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“Whoever receives one child such as this receives me” (Mark 9:37).

Jas 4:1-10; Mark 9:30-37

Fred Rogers devoted his life to early childhood development because he knew that cherished children became stable, giving adults. One of his deepest disappointments was that television might have been a potent teacher instead of a corporate predator selling toys and cereal to children. Though childhood is a relatively late insight in a history of treating children as cheap labor, the 18th century adage “As the twig is bent so grows the tree” shows that adults have long understood that early influences had lifelong effects.

Children in Jesus’ time were nonpersons, expendable if they became a burden, less valuable than slaves and abused in the name of discipline. The Gospels show Jesus’ notable regard for women and children in a patriarchal culture focused on fathers and sons. Jesus welcomed children even when his disciples saw them as a nuisance, and he held them up as models for entry into the Kingdom. God revealed things to children hidden from the wise and learned. Children’s angels always beheld the face of God, and anyone who abused a child was better off drowning with a millstone around his neck.

The openness of children is the source of both their vulnerability and prodigious capacity to learn and delight in life. It was this innocence that Jesus looked for in his disciples, and he confronted them for fighting for status and importance, a sign of

jealousy and ambition that shuts down childlike openness with aggression and fear. They wanted to be first, and he wanted them to understand that humility and service were the true path to greatness. So, he took a child and placed it in their midst, put his arms around it and told them that to receive one child was to receive him, and to receive him was to receive the one who sent him.

This is an astonishing parable, as important as washing their feet at the Last Supper. Jesus describes himself as a child right after one of his frequent warnings about what was awaiting him in Jerusalem. He wanted them to understand the innocence, openness and vulnerability he was embracing as he prepared for his rejection, suffering and death. He was the universal child about to be abused and sacrificed by a callous, indifferent world.

Television might have taught us this, if heart-wrenching scenes of children's faces in war zones and famine regions did not compete for our attention with car, phone, pharmaceutical and food commercials, animal neglect appeals and competing cable news programs, interspersed with mind-numbing reality shows and hyperviolent movies designed arouse and degrade our tired senses as we wind down the day. The realities behind the storytelling are often unbearable, and most of us are spared any direct encounters with the suffering that flashes past our eyes on the screen.

Jesus offers us a simple measure of our morality that focuses on one question: What happened to the children? Every ideology, vision, political program, economic and social decision will be judged by how it cared for or neglected children. For that is where he is to be found, among the least and the last, the smallest and most vulnerable of our human family, and what we did to them we did to him and to the One who sent him.

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