

Let Them Come Luke 18.15-17
by The Reverend Canon Durrell Watkins, M.A., M.Div.
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THE PROCLAIMED WORD

My great-uncle Arthur, husband of my great-aunt Gladys, went missing one day. He just didn't come home. The next day, Arthur is still nowhere to be found, so my great-aunt called my grandmother to tell her about Arthur's seeming disappearance; and like a shot, my grandmother jumped in the car, drove across the stateline from Arkansas to Louisiana to comfort my great-aunt who lived an hour away.

My grandmother picked up Aunt Gladys, took her to the police station and when they told an officer that Uncle Arthur was missing, the officer took a pad and a pen and said to my aunt Gladys, "description?" Aunt Gladys said, "6 feet 2, olive complexioned, lots of wavy dark hair, and built like a brick-house." My grandmother, stunned by her sister's apparent break from reality, said, "Gladys! Arthur isn't tall, and he isn't built; in fact he's so skinny if he closed one eye he'd look like a needle! An onion has more hair, and he's so pale if he stands in direct sunlight you can see his internal organs!" Clearly annoyed, Aunt Gladys snapped, "And why would I want that back?"[1]

Well, poor Uncle Arthur isn't the only one whose sacred worth and value has been overlooked.

The New Testament book of Ephesians, written in the second half of first century, after the crucifixion of Jesus and possibly after the Romans destroyed the Temple of Jerusalem tells its audience in its 5th chapter that wives should be subordinate to their husbands. That leads into chapter 6 telling children to obey their parents and slaves to obey their masters. Those passages do not represent the proudest moment in sacred history; and sadly, those passages have been used to dehumanize and control people and are often still used to hurt and manipulate people. It's a scandal for which the church has scarcely begun to repent. But the passages are important as a window into history.

In the Mediterranean world in ancient times, men dominated public and political space. And though women were considered to be over the domain of hearth and home, even within the home men expected and exercised power and privilege. So, men were considered the "head" of the household in three fairly powerful ways:

1. As husbands, they ruled over their wives.
2. As fathers, they instructed their male children and ruled over the children (they shared this power with their wives).
3. And if they were slave holders, the heads of household obviously expected to rule over their servants.

This pattern of dominance that free, adult, men enjoyed in that patriarchal culture is called the Household Code.

The Household Code was part of the Roman infrastructure. The home was a miniature model of the Empire...every Husband/Father was "Lord" of his house. And if you can get people to buy into that, then it isn't a big stretch to get them to buy into Caesar being Lord of HIS house...which is the entire Empire.

- *Husband over wife.*
- *Parents over children.*
- *Slave-holders over slaves.*
- *Emperor over Empire (everyone).*

By privileging free men over women, children, and people in bondage, Rome actually was building Empire into the consciousness of the people so that a Lord ruling over everyone seemed natural...why shouldn't Caesar be master of the world? Every man was Lord of his house, and

the Empire was simply Caesar's house. The patriarchal status quo actually disempowered the people over whom Caesar ruled, and the system worked to Caesar's advantage for centuries.

This is the world and the time in which a writer claiming to be Paul says, "Wives should be subordinate to their husbands...for the husband is head of the wife..." This is the world and the time in which this same writer says, "Children obey your parents, for this is their right..." and "Slaves, be obedient to your human masters with fear and trembling..."

I don't believe Paul actually wrote those words...they are too different from words that Paul did write in Galatians: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free person, male nor female; for you are all one in Christ..." (Gal. 3.28).

Whoever did write Ephesians, insisting that wives submit to husbands, that children basically be seen and not heard, and that slaves accept their lot in life, was actually challenging the liberating message of Paul...the message of equality, the message that in the community of Christ we are ONE. Someone, claiming to be Paul, contradicts Paul and rather than encouraging liberation promotes the status quo. You see, Galatians would have been written before Rome cracked down on Jews and Christians...Ephesians would have been written after. In a world that seemed very unsafe, the writer of Ephesians, borrowing the name and authority of Paul, was probably trying to make the Jesus movement seem less seditious, less counter-cultural, more able to fit in, so that Rome would be more tolerant of them. But the message instruction for slaves, wives, and children to be obedient and accept the power structure that worked to their own disadvantage was contrary to the liberating message of the Gospel that the real Paul actually supported.

Now, we didn't hear a reading from Ephesians today, so why am I obsessing about it? Because it actually places the verses we heard from Luke's gospel today in context.

Luke was written about the same time as Ephesians, in the last third of the first century, during the time when the Household Code would have been the norm! Men over women; adults over children; privileged over marginalized...Emperor over empire.

In this system, children had no status. Just as women had little or no status apart from the men in their lives, and as slaves were considered to be without agency, children were also without voice or power or status. So in verse 16, hear Jesus in this historical context when he says, "Let the children come to me and do not prevent them; for the dominion of God belongs to such as these." The powerless, the vulnerable, the at risk – to THEM Jesus says, "let them come to me. Let them be who they are; let them be seen, let them be heard, let them be recognized, let them be affirmed!"

In this passage, children aren't just adorable little kids; they are a symbol for all marginalized, excluded people. When Jesus says let them come, he is seeing them, recognizing them, affirming them, and not just them but all people who have been denied access to power or privilege or equal opportunity. He is giving dignity back to people who had been robbed of their dignity; he is seeing people who had been invisible. He is affirming and uplifting the people who had been wounded by society's cruel prejudices. He is blessing children, and women, and slaves, and Samaritans, and lepers, and the poor, and the mentally ill, and epileptics, and the elderly, and everyone else whose dignity had been overlooked.

Let them come...the ones who have been vilified, left out, blamed, targeted...let them finally be recognized, affirmed, and not merely tolerated but celebrated. Let them come.

More than a generation after Jesus is crucified, someone we call "Luke" remembers the spirit of Jesus and applies the healing power of Jesus' wisdom and love to a hurting community by telling a story of Jesus affirming and blessing children, people without access to power. To a community that had been beaten down, stripped of its dignity, what a healing message it must have been to hear, "Let them come...they are the ones the dominion of God is all about."

Let the powerless feel empowered...Let the invisible now be seen...Let the voiceless finally be heard...Let the hated be loved...Let the hopeless have their hope renewed. Let them come. When the voiceless find a voice, they are entering into the divine Way, the dominion of heaven. When the hopeless find hope, they are entering into the divine Way. When the powerless become empowered, they are entering the divine Way. Including those who have been excluded, recognizing the innate dignity and sacred value of all people...this is the dominion of God and... This is the Good News. Amen.

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THE AFFIRMING WORD

Divine Love Recognizes me!
Divine Love Embraces me!
Divine Love Affirms me!
Divine Love Blesses me!
I deserve Good in my life.
I love myself as I am.
And I express hope and wholeness,
peace and prosperity, now.
And so it is!

THE FINAL WORD

“Do you want to be a power in the world? Then be yourself.” – Ralph Waldo Trine

[1] Who knows where I first heard that old chestnut?! I have clearly adapted it for my purposes in this sermon.