
LAMENT FOR THE CHILDREN

MARK 10:2-16

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The Gospel of Mark, compared to the other three Gospels, focuses the most on the suffering of Jesus and his impending death by crucifixion, and only spends a measly eight verses on the resurrection. One could say that there is a subterranean mood of lamentation in this Gospel. Not surprising then that in Mark, we hear the cry of dereliction, that famous headline newsworthy cry of lamentation, from the lips of Jesus as he nears death—“my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” That blues note is a note Christians across the world should learn to sing and nurture. Jesus’s lament shows us that lamentation is a faithful Christian practice and expression before God. The son of God, the child of God, the only begotten feels forgotten, and so he laments out loud for the love of the world.

So often the church wants to ignore lamentation as a viable voice of faith and discipleship. The church seems to prefer Instagram-worthy celebration praise parties when lamentation is also a critical part of the worship of God. We should never forget that the Psalms are full of laments like—how long, O Lord? Why do the nations rage, and the people plot vain things? Why are you downcast, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? There is a lot of lament in the Bible.

And so today, within the Christian tradition, from the heart of Christ, following the lead and love of Jesus, I offer a lament for the children. My God, my God, why?

Why did Hurricane Helene wreak devastation on the South? People still missing as recovery efforts are underway. Homes gone. Businesses gone. Livelihoods gone. Loved ones gone. Of course, all ages of people have been affected by this disaster, but I think of the little vulnerable children in particular—lacking food, looking for water, no electricity, losing their parents, losing their pets, yearning to be safe and warm. My God, my God, why?

Why in Asheville did seven-year-old Micah have to evacuate to the roof of his home with his mother and grandparents for safety, so that the waters would not go above their necks? They thought it was safe. But eventually, the house broke apart and collapsed while Micah and his grandparents were baptized in the waters of death. Only his mother survived.

In an interview, Micah’s mother was wearing Micah’s Deadpool shirt, a superhero shirt, because for this Halloween Micah wanted to be a superhero. When the roof fell in, his mother said Micah started screaming “Jesus save me.” Sometimes, all we can say and pray is ‘Jesus.’ Sometimes, all you can say is ‘help,’ save me. These are the last desperate words from a child named after a prophet. Why?

I lament for Micah lost in a storm and overwhelmed by water, and all the innocent children killed, maimed, orphaned, trapped in violent, deadly wars in the Middle East and other parts of the world. They are just caught in a crisis in which they have no control. They are passive recipients and victims of adult decisions. And yet, the impact on children from war is devastating. In an article about this from the NIH, we learn of the impacts of war on children such as death, injury, disability, illness, rape and prostitution for subsistence, psychological suffering, moral and spiritual impacts, social and cultural losses, and even becoming child soldiers.

Even outside of natural disasters or war, consider the general treatment of children in society. The limited resources in many public schools imply something about who is the priority, and it doesn’t seem to be the children. That social servants like teachers and bus drivers would need to boycott or march for better pay is a valid reason to lament. That those who teach our children or care for children or protect children should struggle to make ends meet due to salary and other benefits is an indictment against our society. How we treat the most vulnerable, how

we treat children, is a revelation of our moral code, values and priorities. What if we needed a letter of reference from children in order to enter heaven?

To go even further, think of words like ‘childish.’ It has a negative connotation. Or, what about a traditional response to lively children’s behavior—“sit down and be quiet.” Isn’t this what the disciples do when people bring children to Jesus to touch them? They “spoke sternly to them.”

This is very similar to the muting of children’s voices in worship services historically to keep the noise down. We’ve heard it before—“shhhhhhh...” to the child restless and twisting and whining in the pew, so the parents, sometimes embarrassed, have to slip out of the service and take their child out into another room, so the noise doesn’t disturb God, apparently. Perhaps we don’t want to keep their noise down because what we are hearing is the sound of the kingdom of God. Or maybe, God is trying to get our attention through them. Like Jesus said, the kingdom of God belongs to the children so let them come and “whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” Rather than marginalizing children, Jesus lifts them up as role models for everyone else. So we ought to be careful when we come to church, that we aren’t more concerned with being sophisticated than saved. The ostracizing of children perhaps signals that we ostracize the kingdom of God from our lives.

But this isn’t really anything new in the history of humanity. The whole idea of children ‘seen but not heard’ is an implicit thread even throughout the Gospel of Mark. Not just in this one episode where children are present but still silent even if they are embraced by Jesus. All throughout the Gospel of Mark, there are, what might be called “unvoiced bodies” (Luke and Emerson Powery). They’re there, but we don’t hear anything from them. One could argue like Robert Fowler does that “the only voice is the voice of the narrator, and it is always in control.” But the question then would be, who does the narrator allow to speak in the stories? I can tell you—it’s not the children.

In Mark chapter 5, the 12-year-old daughter of a respected synagogue ruler is “silent.” Prior to Jesus’s arrival at her home, the only assessment of her is from her father: “my daughter is about to die” (5:23). Sixteen verses later, Jesus challenges the father’s assessment and says, “the child is not dead but sleeping” (5:39).

After Jesus touches her and speaks “foreign” words of healing she “got up” (cf. 9:27) and “walked” around (5:42). Although she’s in good company with Jesus’s own predictions of his getting up at the resurrection (cf. 8:31; 9:9-10, 31; 10:34) and his walking on water (cf. 6:48, 49), she never speaks a word. Silenced. Why?

Then in Mark chapter 7, there’s a young daughter of a Syrophenician woman and she’s overshadowed by her mother who begs Jesus to heal her daughter. In this story, there’s the famous exchange about dogs eating the crumbs from the master’s table. Her mother is the first woman to speak explicitly in Mark, so it’s not insignificant. A lot of attention in sermons and commentaries has been on the mother.

However, little attention is given to the young daughter whose life is most drastically changed. This young daughter does not have one active verb associated with her. She’s passive like when we hear that her mother “...found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone” (7:24-30). She’s healed, which is great, but she never speaks. Silenced. Why?

And in Mark chapter 9 (cf. 9:14-29), another parent serves as an advocate and speaks out on behalf of a child. In this case, “[the child] has a spirit that does not allow him to speak” (9:17). The spirit not only controls the boy’s speech, it subdues many of his normal bodily functions. But, like the daughter of the synagogue ruler (cf. 5:42), this young child received Jesus’s touch and “stood up” (9:27). But again, this child, though he stood up, is shut up, at least by the narrator. Silenced. My God, why?

I lament that we don’t often make space to hear the voices of children, to learn from them, to honor and respect them, despite their age and limited earthly experience. To silence children is to do violence to them and in

opposition to the kingdom of God. This was the genius of Mr. Fred Rogers, an ordained Presbyterian minister, whose entire ministry was focused on children and whose show “Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood” could have been viewed as a child development textbook translated by him. This empathic ethic toward children was nurtured in him by his maternal grandfather, after whom he was named. His grandfather would often tell him: “You’ve made this day a special day by just your being you, Freddy.” Mr. Rogers understood the nature of the kingdom of God, so he opened himself up to children like Jesus and by doing so, welcomed the kingdom of God to be shown on television all across the nation.

It’s no surprise that Jesus becomes “indignant” when the disciples respond sternly to children being brought to him. He literally “grieved much.” If someone is worth loving, they are worth grieving over too, and so he grieved the way the children he loved were treated. And out of his righteous rage and undercurrent of lament, he voices love and welcome, and says, “Let the children come to me... do not stop them... And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.” His grief and lament turned to love.

As Nicholas Wolterstorff wrote in his book *Lament for a Son*, when his son tragically died in an accident: “every lament is a love song.” Jesus laments because he loves.

We should lament over lost children, hurt children, abused children, malnourished children, silenced children, whether they our own biologically or not, because we are in the same human family and it reveals our love. We, too, are children, whether we want to acknowledge that or not. Aren’t we called the ‘children of God’? Mr. Rogers noted, “The child is in me still...and sometimes not so still.” Some of us may want to escape our childhood and so we mute that inner voice and experience. Not everyone views children or childhood in the same way as Mr. Rogers.

But like Whitney Houston sang in her 1986 hit, “The Greatest Love of All”:

*I believe the children are our future
Teach them well and let them lead the way
Show them all the beauty they possess inside
Give them a sense of pride to make it easier
Let the children’s laughter remind us how we used to be*

It’s a call to teach children and affirm their beauty while letting them lead the way. The ancient prophets taught that in the peaceable kingdom “a little child shall lead them...” Sounds very much like the way of Jesus. But we, adult Christians, just can’t seem to get it engrained in our brain membranes or our hearts. We underestimate children so often which is why they may be ‘seen and not heard.’ But Jesus reminds us that they can be our spiritual guide. And maybe their laughter will “remind us how we used to be” when we were children and remind us how we need to be in order to receive and not achieve the kingdom of God.

Jesus welcomes every child and blesses them. He brings them close to his side to be touched by the enfleshed salvation of the kingdom of God, that is, his very own body. Like the children, he wants us all to stay close to him and touch his body and thus the kingdom.

Jesus laments and grieves the treatment of the children because he loves them. He lamented from a cross because he loved the world although it was sick and is still wounded just as his broken body is. He, the son of God, the child of God, lamented for us, showing us how to truly love. Lament is a love song. And I will continue to sing that song. Will you join me?

On this World Communion Sunday, I lament for the children of the world, because “Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world...” But do you?