

Family Sunday: Vulnerable Families
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Last summer I took a life changing seminary class called the African American Interpretation and the Gospel of Luke. In this class, I was forced to look at scripture with perspectives different from my own. Alongside of the book of Luke, we read the book *Evicted*, a true story in which a Princeton sociologist followed eight families living in poverty in the Milwaukee area for several years. One family's struggle in this book was that of Arleen, an African-American single mother raising her two sons, Jori and Jafaris. The author, Matthew Desmond, describes Jori as a fiercely loyal fourteen-year old, who would do anything for his family. He was the man of the house. Jafaris was a kindergartner who excelled in reading, but suffered with chronic asthma, often having to go the emergency room due to his asthma attacks. Jafaris's father was incarcerated and Jori's father had left the family, leaving them to be raised by Arleen, alone. Arleen lived paycheck to paycheck. When her sister died she decided to contribute half her check to the funeral costs, which put her behind on her rent by \$870. Her landlord evicted her two days before Christmas.

Many of us know about the preschool to prison pipeline which steals black boys lives in America. The author of *Evicted* shares that eviction of black women is the equivalent of mass incarceration to black men. In Arleen's neighborhood, 3 in 4 people in eviction court were black and of those, 3 in 4 were women. And if black women are being evicted, who are being displaced along with them? Yes, their infants. Their children. Their teenagers.

After her eviction, Arleen and her children spent time living with a stranger-turned-friend, and later in a homeless shelter. She diligently sought to find a new place to live. She was declined from 82 potential rentals after her eviction. I did not get that wrong. 82. She was often rejected because of her eviction and because she had children. As Matthew Desmond points out, "Families with children were turned away in as many as 7 in 10 housing searches."

Vulnerable families ,like Arleen's, are turned away today, just like the disciples tried to turn away vulnerable families in the passage the Allison's just read. But we don't often focus on the disciples discriminatory practices of turning the children away. Instead, in this passage titled, "Jesus Blesses the Little Children," a title not original to the text, we often imagine a white Jesus sitting under a shady tree with a diverse racial group of children surrounding him, some on his lap, others peering over his shoulder. This picturesque scene brings warm and fuzzy feelings and an image of a Jesus whose love for children is immense. And of course that is true, Jesus does love children, but what if we de-centered that image of Jesus and truly examined the disciples and their response to the people approaching Jesus? They attempted to turn them away, to discriminate against them, but Jesus wouldn't have it. And I can't help but wonder why they were approaching Jesus in the first place. The text doesn't explicitly say, but there

is something so fascinating about the word “touch” being used in the text. People were bringing even infants to Jesus, that he might touch them.

The text specifically says, “That he might touch them.” I don’t think families were bringing their children to Jesus for an interactive La Verne CoB style children’s time story and to get a high five or a pat on the back. I’m fascinated with this word touch. In the book of Luke (and elsewhere) the same word for “touch” is used in describing *Jesus’ healing touch*. So were these people bringing sick children to Jesus, that he might touch and heal them? I think so...

Up to this point in the book of Luke, Jesus has been healing and feeding people. In Luke 7 Jesus raised a widow’s son. In Luke 8, Jesus heals a 12 year old girl. In Luke 9 Jesus feeds the five thousand. We keep seeing Jesus provide **tangibly** for people. So why wouldn’t these people approaching Jesus, with their children, be seeking the same? I’m convinced these families are seeking tangible resources for their children either food or healthcare from Jesus. And Arleen could easily have been in that crowd, approaching Jesus, with Jori and Jafaris in hand, seeking fish and bread and much needed healing for Jafaris’ severe asthma.

But regardless of why they are approaching Jesus, we do a disservice when we gloss over the disciples. The disciples, **those closest to Jesus**, in this situation do not welcome the children. No, they try to stop their advancement to Jesus, their advancement to his touch, to the physical and emotional nourishment he could provide. The text literally says, “they (the disciples) sternly ordered them not to do it.”

You see children in the ancient Greco-Roman world were not viewed the same way many of us view children today. They didn’t goo and gawk over the precious cheeks of an infant or toddler. They were seen as a commodity, as property, as slaves. Womanist Scholar Bridget Green describes children this way, “inferior, powerless dependents with little to no rights.” Green goes on to compare the rights of the children to the relevant privilege of the disciples as men they hold privilege and “probably lived near or at substance levels.”

So here the disciples holding privilege are trying to prevent the powerless to enter into sacred space, a space that had potential to heal them and feed them. The disciples wanted to keep the status quo. And Jesus had already told them the status quo was changing, that Jesus’ way was not their way.

I mean the Cruses read you a scripture earlier. They read a passage in Luke 9 where Jesus pulls a child next to him and tells the disciples to welcome children. So the disciples have ALREADY BEEN TOLD TO WELCOME the oppressed, the child, vulnerable, in society. He has already said the kingdom of God belongs to these children, these that the world deems as unimportant and overlooked. Despite being told this just a few chapters before, the disciples don’t get it. They don’t get it! They still try to stop children just a few chapters later (and possibly sick children) from receiving the tangible resources that Jesus had to offer. Healthcare, food, to be truly seen.

So when I imagine the scene of Jesus and the little children I no longer see the cliché Bible story picture. Instead I see a historically accurate, dark-skinned Jesus, surrounded not by multiracial children, but alone. As this Jesus sits, he is surrounded not by children, but instead by his disciples, arms interlocked. These disciples are desperately trying to keep the status quo, by withholding a group of oppressed families, like Arleen and Jory and Jafaris, from bringing their children into the sacred space of Jesus. The disciples, despite being told Jesus welcomes the oppressed child, does not want these families in Jesus's space, trying to prevent them from receiving Jesus' touch, which may have provided healing or food. The disciple's culture, their systems, their policies were so deeply embedded into their ideology that despite being close to Jesus, they still tried to prevent Jesus' work on earth.

And I don't hear Jesus' voice as a kindly, sweet motherly voice saying, "Oh disciples, pretty please let the little children come to me." No, I hear a different voice, a voice of advocacy, strong and firm. Jesus is correcting his disciples, those closest to him, his voice is raised and he is protesting their actions, "Hey disciples, let the children come to me! I already told you this once and here I am telling you yet again. I will provide for the vulnerable."

As a twenty something and leading children's ministry at another church, I planned a Vacation Bible School (VBS) at a local trailer park in Fontana. When I say trailer park I don't mean mobile home park. I mean trailer park, like what my family would vacation in was the permanent residence for children, youth and families. We provided left over Panera Bread food to this community and when it came time to plan for VBS I decided we would do it there, on site. We had lots of kids and were teaching them the quote on quote basics of Christian ideals. One day we discussed the topic of prayer and José, a second grader in my VBS small group, eagerly shared his prayer: "God I pray that my family has food to eat." My heart shattered. I was here trying to share the love of God to a student who did not have food in his belly. The Sunday after VBS, I shared this story with the congregation and a family approached me after service. They were going to feed José's family, weekly and they did. Every week they bought groceries and I delivered them to José and his family. It was a tangible act of healing, but oh how much more needs to be done for Jose and for Arleen, Jory and Jafaris. Policies which allow their poverty, their need for healing, nourishment, need to be uprooted, need to be replaced.

So on this Family Sunday, I'm reminded that Jesus provided for the vulnerable children, youth and families in his community with tangible resources, through food, shelter, healthcare, not just with thoughts and prayers. I'm reminded that doing this often requires advocacy for people and situations society deems as unimportant and, even to firmly oppose what those closest to me might say or do. I pray that we follow the example of Jesus and advocate for the Arleens. Advocate for Jafaris and Jori. That we provide tangible resources for the sick. The evicted. The hungry. The forgotten. Those deemed as unimportant or overlooked.

This church does this in so many ways from providing housing to refugees to providing meals for the hungry to marching together in support of Black Lives Matter. I invite us to continue to look for the vulnerable families in our community and how we might continue in providing tangible resources, first in with our immediate families and together as a church family. Amen.