). If this is

true, then although this little girl is healed, she is not yet totally free because she is silent. And throughout the Gospel of Mark, there are other children who never say a word. In chapter 5, a child, the daughter of a synagogue ruler, is said to not be dead but sleeping; she's healed and gets up to walk around but she never speaks. In chapter 9, another parent serves as an advocate and speaks out on behalf of a child who has a spirit that doesn't allow him to speak. But even after Jesus heals him and the boy stands up, there is no sound, no words, from this child. The silencing of children is sin.

I've always said that I'd want a child to pray for me over a bishop anytime. Who wouldn't want to have a child pray: Dear God, thank you for the baby brother, but what I prayed for was a puppy? So genuine, honest, transparent, and faith-filled. These are the voices we need. Children's voices. Mr. Rogers was not just an advocate, a voice for children, but he listened to their voices deeply. He had a genuine respect for the dignity of every child. Although children are still developing, they are fully human, made in the image of God, deserving of our respect and gentle care, rather than being seen as objects to be silenced and abused, even in the church. Do we silence the children?

Mr. Rogers didn't. When he met a 14-year-old boy whose cerebral palsy left him sometimes unable to walk or talk, Mr. Rogers asked the boy to pray for him. This boy was shocked because he was normally the object of prayers, but no one had ever asked him to pray for them. This boy said he would give it a try and pray for Mr. Rogers since he thought that Mr. Rogers must be close to God and if Mr. Rogers liked him he must be O.K. When Mr. Rogers was complimented on doing this and improving the boy's self-esteem, he responded this way: "I didn't ask him for his prayers for *him*; I asked for me. I asked him because I think that anyone who has gone through challenges like that must be very close to God. I asked him because I wanted his *intercession*." (David Brooks)

A child may be a part of this biblical story. Children may be a part of your story and lives. But do they have a voice? Do they speak? Are they heard? Jesus said, "Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me" (Matthew 18:2-5) and he adds, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs" (Matthew 19:14). But if they come, will we listen to them?

Malala Yousafzai, a daughter of a teacher, was 10 years old in 2007 when the Taliban seized control of her home region in northwest Pakistan. The following year, the Taliban banned all girls from going to school. Malala began blogging for the BBC about life under the Taliban and her desire to return to school. Eventually, she and her family were forced to flee their home as the Pakistani army returned to the area to fight off the Taliban. The national army was successful, but the Taliban still controlled many rural areas. Malala continued her very public fight for education rights and, in 2012, when she was just 15, masked gunmen boarded her school bus and shot her in the head. She survived, and along with her family moved to England, where she returned to school in 2013 and continued her advocacy for girls' rights to education. In 2014, at the age of 17, Malala became the youngest winner of the Nobel Peace Prize.

When the children come, the world can change. I wonder if sometimes we are afraid to listen to children because they will tell the truth? But if we shut children out, we shut God out because not only does Jesus love the little children, God came into the world as a child. So don't ever underestimate children. One saved the world and we've never been the same.