

## *LEFT BEHIND*

Mark 10.13-16

October 7, 2018, World Communion

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People were bringing their children to Jesus to have him touch them, but the disciples scolded them for this. When Jesus saw this he was indignant and said to them, “Let the children come to me; do not stop them. It is to just such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. The truth is, whoever doesn’t welcome the kingdom of God as a little child won’t enter it.” And Jesus took the children in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands on them.” Mark 10.13-16 (the *Inclusive Bible*)

## **SERMON**

I want to thank Ben and the choir for this gift – this arrangement that connects the blessing, *Salaam Aleikum* “Peace be with you” with the promise that “we shall overcome.”

I need to hear that right now because I am feeling that righteous anger getting the best of me. I’m not just mad these days or disappointed. I am seething.

And let me be clear. I don’t have anything against righteous anger. We need it. We need it especially if it moves us to act.

But I will remind you of those wise words of Sister Joan Chittister from last Sunday: “Action alone is always dangerous.” Without taking time to “dip into that well of the [soul]” before “simply dashing headlong into the world,” we can make things worse.

So Ben helps us remember this morning that what will overcome the fear and the power of privilege and the naked disregard for justice in this moment is the way we bless each other and the world with some other kind of power.

You notice in the text for this morning that Jesus is indignant with his own disciples about the way they are treating children. They are using their privilege to ignore and leave out the families and children that are coming to him to be blessed.

Perhaps you can't blame them. They have been left out of the power system and now they are exercising what little power they do have to exclude the ones who have even less power than they have.

The *Inclusive Bible* says that Jesus "scolded" them - which is fascinating because I usually think of "scolding" as something adults do to children. It's an angry reprimand about something perhaps they have been told in the past and should remember for the future. The scoldings I received as a child usually began: "Didn't I tell you not to do that? Don't you know better?"

Perhaps by scolding the disciples, Jesus is reminding them that they are children too. And the way they are behaving is like children needing to be brought up short to remember what really matters.

But that's good news for them. Because, Jesus says, "unless someone welcomes the reign of God as a little child, that person will not enter it." By getting the disciples to feel like the children they are leaving out, they get a sense of what the family of God asks of them.

So this is one of those unexpected contrast stories in the teachings of Jesus: the grownups get scolded and the children get blessed. And not just blessed. Jesus raises them up as the "left out" ones who are at the center of God's blessing on Earth.

And so it is that we were not leaving children out this morning. We were being led by them in something that is at the center of our life together.

Now if you want more juicy details about my being scolded as a child, you are in luck. My sister is here with us today. Frances is visiting from Illinois with her wife, Heidi. And there are stories to tell.

We were raised in what I call the “Left Behind” culture. It wasn’t just a religious understanding about what was yet to come. It was a whole set of values about right now.

Unlike Ben’s reminder this morning, the Left Behind culture taught us that the only way ultimate good would ever overcome is through war. And not just any war. The war that would end all wars that would take place in the Middle East and would bring in the final rule of Christ – the war through which true believers would inherit the blessing of the world.

And here’s the bonus: If you believed right now, you would never have to face that war because Jesus would come get you and “rapture” you out of the world before the big war took place. You would just disappear and escape to heaven – that is; if you really, truly, with-all-our-heart, without any doubts, believed.

So Frances and I can tell you stories about the fear of being left behind.

I came home one day from school and all the shoes were lined up by the door. There was something cooking on the stove. The washing machine was running in the basement. And there was nobody home.

I had been left behind. And I was in total panic mode. I started thinking about who I could call. There was Mrs. Lee – but the jury was still out on her. And then there were the Bronsons. They were loving, faithful, caring people. Surely they wouldn’t have been left behind.

So, with my hands shaking, I dialed the phone number for the Bronsons. It rang. And it rang. And it rang. And just before I was about to completely melt down, Mr. Bronson answered the phone.

“Hi,” I said, “you are still here!”

“Yes, I’m here” he said. “Can I help you?”

And then what was I supposed to say?

“Um, the washing machine is making some strange noises and my parents aren’t home so I wondered if you could tell me what to do.”

“Turn it off,” he said.

“Thank you,” I said, “and ... I’m so glad you are here.”

And I was.

Over the years I have wondered what the appeal is for this “Left Behind” culture. Who wants to live in that kind of fear?

Dr. LeAnn Snow Flesher wrote a book in 2006 that offers two main reasons why this way of looking at the world continues to appeal. The first reason is that the world is changing and some folks already feel like they are being left behind. The culture has moved on without them and they are looking for a simpler world with a less complicated faith. And this understanding of the Bible provides two things: a common enemy and a claim to some inside information.

The enemy, she says is: “... anyone who exhibits behavior they deem to be antifamily, pro-feminist, pro-homosexual” and I’ll add that they are also vehemently pro-Israel (even while they believe that Jews are going to hell), dismissive of or outright antagonistic to attempts to protect the environment, and anti-anyone who imagines a more global picture of the world. And war is a good thing because it just brings us closer to those final days.

The inside information they have is their exclusive insight about the teachings of the Bible and the timetable for the end of the world. And therefore they – and they alone – will be saved.

And let me be clear. When I say, “them” I don’t mean people I have read about. These were my people. This is the Left Behind culture my sister and I grew up in.

And for lots of reasons, I have left that culture behind.

However, while that biblical understanding may not be true, but the feeling is real. I still know the panic and the fear and the anger of being left behind.

With all the money being generated by this economy, we know what it is to be left behind. The concentration of wealth in this country is astounding.

With all the advances we thought we had made for women and people of color, it’s pretty clear right now just how far behind we are.

And then there is technology. How long before I can’t figure out how to work my phone or my computer or my television because the technology is changing so fast that I can’t keep up. Most of the time I am feeling the fear and the panic of being left behind – of being irrelevant and becoming disconnected and lost.

I talk with those of you who feel like you are in this phase of life where the deaths of family members and friends makes you feel increasingly left behind.

And with the story we have been given today, there is no more poignant experience of being left behind than the children and parents who are being separated at our borders.

Hank McGee sent me an article this week from the *New York Times* about the 13,000 children now being held in immigration detention centers. That includes the children who were separated from their parents at the border and those who crossed the border on their own.

According to the article it isn't that the number of children has grown. It's that the folks who usually step up to care for these children are often, themselves, undocumented. And the rhetoric of this government makes them reluctant to come forward.

They have reason to worry.

*Matthew Albence, a senior official with Immigration and Customs Enforcement, testified before Congress that [his] agency had arrested dozens of people who applied to sponsor unaccompanied minors. The agency later confirmed that 70 percent of those arrested did not have prior criminal records.*

Of course, you know that just being in this country can, by itself, be a crime and that something as small as a traffic ticket can give you a criminal record.

In other words, the government is using these children as part of its plan to flush out, arrest, and deport as many people as possible.

If I sound a little "scoldy" this morning it is because I have to believe that some of the people who are doing the arresting would identify as Christians who must know this story about Jesus being indignant with his disciples for trying to separate parents and children -- trying to keep them from running into the arms that would welcome and bless them.

But maybe that's the problem. Maybe Jesus has been left behind too.

I realize this morning that scolding will only get us so far. The truth is, real people – young and old – are being left behind. And I don't know what to do or how to change it or when this country might right itself.

All I know, is that when I felt that terror and that panic of being left behind, I called Mr. Bronson. And I know how I felt when I heard his voice and what it meant to me to hear him say: “I’m here.”

Maybe in all the ways we feel left behind this morning, the best we can do for each other and the world is to not to harbor some fantasy of escape or to surrender our hope but to find ways to keep saying “I’m here; I’m here; I’m still here!”

We are the people of love and justice and we will not disappear.

I was thinking this week about the words we use to dedicate and bless children in this community. We affirm that they are made in the image of God and are children of God. We promise to love them, respect them, challenge and include them in our life together. We commit ourselves to tell them the stories of ancestors:

about Abraham and Sarah who received a promise to bless the world;  
about Moses and Miriam, who led our people out of slavery;  
about Ruth and Naomi, whose faithful love created the promise of a new family;  
about Mary and Joseph, whose openness to mystery brought Jesus into the world;  
about Jesus, who was anointed by the Spirit to bring good news to the poor;  
about all the world’s prophets and people who stand for love and justice.

And then we offer our hope that these stories will teach them that God will keep them wherever they go.

And we sing those words from Rod Romney’s dedication hymn:  
*May your life, a holy treasure, offer love in fullest measure,  
Neither life nor death can sever, you from God’s own hand forever.*

We promise them, in other words, that no matter where they go, there is a voice that keeps saying: “I’m here; I’m here; I’m still here.”

And maybe, like our children, you need to hear that voice again today.  
You need that hope, that reassurance, that promise.

And so today, if you do hear that voice, do not harden your hearts.

NOTES

Joan Chittister, "The Monastic Way," September 2018 published by Benetvision, [www.joanchittister.org](http://www.joanchittister.org). LeAnn Snow Flesher, *Left Behind? The Facts Behind The Fiction* (Judson Press, 2006), pp.10-11, 38. Caitlin Dickerson, "Migrant Children Moved Under Cover of Darkness to a Texas Tent City," *The New York Times*, September 30, 2018.