

***Forbid Them Not***  
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Columbus, OH  
February 16, 2025

*Let the children come to me, and forbid them not, for of such is the kingdom of God.*  
—Jesus

Ancient Witness: Mark 10:13-16

Today, we are celebrating our daycare that has been meeting in our building for 7 years, now. And we are celebrating all children everywhere. We read from Mark's account of Jesus on his way to Jerusalem and his crucifixion. He had a lot on his mind. He was under a lot of stress. It says, "People were bring little children to him in order that he might touch them." This is quite natural when you think about it, for the Jewish parents to want to have their baby or toddlers blessed by this great teacher and rabbi.

Then it says, "The disciples spoke sternly to them." Now, I don't think it was the author's intent to show the disciples as mean or uncaring. On the contrary, they seem to be protecting Jesus. They wanted the crowd to give Jesus a little space, and their intentions were good, I think

"But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, 'Let the little children come to me; forbid them not—do not stop them...' And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them." Even with all the tension he was under and with all the things on his mind, Jesus had the time and the heart to take them in his arms, smile into their faces, and maybe play with them for awhile.

Jesus was the kind of person who loved children, even though he was not a father. "Forbid them not," he said. George MacDonald, 19th century Scottish poet and Congregational minister said that he didn't believe in people's Christianity if children were never to be found playing at their door. Jesus and his followers are the kind of people who attract kids and make space for them. And it is even more remarkable, then, to hear Jesus' words come out in this kind of world, where children were often seen as mere property, not complete human beings. Jesus took these little-valued nothings, these insignificant ones and held them in high esteem.

I often hear well-meaning advocates say children are the future. "They're the future of the church." Well, that's not quite right; they're the present, a present part of the church. The great educator, Maria Montessori, once wrote,

*There are some who think that the child's value for humanity lies in the fact that she will someday be an adult. In this way they detract form the true value of childhood by shifting it only into the future. This cannot be justified. The child is a human entity having importance in herself; she is not just a transition on the way to adulthood.*

Children are full human beings—valued and gifted. Often we tell children to “grow up” and by that we mean, “join our world and settle for it.” But Jesus did not tell us to grow up. Jesus, in fact, said, “Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.”

As adults, our minds often become rigid and dogmatic, closed with age. Receiving the reign of God as a little child means to be continually open and flexible, like a sponge, soaking things up. It means to receive the world with an open mind and an open heart. Freud once said, “What a contrast there is between the radiant intelligence of a child and the feeble mentality of an adult.”

Thomas Groome, a professor of religious education, wrote,

*Little children are still capable of discovery, fantasy, and openness about what is yet to be. The invitation of Jesus to become as children is, among other things, an invitation to imagination, creativity and freedom.*

The world is such a serious place—lots of dangers and problems to overcome. Yet Jesus reminded us, “Whoever receives on such child in my name, receives me.” How difficult it is when we look at a child and see Jesus. But that is our task. So, how can we receive the child and thereby receive Jesus? How can we fulfill Jesus’ command, “Forbid them not?”

Many of you are familiar with the wonderful author, Anne Lamont. In her book, *Traveling Mercies*, she has a great essay about why she makes her son, Sam, go to church. Sam, who is made to go to church two or three times a month, is the only kid he knows who goes to church. She wrote:

*You might think, noting the bitterness, the resignation, that he was being made to sit through a six-hour Latin mass. Or you might wonder why I make this strapping, exuberant boy come with me most weeks, and if you were to ask, this is what I would say. I make him because I can. I outweigh him by nearly 75 pounds.*

*But that is only part of it. The main reason is that I want to give him what I found in the world, which is to say a path and a little light to see by. Most of the people I know who have what I want—which is to say, purpose, heart, balance, gratitude, joy are people with a deep spirituality. They are people in community, who pray, or practice their faith: they are Buddhists, Jews, Christians—people banding together to work on themselves and for human rights. They follow a brighter light than the glimmer of their own candle; they are part of something beautiful.*

It may not surprise you that I agree with Anne Lamont on this. I can think of few things as important as a child’s spiritual and religious well-being. The kind of religious instruction that I see in many churches today—teaching a God who is violent and vengeful, who favors the United States over other nations, who blames the poor for a lack of faith or character, a God of fear and judgment instead a God of love and forgiveness—is malpractice. And the lack of mature, authentic spiritual instruction is at the root of so much of the autocratic political movement today. As Richard Rohr is fond of saying, “Our image of God creates us.”

This is what the sacrament of baptism is about. The parents recognize the importance of Jesus' path of love and justice, and they want to share that with their child. They make a public commitment that this is a priority—to be part of a larger community to practice their faith and to grow with their child.

For our children, I can think of nothing more important than their spiritual and religious well-being. Each one of us is called to bring children into God's healing and redemptive presence, teaching through our own words and actions. Not just children of this congregation, but all children everywhere.

Thirty years ago, Jonathan Kozol wrote his classic book, *Amazing Grace: The Lives of Children and the Conscience of a Nation*. In it he asks a young girl,

*“What is it like living here in the South Bronx? Is it like being in prison?”*

*Isabel (who is 15): “No, I think that’s too strong. I would put it differently.”*

*Kozol: “How would you put it?”*

*Isabel: “It’s not like being in jail. It’s more like being hidden. It’s as if you have been put in a garage, where people put things if they don’t have room for something but aren’t sure if they should throw it out, they put it there where they don’t need to think of it again.”*

Jesus says to us—as individuals, as parents, as a church, as a nation—“Forbid them not! Let them come to me! Don’t let them be hidden; don’t let them be neglected; don’t let them be put on a shelf. Your faith can’t allow that. Your love can’t allow that.”

And we are facing some very dark days for the children in our nation. The administration of this country simply cannot profess to love children and value families while it deports 12 million people, almost all of whom are here simply to live, work, go to school, pay taxes and be contributing members of our society.

The President and his political party simply cannot profess to love children while entirely eliminating the Department of Education, and while cutting the Headstart Program and school lunches for low-income families.

The Republican Senators and Representatives cannot profess to love children as they propose over one million dollars in cuts to Medicaid that serves 75 million people and 35 million children, and cuts to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) that serves 20 million children, while giving away over a trillion dollars in tax breaks to billionaires.

This nation cannot profess to love children while the White House and Elon Musk, the richest man alive, illegally eliminates the Agency for International Development (USAID), the largest provider of humanitarian assistance in the world, denying food for the poorest children on earth,

while just this week Musk's Space X received another \$40 million of our tax money from congress.

In the name of Jesus, who calls *all* children to come unto him, to come unto his love, Christians in America need to rise up and to speak out on the behalf of children. Earlier this week, Pope Francis reminded Vice President Vance, who is a Roman Catholic, that to be a follower of Jesus means caring for all children, not just children in my family or in my church, not just children of parents who have wealth. And that neighbor is not a geographic term; it's a moral term. And that we are called to love our neighbor as ourselves.

Let the children come to me, said Jesus. And forbid them not. Forbid them not.

I'll end today with a prayer that was written over 30 years ago by Ina Hughes, a newspaper columnist:

*We pray for children who put chocolate fingers everywhere, who like to be tickled, who stomp in puddles and ruin their new pants, who sneak popsicles before supper, who erase holes in math workbooks, who can never find their shoes.*

*And we pray for those who stare at photographers from behind barbed wire, who can't bound down the street in a new pair of sneakers, who never "counted potatoes," who are born in places we wouldn't be caught dead, who never go to the circus, who live in an x-rated world.*

*We pray for children who bring us sticky kisses and fistfuls of dandelions, who sleep with the dog and bury goldfish, who hug us in a hurry and forget their lunch money, who cover themselves with Band-aids and sing off-key, who squeeze toothpaste all over the sink, who slurp their soup.*

*And we pray for those who never get dessert, who have no safe blanket to drag behind them, who watch their parents watch them die, who can't find any bread to steal, who don't have any rooms to clean up, whose pictures aren't on somebody's dresser, whose monsters are real.*

*We pray for children who spend their allowances before Tuesday, who throw tantrums in the grocery store and pick at their food, who like ghost stories, who shove dirty clothes under the bed, and never rinse the tub, who get visits from the tooth fairy, who don't like to be kissed in front of the carpool, who squirm in church or temple and scream on the phone, whose tears we sometimes laugh at and whose smiles can make us cry.*

*And we pray for those whose nightmares come in the daytime, who will eat anything, who have never seen a dentist, who aren't spoiled by anybody, who go to bed hungry and cry themselves to sleep, who live and move, but have no being.*

*We pray for children who want to be carried and for those who must, for those we never give up on and for those who don't get a second chance, for those we smother and those who will grab the hand of anybody kind enough to offer it. Amen.*