

And How Are the Children? **Habakkuk 1:2-4; 2:1-4; Matthew 19:13-15**

Whenever the fierce and intimidating warriors of the Masai tribe in East Africa greet each other, it is with these words: “*Kassarian ingera.*” These fearsome fighters use this salutation whether they are at war, or at peace, on the battlefield or in their local village. The greeting isn’t the ordinary “Hello, how are you?” or “What’s up?” or even anything similar to our normal ways of acknowledging each other’s presence. The greeting the Masai use is best translated, “And how are the children?”

Now you might assume this is just a friendly gesture, addressing each other on a personal level. “And how are your children; what ages are they now; what are they up to?” We ask that of each other all the time.

But the Masai use this greeting whether or not the people they encounter have children. And even those without children respond with the traditional answer, “*Sapati ingera,*” or “All the children are well.” In other words, the question posed is not one requiring a personal reference. Rather, it is about their entire society—a question about the well-being of all the children in their community and region for which they are responsible. “And how are the children?” “All the children are well.”

The Masai do this because the welfare of the children reflects the state of their world. If the children are well, then it’s likely that the rest of society is doing fine. The children, you see, are the standard by which to gauge everyone’s welfare, and this common greeting is a way to reflect that notion.

I wonder how we might answer the same question, “And how are the children?” Would we assume they are relatively well, imagining scenes of happy kids; or would we pause to think about the children who lost parents in the mass shooting in Las Vegas or their father serving in Special Ops in Niger, or who are currently homeless in Puerto Rico and Virgin Islands? Are they well? Or, closer to home, how are the children doing in New London, or New Haven, or Hartford, or Bridgeport?

What would we say about undocumented immigrant children, especially the Dreamers, who have only known life in the U.S.? Or those who have already been deported? Or those who grow up in the desperate poverty of Mississippi or Appalachia or rural Maine? What about those who are being trafficked for sex, or transgender youth being beaten in schools or on the streets? What about or those who are born already addicted to opioids, or those drinking water made toxic by industrial or agricultural pollutants?

What would we say about the refugee children of Syria or Iraq? How would we account for their welfare this morning? What about the Rohingya children of Myanmar? Or children living in Sudan, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Palestine, Somalia, Nigeria, or anywhere else where the stress of war, or famine, or oppression, or neglect exists? Likely, our answer would not be, “The children are well,” because we know, in fact, they are not.

I’ve been dwelling on vulnerable children recently given the reports that Congress still has not approved new funding for the Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP), which expired at the end of September—something that was not lost on many child

advocates and health professionals. This federal program administered by states provides funding for children from low-income families to receive preventive health care services—“preventative” being, of course, the most cost effective of all medical care. So it has wide bi-partisan support and considered a reasonable investment. But each party is adding unnecessary amendments to the bill that will kill its re-authorization.

With legislative politics now driven by the budget debate and tax reform, as well as the ongoing efforts to repeal and replace the Affordable Care Act, little attention is devoted to this vital federal program. The only ones promised federal benefits and a new round of tax cuts are the Middle Class even more likely, the wealthiest top one-percent, as if they are the most important beneficiaries to consider. Why aren't we hearing about the children, particularly the most vulnerable, and the need to watch out for their interests? Aren't they the ones we should pay attention to first, since they are our future? Why don't we start with them and let the welfare of our children be the basis for judging the fairness and purpose behind budget policy and tax reform? Who is standing up for them?

I'm reminded of a quote attributed to the late Vice-President Hubert H. Humphrey, who was one of the visionaries and architects of the “War on Poverty” campaign half a century ago. Humphrey challenged the country when he said, “The *moral test* of government is how that government treats those who are in the dawn of life, the children; those who are in the twilight of life, the elderly; and those who are in the shadows of life, the sick, the needy, and the handicapped.” Though we might upgrade the language, the point is

clear: what Humphrey believed was a moral test of government is, in many ways, the moral test of humanity as a whole. Even our national character, greatness, and moral strength is measured and shown by how we take care of those who are the most vulnerable in society, in terms of their welfare, their status, their dignity, and their relative power. For no matter how strong our country appears to be, if the most vulnerable among us are suffering in inhumane ways, it betrays every spiritual value we profess and diminishes our moral standing. Humphrey was right; the wellbeing of children, in many ways, is how we best gauge the welfare of all our lives.

This is not unlike the old-fashioned custom in the coal-mining industry where a canary was placed in the mine shaft as an early warning system for the presence of toxic gases. If the chirping of the canary could be heard, it indicated the air was safe to breathe. But should the canary go silent, if its song wasn't heard, immediately it would indicate that this fragile bird was dying from toxins at otherwise unnoticeable levels. The foreman would then quickly sound an alarm and everyone would flee the mine before they, too, succumbed to the poison.

The lives of children are one of the early warning signs of the dangers that threaten our entire society and the welfare of the planet. On the whole, our children are not well. The most recent annual statistics compiled by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Children's Defense Fund¹ indicate we have work to do as a society to protect our children and improve their lives. For those under 20 in the United States, *every day* on average:

¹ Children's Defense Fund, 2014.

- 7 are killed by firearms;
- 187 are arrested for violent crimes;
- 408 are arrested for drug crimes;
- 1,241 are born without health insurance;
- 2,723 are born into poverty;
- 1,837 are confirmed as abused or neglected;
- 2,857 high school students drop out;
- 16,244 public school students are suspended.

That's what the data tells us. So, when we hear about values and national priorities, why aren't we alarmed by these kinds of threats upon our children's welfare? Why don't they immediately rise to the top? Why aren't we addressing first the wellbeing of our most vulnerable children?

Frankly, it's not good enough to merely say that these children will do well when the breadwinners in the house have a better-paying job or their tax bill will be less. However, we already note the strength of our current economy when it comes to those who are doing well. But the economy is not the end all for everything. Among industrialized nations, the U.S. ranks first in Gross Domestic Product, in health technology, in military technology, in military exports, in defense expenditures, in the number of millionaires and billionaires. But when we scale it according to our most vulnerable, the U.S. is second to last in living standards for the poorest 20 percent of our children, second to last in per capita teenage births, 31st among those with the lowest infant mortality (30 countries have lower rates of infant mortality), and last in protecting our children against gun

violence.² The most galling example of our questionable priorities when it comes to children is the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child, which is the legally-binding international treaty to ensure basic protections for children. Every country on earth has ratified this commitment except for three: Somalia, South Sudan, and the U.S.! We helped to write it and get it adopted by the U.N., but since it was adopted twenty years ago, Congress has refused to ratify this universal international agreement on basic standards for protecting the welfare of children! The Senate hasn't even brought it up for a vote, namely because some Senators complain it undermines U.S. sovereignty, or sets standards of pediatric wellbeing that usurps parental authority.³ Some even want to protect the rights of states to incarcerate children and youth for life without parole.⁴ These are facts; these are the reasons for not ratifying it. What does this say to the rest of the world about the greatness of America? That punishment is more important than protection when it comes to our children?

My friends, as followers of Jesus our faith should be compelling us to make protection and care a priority. If we take Jesus seriously, then it should be evident that he advocated for the least of these and challenged the prevalent first-century notion that children were of low value. That's not how Jesus viewed them. They were "first in the kingdom of God" to use his words, meaning, the last of this earth become the first of our priorities and the interests of the privileged

² Ibid.

³ Amy Rothschild, "Is America Holding Out on Protecting Children's Rights?" www.theatlantic.com, May 2, 2017.

⁴ "Why Won't the U.S. Ratify the U.N. Convention on Children's Rights?" www.economist.com, Oct. 7, 2013.

and powerful become the least of our priorities. This reordering of social value was not inconsequential, but eternity's mark of protection upon the most vulnerable.

Couple this with the passages from the prophet Habakkuk and they speak to how so many of us feel over the harm that is done to children and the systemic obstacles that get in the way of important remedies. The prophet gives voice to the frustration that caring for the most vulnerable isn't a priority to others, or that so much unnecessary injustice occurs in society. Habakkuk was complaining that all he saw was the injustice and suffering in Israel, among his own people, and yet God didn't seem to say or do anything to change it. For the powerful still ruled. It's not unlike what you and I feel when powerful leaders make policies with cruel consequences upon those who are powerless. It always seems to be overwhelming and beyond our control.

Yet, instead of cowering in resignation and bitterly complaining, God instructed Habakkuk to get up and speak out against it—to rage against the evil of his day and trust that it would be the precursor for things to change. “Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that even a runner would see it”—in other words, so evident that no one could pass by quickly without noticing this prophetic warning. Though change may not occur immediately, divine justice and redemption would come in due time, if the prophetic voice was not silenced. For if you stand up for what is right and live faithfully trying to right the wrongs of this world, the Spirit of God will inspire others to come to your aid and act with you and for you.

So, my friends, do we dare ask God to help us stand up for our most vulnerable children? Will we trust God's Spirit to inspire people to care enough to right the wrongs? What can we do for the sake of children, if we're not already doing something? What charity, cause, or campaign can we get behind and support? What advocacy role can you or I have here at church or in the community? Can we assist in some way at a local mission or ministry that aids impoverished or vulnerable children? Will we contact our Members of Congress or the White House to implore them to fund the CHIP program for the eight million impoverished children who benefit from it? Will we urge our Senators to work for the ratification of the U.N. Convention on Children's Rights? Will we address the needs of children in our time, so that we will be able to raise hope for our future? This isn't a matter of right or left—this is a matter of *right or wrong!*

As Hubert Humphrey implied: the measure of our lives is how we take care of those who are weakest among us: the children in the dawn of their lives, the elderly in the twilight of their lives; and those in the shadows of life: the sick, the needy, and the handicapped. These are the “canaries” in our midst, whose voices we must pay attention to, to determine the quality of our lives, our land, and the survival of us all. These are the ones whose care we must rally around in order that all of us will find hope for our world.

Every day when we greet each other, we should ask, “And how are the children?” as that African greeting goes. And if we are doing all we can on their behalf, then, in Jesus' name, we will be able to respond with a hopeful heart: “The children will be well. All God's children will someday be well.”

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