

Protect the Children

Jesus is often imagined as a sweet, loving, non-violent White man who walks around the desert in Birkenstocks. With his long hair and swishy tunic, he's the kind of person who is non-threatening. Docile, Meek. Kind. Gentle. The shepherd.

But in our passage for this morning. Jesus gives threats. Warnings even. Like a big sibling on the playground defending younger siblings, Jesus tells the crowd what will come to them if they are guilty of harming "one of these little ones." Even more, he promises that it would "be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea."

That's a lot, Jesus. But is it?

In its own context, Jesus might have been speaking with the due amount of force. He was an ostracized, outcast, highly-visible and vulnerable anti-state organizer, healer and spiritual leader. He was NOT a spiritual advisor to the Emperor. He did not have a book on the New York Times bestsellers in religion. He did not have a blue-check on his Twitter and he was not invited to the biggest national conferences on spirituality. He was an outsider. And as such, his commentary must be read as someone who is responding to violence, not someone who is initiating violence.

Philosopher, professor and activist Dr. Angela Davis talked about this very idea in an interview captured by the Black Power Mixtape documentary. Filmed in prison, she replies to an interviewer who asks her to make an account for violence done in the name of the Black Panthers.

She says, "You ask me whether I approve of violence? That just doesn't make any sense at all. Whether I approve of guns? I grew up in Birmingham, Alabama. Some very, very good friends of mine were killed by bombs – bombs that were planted by racists. I remember, from the time I was very small, the sound of bombs exploding across the street and the house shaking..That's why when someone asks me about violence, I find it incredible because it means the person asking that question has absolutely no idea what Black people have gone through and experienced in this country from the time the first Black person was kidnapped from the shores of Africa."

Where does violence begin? Does it begin with the looting, self-defense brigades and angry retorts? Or does it begin with the offensive strike of slavery, lynching, police brutality? Where should we aim our wagging fingers? At the destruction of property during protests, or the deployment of hyper militarized police militias in residential areas? In Dr. Davis' words, "that doesn't make any sense at all."

Jesus is not being violent. Yet it still may be difficult to read these words in his voice. Someone who hangs a millstone around their neck and falls into the sea will most certainly die. Even more, Jesus tells people that if your hand causes you to "stumble" then cut it off. It's better for you to "enter life maimed than to have two hands and go to hell." This sounds painful. Jesus is responding to violence that has already been aimed at him and his people.

Jesus is asking us to get to the base of sin. The bombs, the spiritual malice in treating entire classes of humans as servants, the violence of the prison system. If we look to the base, we might not be so quick to blame the little ones for their circumstances. Who exactly are the little ones in this scripture? The Greek word used here in this passage is “micros” where we get the prefix “micro” in English. Microwave, microscope, microphone. Funny enough, in these English words, these are all examples of small things becoming amplified. It’s not a description of the thing itself nor its value.

Microwaves energize water molecules in food to heat them up, microscopes use strong lenses to help human eyes see small objects, people speak into a microphone to amplify quieter sounds, especially when there is a Lion’s and a Tiger’s game on the same day.

So when you hear “micros” don’t just think about the smallness of a thing. Think about the ways we can amplify and witness that thing in a more accessible way.

Mikros can refer to size, age, time, quantity, and even rank or influence. It is found elsewhere in Mark 4 to describe the smallness of the mustard seed. Small things can become powerful. Mustard seeds are easily spread because they are small.

But I don’t want to get too metaphorical. Most of us think about children when we hear the phrase “little ones”. Jesus frequently speaks positively about children, as we saw last Sunday and prioritizes them in his healing work.

Consider then the numbers of children who are being intentionally surrendered to the mathematical likelihood of contracting COVID-19 because adults with power have presented themselves as “stumbling blocks” to children. Yet there do not seem to be political consequences for those adults. There have been school board meetings where anti-maskers have protested for their right to not only infect other adults, but to assume that children will inevitably contract the deadly virus.

CBS news reported during the first week of September that children made up 22% of weekly US cases as schools are opening up. There is no national plan to support the end of the pandemic. There are barely some mitigation measures, but overall, there is no consistent protocol for children in schools.

Some schools are completely virtual, others are in a hybrid model and others are fully in person. Among those that are in person, there are some schools that mandate masks, some that mandate masks and testing in lieu of vaccines and some that mandate tests and vaccines for everyone.

Experts have noted that the numbers of child COVID-19 cases have increased nearly five fold between August and September. This is mainly thanks to the highly contagious nature of the Delta variant, the more aggressive cousin of the first few strains of the Coronavirus. And don’t forget that younger children are not eligible for the vaccines, which puts them and their families at risk as the new strains of the virus run about the nation.

The Center for Disease Control, has recommended that schools prioritize “in person learning.” They have also recommended indoor masking for all people regardless of vaccination status, as well as “three feet of physical distance” to reduce transmission risk. But in schools in under-resourced districts, especially those that serve students of color, these mitigating measures are insufficient.

How do you maintain healthy ventilation if you have no windows? How can children eat if they have no outdoor space? How can students get the help they need if there are more school safety agents on-site, than school nurses and guidance counselors?

Jesus’ warning seems less like a threat and more like a statement of fact. The more we place stumbling blocks before the little ones, the closer we are to our own demise.

Jesus has just come from a conversation with John and others, who cry out, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name and we tried to stop him because he was not following us.” To this, Jesus replies, “Do not stop him, for no one who does a deep of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us.”

In his own riddle-ridden way, he tells them, “whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.” This same idea is expressed in Matthew 10:42, where Jesus says, “and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple, truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.”

In Jesus’ view, we lose nothing when we offer human compassion to those among us, especially when they are “the little ones.” We do not lose anything, but it does cost something. Masks, proper ventilation, laptops for virtual schooling all cost something. And maybe we lose something sacred like the ability to see each other’s smiles and feel each other’s energy in person. But when we put the safety of the little ones first, we lose nothing.

Each one of us, as different as we are, has one thing in common. We either are presently children or were formerly children. When Jesus talks about “the little ones” we can all claim access to this label. Each of us has a child who still lives inside of us.

So what is Jesus saying and doing by relying on these body based metaphors. Dr. Monique Morris the founder of the National Black Women’s Justice Institute can help us. She gave a Ted talk in 2018 where she argues for more compassionate ways of dealing with the trauma and struggles Black school aged girls endure.

She says “Schools that integrate the arts and sports into their curriculum or that are building out transformative programming, such as restorative justice, mindfulness and meditation, are providing an opportunity for girls to repair their relationships with others, but also with themselves. Responding to the lived, complex and historical trauma that our students face requires all of us who believe in the promise of children and adolescents to build relationships, learning materials, human and financial resources and other tools that provide children with an opportunity to heal, so they can learn.

To that end, Dr. Morris advocates for the removal of police officers and increase in school counselors, particularly in schools and districts that are predominately Black. After all, in her words, "Education is Freedom work."

What power do you have available at your fingertips. What are the everyday ways you can practice "giving a cup of water" to someone in the name of Christ? What things are you prepared to lose on the way to chasing the "reward" of total community flourishing? What things, ideas, are you willing to "cut off" so that we might enter life well?

As I close I want us to think about our relationship with local schools. What would it look like for our church to become more intimately invest in children invest in children who spend much of their days institutionalized in school systems? What would it look like, when our redevelopment is done, to have a place where kids with no wi-fi can come and get their homework done. What would it look like, for this place to be a safe space for children to build community. What would it look like for us to house a Freedom school here every summer so no child is left behind?

Is it possible? I don't know. I'm just asking. Amen.