



*Jesus loves me, this I know
For the Bible tells me so
Little ones to him belong
They are weak but he is strong*

I think we all know this song
It makes us think of children's sermons
and Sunday school pictures of children gathered at the knee of Jesus
It makes perfect sense to us – that Jesus would welcome the children,
get down at their level to talk to them, to make them feel special.
That is how we treat children: we love them, we indulge them.
There are whole industries centered on selling toys and sweets to children,
early learning, camps, and lessons to give our children their best lives.

The story about Jesus welcoming children,
which is told in Matthew, Mark, and Luke's gospels,
comes from a very different culture.
It is difficult for us to imagine the place of children in the ancient world,
or why the disciples discourage parents
trying to bring their young children to Jesus



In the book *True to Our Native Land*, Michael Joseph Brown offers a context for the reality of children in first century Palestine:

We should dismiss ideas of childhood bliss when we read this passage, he says.

Childhood in antiquity was difficult. Fifty percent of children died before the age of five. They were the weakest members of society. They were fed last and received the smallest and least desirable portions of food. They were the first to suffer from famine, war, disease, and natural disasters. A minor had the same status as an enslaved person, and it was not until adulthood that they would be considered a free person.

By welcoming children,
Jesus shows that these small people of low social status are important to God.

In Matthew's gospel, Jesus has already spoken to his disciples about the value and status of children.

They asked him, "Who will be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"

And Jesus brought forward a small child, and said,

The reign of God belongs to little ones such as this.

And he says, whenever you welcome a small child such as this, you welcome me.

In these stories, Jesus makes children –

little children, who don't contribute to society and have the lowest status – an illustration of the welcome the Reign of God offers to all the least of these – tax collectors and outcasts and people the religious leaders call "sinners."



Minister Olive Elaine Hinnant writes

Throughout Matthew's gospel, we see Jesus crossing social, political, and religious boundaries to associate with people whom others consider inappropriate, immoral, or contemptible but who are invited to become the growing reign of God.

In his concern for the vulnerable,

Jesus is following in the faith of his Jewish ancestors.

We read from Deuteronomy a part of the instruction God gave to the Hebrew people as they prepared to enter the Holy Land

God tells them that they are to be aware of the most vulnerable among them—immigrants, who are strangers in the land;

widows and orphans, who have not status and must rely on charity.

God tells God's people to protect and care for these vulnerable ones among them.

And what is important for us to recognize is that God is not just giving these instructions to individual people of faith,

but to the community of faith –

indeed, to the whole society of God's people come together in covenant with God.

As followers of Jesus, we are called to generosity with our own resources for the sake of the vulnerable people around us.

As a community of God's people, we are called to work together for their sake -

as we do in food collection and quilting

and outreach to our unhoused neighbors.

And, these scripture readings call us as a community of faith to the work of advocacy – to creating a society that protects and cares for the most vulnerable –

those who are hungry or unhoused,

those who lack access to health care,
children who are too young to speak for themselves when they are hurt.



Our theme for this week of Lent is

The good news is protection and care for the vulnerable.

It is a reminder of our responsibilities as followers of Jesus.

And, it is good news for us as well.

It is good news because it calls us into community –

community which is inclusive and practices hope and forgiveness.

And it is good news because,

as much as we hate to admit it in our individualist, do-it-myself culture,

we have all been vulnerable at some time,

and we will all be vulnerable again.

We experience illness and addiction;

we know what it means to be the stranger;

we know grief or loneliness or depression;

we experience the vulnerability of a minority status or neurodivergence;

we know the vulnerabilities of aging.

And in all these things, we know God loves and welcomes us.

We see that, when Jesus loves and welcomes children,

it is not because of their great faith or good works.

It is because they are God's children, first and foremost.

And so are we.

Our relationship with God begins in God's love for us.

As baptized children of God, our identity begins there –

when we are strong and independent,

when we are lost and in need,

and all the times in between –

we are God's beloved, welcomed into the community of God's people

and the eternal reign of God.

Sing with me:

Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so

Little ones to him belong

We are weak but he is strong

Yes, Jesus loves me; yes, Jesus loves me

Yes, Jesus loves me – The Bible tells me so