

Grace and peace to you from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

I start today with a poem by Rev. Sarah Speed
titled *Unwritten Agreement*

We have this unwritten agreement,
us members of humanity.
When the toddler at the coffee shop runs round the
corner,
when her mom, at the register, looks up in panic,
we, the adults in the room, will pledge,
with quick smiles and silent head nods, to keep watch.
We will lean out of our seats.
We will put down our phones.
We will stand at the ready
to scoop up,
to offer words of comfort,
to make silly faces,
to keep an eye on the door.
And we will do this,
because we cannot ignore the instinct to care.
We will do this,
because we cannot ignore the child right in front of us.
We will do this,
because love always includes the least of these.¹
In Jesus' time, children were socially powerless and dependent.

In our gospel reading today, the disciples may have been
simply insensitive and snobbish,
or perhaps they were trying to protect Jesus from too much attention.
At any rate, they had not yet absorbed his revolutionary scale of values,
in which the 'little ones' were the greatest.
Eager to get on with the business of setting up the kingdom,

¹ Rev. Sarah Speed

the disciples have little time for people who do not wield political power. Perhaps the disciples, like others, thought that the kingdom would be achieved by force of arms; others, by radical moral reform, and so on. But no one expected the kingdom to come by becoming powerless like children. The totally powerless can depend on no one but God.

When Jesus says that the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these it was not to give them rocky road ice-cream, though that is a heaven unto itself, but rather to set up their lowly status as a model for discipleship.

For children, we would do anything.² Children are the closest thing to a miracle in most of our modern human lives. They are blessings we indulge with the best of our energy, support, protection, attention, and acceptance. We not only welcome them into our company—we make them the center of our attention. We watch what they do. Marvel at how they grow. Attend to what they say. It was not always so. In Jesus' time, in the company of adults, particularly adults with a sacred agenda, children were an invasive distraction. Humble in both physical stature and emotional maturity, children occupied one of the lowest rungs of social status. Leaders like Jesus were not expected to climb down to their level, and parents ought not to presume lifting them up into his presence. That was the attitude of Jesus' disciples. They mirrored the ethos of their time when Jesus so desperately wanted them to challenge it—

² Rev. Dr. Brian Blount

by treating children the way they would treat him.

Earlier, Matthew 18:1-5 records an incident where Jesus warns that only those who humble themselves like children will receive entry into the reign of God.

He follows up that startling revelation with the even more striking declaration that in welcoming the lowly child, one welcomes Jesus himself.

Just a brief time later in our gospel reading today.

The disciples attempt to bodyguard Jesus, pushing away every child in range of Jesus' sacred space.

In rejecting the children, they are rejecting Jesus.

So Jesus rebukes, not the parents and their children, but his dull disciples.

They refuse to entertain the radical truth about God's reign that Jesus is trying so desperately to teach them.

The reign of God belongs to children and everyone who, like children, is not granted polite society's respect and acceptance.

The children, then, are a metaphor for all who lack societal status, who so-called decent folk find distasteful and undesirable.

The migrant worker.

The immigrant.

The alien.

The homeless.

The powerless.

The undocumented.

Harking back to Deuteronomy 24:17-22, where God commands the people to care for the socially downtrodden because they themselves had been beaten down in Egypt,

Jesus issues a clear, if not controversial, command for his followers.

They are to live as an ekklesia, a "church."

And this church is to exist in this world as a refuge of radical welcome.

And that's who we are called to be.
Ekklesia, "church", in the world for good.
Jesus wants us, his church, to offer the hospitality he —
to greet those of the lowest stature with the grandest welcome.

In this season of Lent, the good news is that God,
through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection,
extends the same radical welcome to everyone.
All human beings who are made in God's image.
All human beings who are made to seek God.
All who are called to be "church".
We don't always get it right.
We "miss the mark" as some would say.
But, we all stand before God in the same stream of blessed grace.
The good News is God promises to receive us as if heaven is our home.
Thanks be to God. Amen.