The Gifts They Bring

How Children in the Gospels
Can Shape Inclusive Ministry

AMY LINDEMAN ALLEN

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To

Roger and Joanne,
whose faithful love and inclusion of all God's children
is an inspiration and model for me.

"One generation shall laud your works to another, and shall declare your mighty acts."

—Psalm 145:4

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Foreword

Amy Lindeman Allen is a biblical scholar, pastor, educator, and parent. Her experiences in all of these roles, as well as her talents and insights, are woven together in this book as she invites readers to think in new ways about beloved Gospel stories. Just as Jesus confronted those he met with their assumptions, so too we, as contemporary hearers today, can imagine new ways that children listen, share, participate, proclaim, advocate, and live in partnership with us in being God's faithful disciples at work in the world.

What story is your church telling? That is the question at the heart of this book. Each chapter offers you the opportunity to hear a contemporary story and then reflect on its meaning in light of a Gospel story. This seamless movement between ancient and contemporary stories invites you to consider the gifts that children bring when they are welcomed and supported in their participation and leadership in congregational life. The connection among these stories is made evident by the gifts that are nurtured and sustained when all ages are welcomed into the faith life of a congregation. As Allen reminds us, welcoming a child is welcoming Jesus. Is our welcome to children in worship contingent on how quiet and passive they are? Whose voice is heard and valued? Are opportunities for service and mission limited only to adults?

Author and theologian Phyllis Tickle once commented that the church should have a large rummage sale every 500 years to bring

out all the stuff that has accumulated. Sort everything—theologies, practices, ways of interpreting Scripture—and decide what to keep, what to discard, and what to recycle. I think we are at the beginning of that church rummage sale. We sit on a cusp of possibility. Either we retreat into the past—"We've always done it this way" or "We've never done it that way"—or we imagine new ways we can intentionally be church together across the ages.

A hymn written by Marty Haugen in 1995 similarly invites us to imagine the house we build where all are welcome, where everyone is named, "taught and claimed as words within the Word."[1]

Seeing how some of his disciples attempted to block the parents and children coming to see him, Jesus opened his arms so they could participate in his loving welcome. Young shepherds proclaimed the good news of the birth of the child whose story we still tell. Jesus invited fishers to follow him, to live into the ways they could each be advocates for a life of inclusion for all who were hungry; thirsty; or needing clothing, shelter, or friends. Jesus noticed and listened. When he was at Martha's house, he saw how Mary was listening and learning and the ways that Martha was offering hospitality and welcome. Both were serving as his disciples. A child's lunch fed a crowd, and Jesus helped people see how God's realm is revealed in the sharing of bread. The healing of a distraught mother's son invites our consideration of the ways we can live together as partners in faithful communities wherever we live.

With her close and imaginative reading of these familiar biblical stories, Allen invites us to begin the rummage sale by considering the ways we invite and support faith in disciples of all ages—those with autism and neurodiverse abilities, those for whom hearing or vision is a challenge, those who wrestle with who they are and what they are called to be and do in this world, those who are quite sure of what they believe, those who come with many questions, and everyone in between. God's family is complete when the gifts of all are welcomed at the doors of the church.

The Gifts They Bring is a gift to the church. Read and discuss it together, and consider the story your church is telling about the ways the gifts of all are being invited, supported, and challenged for the

ministry that God is calling forth in us. Together find new ways to tell old stories and share new gifts as you work to build a house that embodies God's Word.

Elizabeth F. Caldwell
McCormick Theological Seminary,
professor emerita, and author of
I Wonder: Engaging a Child's Curiosity about the Bible

Acknowledgments

This book is dedicated to my grandparents, Roger and Joanne. From my first childhood fancies to the discernment of my call to ministry, they never stopped believing in me and helping me to recognize the gifts that I can bring to the church and the world—even as my direction changed more than a few times along the way. When my academic dissertation was published, they were among the first to read it, through the academic jargon and literature reviews, even though they have no special interest in biblical criticism or theology. They graciously thanked me for gifting them a copy of that book but told me it would also be nice if, someday, I wrote a book that was easier to read and understand. They were the first to plant the seed in my head, and the hope that they might have the opportunity to read this book has been a continual inspiration along the journey of its development.

While my grandparents were the first to encourage me to write for the church, they were far from the last. Over the past several years I have had the opportunity to teach about children and the Bible in countless Christian education settings across the church, ranging from clergy and lay education events to adult forums to intergenerational seminars to preschool Sunday school classes. I have both learned from and been affirmed by the students in each of these sessions. Over and over again, as I point out children who are hiding just beneath the surface of many of our favorite biblical texts, or bring

to life the perspective of those with whom we have become overly familiar, people have asked me if I have written about that. The curiosity and affirmations of each person who has been generous enough to engage with me about this topic have been a gift to me in my writing process, and this book is intended as a gift to them in turn.

At the same time, writing for a church audience is quite different from writing for academicians and seminarians and even from preaching and teaching in the church. It is a process that combines the best of both, but it is, at the same time, an altogether different labor entirely. Coming to this realization was a journey, and I am indebted to my editor, Jessica Miller Kelley, for accompanying me along the way. From the first inquiry I sent to her until the last edits before this book went to print, Jessica has steadfastly walked alongside me in the art of church writing, first helping me to clarify the gifts the children in these biblical texts bring to bear on today's church, and then offering questions and comments along the way that helped me to gain clarity in my thoughts without dismissing them. In so doing, she helped me to dig deeper into the meaning of these biblical stories not only for the first century, but for today. I am indebted to her wisdom and grace.

Likewise, my parents, Bonnie and Roland Lindeman, have been a support and a guide to me always; that has been true especially in this writing process. As a pastor who is gifted in preaching children's sermons, my father is a natural resource for ideas and perspectives, and I am grateful for his ear and guidance as I grow in my ministry. As a layperson, however, my mother was the most instrumental in helping me to shift my target audience from preachers to the people in the pews. Throughout the writing process, she read multiple drafts of each chapter and talked me through each one, at times line by line, noting what she found helpful and inspiring, what she wanted to know more about, and, even more helpfully, what she didn't understand or found to be too bogged down with detail. It is with thanks to both my parents that I hope this book will be beneficial to both pastors and laypeople alike.

Additionally, this book would not have been possible without the time and resources so graciously granted both by my institution and my family. The faculty and board of Christian Theological Seminary

(CTS) granted me a research leave in the fall of 2021. During that time I completed the bulk of the writing of this book. More importantly, collegial support of my work at the intersections of praxis and scholarship has given me both the freedom and the incentive to pursue this project. I'm especially grateful to the students who have participated in the Children and the Bible course I teach at CTS. The unique mix of students preparing for both counseling and pastoral ministries with whom I have had the privilege of working in each of these course sections has opened up these stories for me in ways I would not have imagined otherwise and confirmed the importance of attending to the gifts that children bring not just in the Bible, but for the church. And, of course, I am grateful to my spouse, Erik, and my children, Becca, Joanna, and William, who have offered encouragement and understanding, even when at times I had to pull late nights editing chapters or spend Sundays away from our worship homes, teaching in churches across our community. They have even generously allowed for parts of their own stories to be shared in this book. I could not get through this work, or this life, without them.

Finally, this book is the product of more than fifteen years of ministry among God's faithful people, and it rests on the shoulders of all of the people and churches with whom I have had the privilege of serving over that time. Our stories are interconnected, and I am indebted to each church and individual for letting me be a small part of theirs.

Introduction

A Child-Centered Approach to Scripture and Ministry

Our oldest child, Becca, received her first Holy Communion by mistake. Actually, it wasn't so much a mistake as it was an intuitive act of inclusion. It was a blessing of the best sort, but the fact remains that no one quite knew it was happening—except, of course, for Becca.

Because her father and I were both parish pastors at the time, Becca was cared for during worship by surrogate grandparents in each of our respective congregations. At Hebron Lutheran, the church my husband served, this role was filled by Betty Kanas, and at First Lutheran, the church I served, she was cared for by Clarence and Louise Bell. Throughout the time that I served First Lutheran, I observed Clarence and Louise care for Becca with unwavering joy and ease, similar, I suspect to the care they had shown their own children and grandchildren over the years. They cradled and fed her as a baby and, as she grew, adapted to her boisterous toddler phase seamlessly. By eighteen months old, Becca felt as at home in the parish naves of our two congregations as she did in our own house. She skipped up and down the aisles between services, ran her toy trains along the edges of the pews, greeted every member of the choir with energetic waves, and giggled with glee when she was granted the opportunity to "test out" a new key or stop on the organ.

Nevertheless, each week she was at First Lutheran, when the worship service began, Becca was steadfastly seated in between Mr. and

Mrs. Bell, often balanced just barely on the edge of the pew or teetering on her tiptoes to see what was going on at the altar. The Bells, together with Betty, taught Becca to hold a hymnal, sing even when she didn't know the words, and fold her chubby fingers in prayer. And, of course, they always brought her forward to receive a blessing during Communion.

We used a large loaf of fresh-baked bread for Communion in that parish. The bread not only looked and tasted delicious, but its aroma would often fill the nave before and during worship. As the presider, I tore liberal pieces from the fluffy interior of the loaf as I distributed it. In retrospect, it's not at all surprising that right around the time Becca's love of good bread emerged, she also realized that what was being shared among the adults was far superior to the goldfish crackers in the snack cup she carried.

I don't know for sure, but I suspect that upon this realization, Becca pretty quickly voiced her complaint to Louise about the injustice of not receiving her own piece of bread. She was, after all, at that same time also discovering the power of using her voice to make her wants known, as every toddler does. What I do know is that one day, after breaking off a piece of bread for Clarence and Louise in turn and laying my hands upon Becca in blessing, I walked past them to the next group at the altar rail and observed, out of the corner of my eye, Louise breaking her large piece of bread in half and offering one of the pieces to Becca.

Not a word was ever said about what I observed. Yet from that day forward, after saying words of blessing over my daughter's head, I broke a piece of bread from the loaf itself, as I did for every other communicant, placed it in her hands, looked her directly in her eyes, and said, "The body of Christ given *for you*." I don't know whether Louise thought of it the same way, but I believe that by sharing bread from the Communion table with Becca, she was sharing the gift of Christ's body already. What shifted when I began handing Becca the bread directly wasn't her experience in the communion of the saints—that much was already secure. By giving her the bread from the same source and with the same words as everyone else, however, I was signaling that truth to both her and the gathered community with clarity. This was affirmed by the lay assisting minister

that day (and every Sunday following) who, without question, seeing me commune Becca with the bread, did the same for her with the cup by handing her a cup of grape juice with the words "The blood of Christ, shed for you."

Under the circumstances, my daughter's desire for inclusion in the eucharistic feast isn't that remarkable. She behaved in the same manner as countless children whom I have observed over the course of my ministry and participation in parish life. Free of the inhibitions socialized into us as we grow, toddlers see something that they want, and they naturally reach for it. What really took my breath away wasn't my daughter's brazen demand for the eucharistic bread, but her caregiver's unhesitating decision to share it with her.

I suspect that if I had asked Louise at that time, or any time before or after, about her opinion regarding First Communion, she would have likely insisted that instruction be given to children at a sufficient age of reason so they can understand the sacrament properly. Although the specific age and notions of proper understanding have shifted across generations, I know that this is the general practice by which each of the Bells and their own children received their First Communion. It was also the practice of our parish and, despite theological statements affirming the availability of Communion for *all* the baptized, it is still today considered by many people to be "good order" in our denomination.

This is why I doubt that Louise was intending to commune my toddler when she first broke her bread and shared it with her—though I intentionally never asked. Nor did Louise ever ask me why I began "officially" communing Becca after that day. Rather, in that moment of eucharistic sharing, what is perhaps most significant is that Louise was acting to *include* my daughter. Seeing a child aching for something so simple for her to provide, she instinctively shared from her bounty. And whatever they may or may not have thought about young children receiving the Eucharist, Louise, Clarence, and even Betty continued to share this bounty for the entirety of our time in those parishes—bringing Becca bouncing joyfully up to the eucharistic table, teaching her to extend her hands at the rail to receive the bread, and assisting her with little cups of grape juice every Sunday. Indeed, even when the elements themselves are not shared, I see this

same instinct among parents and grandparents who allow their children to place their little cups in a basket after they (the adults) have consumed the contents, pastors who lovingly clasp the outstretched hands of toddlers and little children at the Communion rail, and youth workers who offer packaged snacks or trinkets to children who come forward in worship. The message is clear: all are welcome.

Inclusive Ministry

While the details may differ across contexts, I don't think that Louise Bell's impulse to include my daughter was unique. Most adults want children to feel included. We want to share the good gifts of God's grace with the next generation. Moreover, study upon study conducted by church growth organizations indicates not only this desire but the *need* to include children and families in religious communities for the sake of the health and future of the church. Jesus praises "whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones" (Matt. 10:42); in most churches, a person who would avoid this sort of small grace is rare indeed, especially outside of the worship space itself. In the fellowship and Christian education wings, churches abound with people like the Bells, who boost toddlers so that they can view buffet tables, help children to extra cookies at potlucks, carry Life Savers in their pocketbooks for restless preteens, assist with crafts or vacation Bible school singing, and share their bread when there is plenty to go around.

One might ask, then, what is the problem? Why do we need another book about children and the church? This book establishes that children were important to Jesus and the early church and makes the case that children should continue to be important to the church today. But at least at some level, we already *know* that children were important to Jesus and that they should remain important to the church. The implicit assumption of every graph that reflects how the average age of churchgoers has increased over the past two generations and every church ministry discussion oriented around how to attract families or children is that *children are important in the life of the church*.

There is little to no question about whether children should be included in the church or its ministries. I suspect that for most of

you, committed perhaps to children's ministry or faithful parenting or a combination of both, the answer is a resounding *yes*—of course we care about including children in the church! This book is, in fact, written out of gratitude for you.

The question as I see it isn't about *if* children should be included in the church, but rather *how* to fully include children—and not only in the church as a collection of buildings or ministries, but more fundamentally in the church as the collective gathering of the body of Christ. In the various congregations that my family and I have had the privilege of being part of, whether for a short time or a long time, I've never encountered a lack of passion or energy for the inclusion of children and their families. This, with no small thanks to faithful families and youth workers, we are blessed with in abundance.

However, over the course of our children's lifetimes, bringing them to worship both as their pastor and, in other contexts, as a solo parent in the pews while their father led worship, I have often encountered disagreements or outright paralysis over what including children means, not just for the children and their families themselves, but for the entire congregation. I have observed a disconnect between the sort of *intuitive inclusion* I describe above, which I think describes the good intentions of most congregations to welcome children, and the more expansive *full inclusion* of children not just in a corner of the building dedicated to children's ministry or at Wednesday evening youth events, but in the corporate life of the whole community.

This book is about bridging that gap. It is about seeing the outstretched hands of the children in our churches and responding to them with compassion. It is about seeing in their hands not only a need to be met but the ability and desire to share and to serve. Full inclusion means the shift from caregivers surreptitiously sharing their bread to Communion ministers confidently proclaiming, "This is the body of Christ / This is the blood of Christ, given *for you*." And then, perhaps even more dramatically, it is a shift to allowing those same children to place the bread in *our* hands and to experience the incarnate Christ when they say, in return, "This is the body of Christ given *for you*."

Our daughter, Becca, was nine years old the first time she stood in front of the altar holding the common cup, offering the blood of Christ, in the form of grape juice to the worshiping body. Because

she is a petite child, as adults came forward to dip their bread in the cup she offered, it was necessary for some to stoop a bit to partake, no matter how high up her small arm extended the cup forward. As smaller children came forward, I noticed the smile on their faces as they were able to look Becca straight in the eyes as they easily reached the cup she extended downward, hearing the promise of Christ's presence declared for them. Yet whoever received Christ's blood from Becca that day, whether young or old, short or tall, received the same promise and the same presence.

This is what it means to be, together, the body of Christ. Full inclusion of children in worship is not just or even primarily about the children. From a theological perspective, worship is participation in the communion of saints; it is about gathering as Christ's body *together*. It is about reaching out to one another, whichever direction we need to extend the welcoming hand. Full inclusion means accepting that we are all members of one another, working together with, rather than in opposition to, one another for the sake of the realm of God. Most of all, embodying the body of Christ means acknowledging that when a segment of that body is missing or is somehow relegated to the side, as children can be, then the whole body suffers. As Paul writes, "If one member [of the body suffers], all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it" (1 Cor. 12:26).

Inclusive Scripture Reading

Paying attention to each member of the body is the goal of inclusive Scripture reading. Such readings are embodied in beautifully diverse ways by interpreters who embrace their God-created uniqueness through feminist, womanist, masculine, disability-oriented, Latin American, African American, and queer readings of the Bible, just to name a few. As a mother and biblical scholar focused on the inclusion of children, I wrote this book in an effort to do the same through a child-centered interpretation of Scripture.

Moreover, just as inclusion of children in worship is about the whole body of Christ, so too does centering children in Scripture reading lift up the whole body—adult and child. Through attention to children in our reading, I believe we can reorient our approach to

one another at an intergenerational level—children and adults—as stewards of the same heavenly realm, members of one body in Christ. The goal, then, is not to privilege children over and against adults. Rather, the novelty in a child-centered reading of the Bible is simply that it doesn't immediately privilege adults. The use of the term *childist* sometimes applied to such readings isn't intended to imply bias of any kind either in favor of children or adults, nor is seeking out the children in Scripture meant to be a gimmick to attract young people's attention or offer adults a fresh way to read the text. Child-centered, or childist, interpretation seeks to learn equally from both the children and the adults in the biblical texts by paying attention to the presence and experience of all the characters in the story, even the children who are too frequently forgotten or assumed to be adults.

Typical readings of Jesus' teachings on children provide a prime example. Each Gospel author tells the story of Jesus blessing real, actual children. However, most adult Bible studies on this story focus on how adults can *be like* these children in order to enter into God's realm, rather than lifting up the experiences and contributions of actual children in God's realm. At the same time, Sunday schools are filled with posters and story Bibles that make it clear Jesus blessed and welcomed actual children. With the exception of the occasional intergenerational event, contemporary churches are generally structured to keep adults and children apart, not only in worship but also in Scripture study.

In contrast, out of necessity, adults and children shared far more space in the ancient world. Taking place in this context, Jesus' ministry assumed the presence of *both* adults and children more often than not. By reclaiming the roles that children played in Jesus' ministry, the child-centered interpretations that follow seek to shine a light on how much adults and children each have to learn from one another. Child-centered reading seeks to learn both from and with *all* of the little ones who believe in Jesus.

Strategies for Reading

Part of the nature of this focus on the needs of one another is that there is no single pioneer of this child-centered approach to reading biblical texts. Rather, child-centered readers have, over time,

discovered that we share similar strategies.[1] These strategies aren't intended to be hard and fast rules but, rather, guides to help shine a new light on children both in and beyond the biblical narratives.

The first of these strategies I've already mentioned. It involves shifting the focus from adults to children. This shift is not about privileging children but about opening ourselves up to seeing children in the text. Instead of assuming that every text is written solely for adults or that every character *is* an adult unless otherwise specified, childist readers ask the questions "How would a child perceive or read this text?" and "Where might the children be *in* this text?"

Next, a childist reading pays attention to the place and role of children in the biblical world. As we read the Gospels, this means asking about the roles and responsibilities of the children whom Jesus encountered in their own world. Since Jesus and most of his followers were Jewish, this means paying attention to the roles and responsibilities of children in first-century Jewish culture. Since the Gospels take place during a time of empire in the area now known as Israel/Palestine, attention to context also means asking about the place of children within this larger cultural context, including North Africa, Roman Italy, and other locations across the Mediterranean basin.

The final two steps of childist readings of biblical texts are aimed at leveling the playing field between adult and child readers. The biblical texts were written mostly, if not entirely, by adult men who, often without even knowing it, inherited the adult-centered, patriarchal worldview of their cultures. They have also been widely interpreted over time by adult scholars whose work, to varying degrees, represents similar adult-centered biases in the contemporary world. Such readings run the danger of repeating the mistake of placing stumbling blocks in front of the very little ones whom we seek to welcome into Christ's presence (Matt. 18:6).

To correct for this adult-centered bias, child-centered readings don't just lift up the child characters directly named in the Bible; they also look for children in the shadows of the biblical narratives—children who may have been present and unnamed in houses, crowds, synagogues, or streets. Paying attention to the places children commonly inhabited in the first-century world, a child-centered reading

of the Gospels can fill in gaps left in the actual text in order to understand where children may have been, even if they aren't specifically mentioned. The most frequent example of this involves remembering the children present in the crowds, as in John's feeding narrative (John 6:10; cf. Matt. 14:21); however, this can also occur by inquiring deeper into the background of unnamed children, such as the child whom Jesus places in his disciples' midst (Matt. 18:2).

Finally, as we notice the presence of children, either directly stated or emerging from the gaps of the Gospel stories, childist readers attempt to respect these children as human beings in all of their fullness. This means not stopping at recognizing the ways in which adults act toward or speak for children, but paying attention to how children themselves act and speak in the stories. In this way, child-centered readings are committed to seeing the interactions between adults and children in all of their complexities. Children are more obviously dependent upon their caregivers and their environments than adults, but paying attention to children helps us to see the interdependencies between all human beings and God's creation. It is to such relationality that Jesus commends those of us who seek to follow him when he instructs his disciples to be like little children (Matt. 18:3).

At the same time, such an instruction was never meant to be an either/or. Jesus does not intend to exclude either adults or children from following him or entering the realm of God. The ways in which adults and children work together in this ministry can be reclaimed by recognizing child disciples where adult-centered readings do not commonly see them—for example, in the person of John, son of Zebedee (Mark 1:19–20), or Mary, sister of Martha (Luke 10:38–42). In this way, by living into God's covenant with God's people—both adults and children—Jesus continues to extend God's blessing throughout his ministry and commands his disciples to continue in the same way.

Unfortunately, somewhere along the line, as the early followers of Jesus separated from Jesus' earthly ministry and from Judaism, they also lost this intentional focus on supporting one another across all differences—especially age. By recentering our attention on the real children impacted by Jesus' teachings on children, a childist rereading

of these familiar texts paves the way for even more genuinely inclusive interpretations that can open us up to different understandings of what it means to relate to one another as members of the same body.

As we apply these principles of reading to additional stories from Jesus' life and ministry, it is my hope that our imagination for different kinds of relationships made possible by Jesus' directive both to welcome and become like little children will blossom. This child-centered interpretation is grounded on the belief that both adults and children can benefit spiritually from paying closer attention to the ways in which children participate in and contribute to the building up of God's realm as they are portrayed in the biblical texts. When we look again at Jesus' teachings on children through this lens, it becomes clear that Jesus is no more silencing adults than he is silencing children. When Jesus commands his disciples to welcome children in his name, he does so with a view of a community that is big enough not only to hold but to welcome and affirm all of God's people—including both children and adults.

In this way, child-centered readings of the Gospels have the potential to benefit the whole body of Christ as we imagine anew what it means to uplift and support one another—adults and children—in all our diversity. For too long, children have been commanded to keep silent not only in church but anytime they are among adults. This expectation for children to fade into the shadows has led to precisely that. The task before us as adult readers is to let the little children come to *us*, as we discover together what it means to live into the realm of God, with all the gifts God has given us to share.

Coming Together as the Body of Christ

I call my daughter's unintentional Communion a blessing of the best sort because in that moment of unpremeditated acceptance God cut through all the barriers and welcomed her as God's child into the full fellowship of the body of Christ. In that act, the *whole* body benefited. I believe that in that moment and through a shared love for both Christ and a child, our small congregation was gifted with the "greater gifts" about which Paul writes (1 Cor. 12:31). These gifts can take many different forms, but at their heart they are centered in love

for God and one another. Such love is embodied in full inclusion and acceptance of every member of Christ's body, across all our intersecting identities, including age.

Defining Welcome and Inclusion

Different congregations and denominations live into this fellowship of Christ's body in different ways. The point of this book is not to persuade you that any one sacramental theology, form of gathering, or way of being is better than another. This is not a book about sacramental practice or a how-to book on Christian education or First Communion, nor is it a book about how to parent young children from the pews or the best approaches to including and reaching youth in worship. It is my hope that this book may spark your imagination around these and many other topics related to the roles of youth and family in church. Most importantly, though, this is a book about community. Specifically, it is a book that celebrates what is possible when adults and children come together in community as one body in Christ.

It is necessary to affirm that this inclusion extends across race and ethnicity, gender and sexuality, wealth and poverty, ability and disability, geographic location, and chronological age. Recently, many mainline churches have gravitated toward stating, "All are welcome," often intending to counteract the assumption of LGBTQ exclusion in Christian churches. However, the expansiveness of this welcome and what it means to live fully into such welcome is often taken for granted and so not embodied in the life of the church either for LGBTQ worshipers or others. As a White, cisgender, heterosexual, middle-class Euro-American woman, I find that mainline congregations (which are themselves predominantly White and middle-class) generally welcome me with ease. But sometimes I arrive at many of these same congregations as all of those things *and* as a slightly frazzled mother with my small children in tow and am greeted with a different response. While I typically experience the same verbal welcome, when I come to worship with young children, acceptance into the community and, in particular, into the worship space may be on much shakier ground. In the early years of my parenting, more than

one fellow Christian walked back that welcome because I allowed my toddlers to stand on the pews, I nursed my infants in worship, and I sat toward the front so my children could see.

I highlight my personal experience as an example of the larger challenge—the full inclusion of children into the body of Christ, however your community embodies this grace. Whether yours is a tradition that baptizes or dedicates, communes toddlers or teenagers, invites children to sing with the praise band or color quietly in the pew—whatever human identities and experiences your congregation actively affirms or is working to understand, I am convinced that God is calling each of us to take seriously the children in our midst, not just as the future of the church (though they are surely that) but also as gifted and essential members in the present body of Christ.

From my studies of the Bible, I am convinced that children and adults have labored side by side in the body of Christ since the very first followers of Jesus. The idea that children were important to Jesus isn't itself a radical claim; it's the centerpiece of such beloved children's songs as "Jesus Loves Me" and "Jesus Loves the Little Children." But when we talk about Jesus' love for the little children, we have a tendency to sentimentalize his love, like we would a child's love for a stuffed animal or a cute kitten. In contrast, to recognize children as integral members of the body of Christ alongside adults speaks to a deeper and more participatory kind of love. Children were not simply loved by Jesus in a one-directional way. Jesus recognized children as equally capable of returning that love. In love, Jesus recognized the gifts that children brought—and continue to bring—to the community of believers.

But Jesus wasn't the first or only one in his community to affirm these gifts. Although the world of Jesus' day was different from our own in many ways, the communities in that time and place were teeming with children and with families and neighbors who valued those children. On a daily basis, parents, grandparents, and community members entrusted their children not only with their livelihoods but with the respect and continuation of their traditions. Deuteronomy 11:19 records God's command to the Israelites to teach God's promises "to your children, talking about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise."

Children were central to God's promise to the Jews; as Jews themselves, both Jesus and his disciples knew and honored this. Jesus' love for children was not unique to him, but a part of his Jewish identity and heritage. Sometimes we can miss this generational value in the first-century world, though, because of cultural differences between the United States of America in the twenty-first century and Galilee and Judea in the first, and part of the purpose of the studies that follow is to bridge this gap. Honoring and loving children in Jesus' context looked very different from what most twenty-first-century adults think about when we imagine honoring and loving children today, but it remained a central value of the Jewish faith.

Defining Children and Childhood

While Jesus and his community affirmed and welcomed children, the truth is that there is no single way to do this. Growing up on a farm is different from growing up in a city, and cultural assumptions around childhood are as varied as the number of cultures we encounter. Talking seriously about children and childhood is thus heavily contextual and requires a series of assumptions from the start. I am writing from my experience as a White American mother and cannot authentically do otherwise, which means that the cultural assumptions I make about childhood come from this context. Even more specifically, I grew up and have raised my children in a middle-class, dual-income household in small towns and suburbs of the United States of America. These contexts influence my view of childhood.

Within White American suburbia, childhood is often sentimentalized and idealized, with a view that children ought to remain innocent and avoid work as long as possible. Parents often try to "protect" children from the "real world" or curate their activities in an effort to tailor their future success. Such desires, while mostly well-intentioned, have been embodied in intensive styles of child-rearing that have been described as "helicopter parenting" or "snowplow parenting"—attempts to protect children and to remove obstacles from their way, respectively. In its extreme, this kind of parenting made the headlines in 2019 with a college admissions scandal involving numerous high-profile White celebrities in the United States.

Even in a more moderated approach, such parenting styles mark economic privilege due to the amount of time, energy, and money they consume. My culture is thus characterized by a fierce intentionality in marking off childhood as a protected space completely separate from adulthood.

Foreshadowing this cultural understanding of childhood, French historian Philippe Ariès famously argued that there was no concept of childhood in ancient societies before the Renaissance. Other historians of family and childhood have since pointed out the cultural limits of Ariès's study, as well as the error in his assumption that childhood must be carefully distinguished from adulthood in order to exist. The result has been more nuanced discussions of *childhoods* in the plural, rather than a monolithic, timeless standard for childhood. While I write from my experiences of childhood, therefore, I do so with an ear toward and awareness of the multiplicity of experiences of childhood both past and present.

In many such experiences of childhood, the distinction between adult and child is nowhere near as neat or complete as White American suburbia or Philippe Ariès might have us think. In most instances in the ancient world, childhood and adulthood were distinguished not by age or physical maturity but by one's place or role in society. Most typically this involved marriage and procreation, though for boys some level of adulthood might have been realized when they established themselves in a field of work even before marrying. In contrast, in the United States today, childhood is usually legally defined with reference to age rather than social status. However, at what age one is classified as an adult continues to vary, with tiered ages at which a person is legally recognized as an adult in the United States. This standard is actually set at the state level, with most states setting the age of majority at eighteen but permitting individuals certain mature privileges, such as driving, as early as fifteen or sixteen and, despite allowing a person to serve or even be drafted into the military at eighteen, not permitting the consumption of alcohol until the age of twenty-one. Meanwhile, medical studies on brain development and functioning suggest that most people don't reach full maturity—and so don't have the ability to fully assess risks and consequences—until the age of twenty-five.

Thus, while early childhood is easily identified through biological immaturity, by the time a person reaches early adolescence, the stage where individuals increasingly interact in community, childhood and adulthood are identified mostly by cultural rather than biological markers. And these cultural definitions can vary widely. Young adults in U.S. suburbia today grapple with when and how to define this transition, celebrating mundane milestones from doing the laundry to ordering pizza to paying the electric bill as "adulting." More officially, adulthood is often celebrated when a young person graduates from college, rents their first apartment, or begins a full-time career.

At the same time, one of the great threats to Black American youth today is the adultification of Black youth by White-dominated culture, leading to the oversexualization of Black girls in the media and the criminalization of Black boys by police. The assumption in White American culture that some (White) children need special protection while other (Black) children are dangerous is not only empirically wrong but insidiously dangerous. This has led to the persistence of courts to try children, especially Black or other racially minoritized children, as adults in the criminal justice system. The legal default at which individuals are assumed to be adults, and thus capable of being held fully accountable for their actions in the criminal justice system, is eighteen. However, judges are given the discretion to shift that standard down, depending upon the state, with various states setting limits between ages ten and fifteen and others setting no lower limit at all, allowing children as young as seven or eight years old to be tried as adults. In highlighting the gifts that children bring to the church, it is particularly important for White Americans like myself to recognize both the youth and the giftedness of Black and Brown children *as children*. Combating this cultural evil of inappropriately labeling developing children as adults is one of the important tasks of reading again familiar Bible stories with an eye for children in mind.

In short, human development is a process that occurs over time. This makes it difficult to define the transition between childhood and adulthood with a concrete number, as much as we may try, and accounts for some of the ambiguities we will encounter when attempting to locate individuals who may have been socially defined as children in the Gospel stories. In this task chronological age can be helpful, but

paying attention to social roles and positions is much more telling—especially in stories that rarely reveal their characters' ages. Although the key ages and social markers differed, cultural distinctions were also what most readily marked the transition between childhood and adulthood in the first-century Mediterranean world. For both boys and girls, puberty and adolescence were a large factor in this transition, especially when tied with marriage and procreation. But these were not the only social markers of adulthood. For Jewish boys, successful Torah study and inclusion in ritual obligations at twelve years old was a significant step toward adulthood at the religious level, although their adulthood was not yet fully realized on a social level. For Roman boys, the transition to manhood was heavily attached to completion of required service in the military, usually at around eighteen years old, or to their ascendancy as head of their household when their father died. Rarely, young women whose parents died without any male heirs would fill a similar role.

However, the most definitive markers of the transition from childhood to adulthood across gender and cultural differences had to do with one's role in the household. For a boy, this often had to do with greater economic contributions related to completing his education, performing military service, or mastering a trade. Such milestones equipped a young man with the ability to responsibly marry and provide for a wife and children. For a girl, adulthood was closely tied to taking on the roles of wife and mother associated with marriage and childbirth. Because of these factors, girls typically married once they reached child-bearing age, somewhere between twelve and eighteen years old, while boys waited until they were able to provide for a family, marrying on average about five to seven years later than girls. While there continued to be some ambiguity as young people passed these milestones, by the time they were parents in their own right, they were unquestionably considered adults.

Part of the task of reading for inclusion of children is to recognize that cultural difference is not the same as social position. In Jesus' world, children are depicted as moving about more freely in the Gospel stories and at a younger age than many readers today would expect, but that does not mean they ought to be counted as adults anymore than a ten-year-old latchkey child would be considered an

adult today. Culture and context dictate what is safe or necessary for children and these vary between communities, times, and places, but they don't change the embodied reality of childhood. Children staying home by themselves or moving freely through the marketplace are still children and rely upon various support networks, including neighbors, extended family, and—today—technology to help care for them when their parents need to be away.

Another difference is that while there are now laws in place regulating when and how much children can work in the United States, it was not uncommon for a child in Jesus' world to hold what we would consider to be a full-time job. This was both because families needed all the help they could get in order to produce enough food and income to survive and because jobs in this preindustrialized economy would have been much easier and safer for children to perform. The stage of life designated as "childhood" also represented a shorter time in Jesus' world than it does today, for similar reasons. But at its core, childhood both then and now has to do with an increased dependence upon others, while maturity is often defined by greater levels of independence and individual responsibility, although different cultures privilege this experience of independence differently, with many Indigenous American, African, and Asian cultures in particular prizing community and interdependence over and against the individualism often touted as achieved adulthood in White America.

Noticing Children in Christ's Body

Observing such differences from a distance, some commentators on the New Testament have speculated that the first-century world valued children less than we do in the twenty-first century. It is true that the first-century world sentimentalized children less. However, I am convinced that a close reading of Scripture reveals that these communities valued children as much, if not more, than many Christian communities today. The key is in recognizing that in the first century children were not simply valued as precious innocents to protect, but rather as gifted participants in their communities of faith. Children, together with adults, were fully entrusted with God's promise.

Although it would be idealistic to say that children in the first century were fully included all of the time in their communities of faith, I have found that the biblical texts have much to offer us in terms of what a fuller inclusion of children within our own communities of faith might look like. We need only approach them with hearts willing to receive. In what follows, I invite you to journey with me into these texts, some familiar and some less so, and to encounter them with a new appreciation for the gifts that the children in these Gospel stories bring, not only within the communities where their stories take place but also for Christian communities today. I invite you to recognize and embrace the legacy of these children who helped to build the foundations of the body of Christ.

To set this perspective, each chapter begins with a reflection on lived experiences of children in the twenty-first century. This is followed by a summary of a related Gospel story, attention to the role(s) of children in the text, and reflections on how reading with attention to children might draw adult readers of each story both to live into our own "childlike faith" and to come alongside the children in our communities in the process. The goal is that with a fuller appreciation for the active roles of both adults and children in the mission and ministry of Jesus, we—as adults and children seeking to further that mission and ministry today—might seek to embody more fully the body of Christ, recognizing the gifts that we each bring as essential members, one of another.

Through these stories, we will explore the ways children ministered in the first century and how they can do so today as preachers, evangelists, learners, stewards, and cocreators of both family relationships and the ever-approaching realm of God. In the process, I invite you to wonder with me at the diversity and promise held in such a reading of the first-century church and to consider the ways in which twenty-first-century adults and children work together as members of the same body.

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