

Children and Youth Through God's Eyes

Matthew 19:13–15, Luke 2:39–52, Jeremiah 31:15–17 and Matthew 2:16–18

Introduction

As United Methodist Women, we have a special call to support children and youth. This historical mission motivates us in many areas of our work, from stewardship to service to advocacy. It is so much a part of who we are that we may take it for granted — but this vital area of our life together deserves constant attention. Careful study of Scripture helps enliven and deepen our understanding and practice of ministry to, for and with children and youth.

In this study, we will begin to explore:

- The special place of children and youth in the eyes of God (Matthew 19:13–15)
- The special, challenging, exciting time of adolescence (Luke 2:39–52)
- The pain and promise of advocacy for children and youth in a broken world (Jeremiah 31:15–17 and Matthew 2:16–18)

In our first scripture, the disciples try to dismiss the children that rush towards Jesus. Jesus shrugs off such dismissals, welcoming the children with open arms. Jesus affirms that it is to “such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs.” We are invited to consider the role of children in our community and how this Scripture might empower our mission and ministry today.

We might find ourselves thinking, sure, little children are easily loved — but dealing with teens and tweens is an altogether different story! Sometimes adults may be baffled or frustrated by adolescent behavior, especially acting out, pushing boundaries and talking back. Would it surprise us to remember that Jesus' family felt just the same way about him at this age? And that, in fact, this was a necessary and holy part of Jesus' growth and becoming, according to Scripture? We are invited to explore the adolescent antics of the Son of God and how this might inform our approach to youth in our own communities.

“I have a cousin who is four years old and I went over to the house one day just for some reason and I was like, ‘Okay, so why aren’t you in school, sweetie?’ And he is smiling at me and he’s like, ‘Oh, I was expelled.’ And he’s four.” – Damekia Morgan, LA, Family and Friends of Louisiana’s Incarcerated Children

Watch Damekia’s full video here:
[youtube.com/watch?v=IHwjyuvODs&list=PL62A9027219FB16DE&index=2&t=0s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IHwjyuvODs&list=PL62A9027219FB16DE&index=2&t=0s)

Finally, we will carefully consider some expressions of grief and promise, found in both Jeremiah and Matthew. We read these Scriptures in light of the violence done to children and youth in the time of Jeremiah, the time of Jesus and the present day. These Scriptures invite us to go deeper in our grief, deeper in our labor and ultimately, deeper in our hope in Christ.



Opening Prayer

Dear God, we confess that we get so caught up in our day-to-day that we may feel tempted to dismiss the children and youth in our own lives and in our communities. And yet, it is to such as these that the kin(g)dom belongs. God, give us hearts to hear and hands to help, that we might be true friends and champions for the young people in our communities — those that are closest to us and those that we might never meet face-to-face. Strengthen us to your service, that we may seek a future of hope for all your children. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Bible Study

Part 1: The Special Place of Children and Youth in the Eyes of God

Then little children were being brought to him in order that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples spoke sternly to those who brought them; but Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs." And he laid his hands on them and went on his way. (Matthew 19:13–15)

Discuss

Misunderstanding Jesus' mission, the disciples try to dismiss the children and their families, shooing them away so Jesus could get back on task. Do we ever treat children, youth and their families as "interruptions" to our primary work — whether that's getting through a lesson plan, completing a task unbothered, or getting through a Sunday service with no squawks from the back pew? Think of examples in your experience where we have acted in the role of the disciples, trying to rush through children and families to get to the task at hand.

What does our faith teach us about the value and importance of children and youth? What does it mean to say the kin(g)dom of heaven belongs "to such as these"?

How are children treated in your family? In your church community? At your local school? In the country, more broadly?

Despite all the challenges, there is deep goodness in the world. We are surrounded by living witnesses and a powerful host of everyday saints. Do you know someone in your church or community who exemplifies the spirit of Jesus, welcoming and caring for all children? Who? What do they do?

Jesus teaches us a radical love and hospitality for children and youth. Where do we, as a community, fail to live up to this standard? Do we do better by some children than others? What are the differences, if any, in how our communities, churches and schools

treat our children based on race, ethnicity, family income, sexual orientation, gender, or otherwise?

Researchers have found that adults often perceive children of color to be older than they actually are and older than white children of the same age. How might this bias negatively impact discipline at school, interactions with the justice system, and more? What other kinds of implicit bias might impact the way adults perceive children of different backgrounds and identities?

Imagine that you were explaining the school-to-prison pipeline to Jesus. What would you say? What might Jesus tell you in return?

How can we ensure that *all* children are treated like the beloved children of God that they are — in our churches, our schools and our communities?

Part 2: The Special, Challenging, Exciting Time of Adolescence

When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.

Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. Assuming that he was in the group of travelers, they went a day's journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, "Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety." He said to them, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" But they did not understand what he said to them. Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart.

And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.
(Luke 2:39–52)

Discuss

In this passage, a 12-year-old Jesus slips off from his parents to stay behind in Jerusalem. Did you ever run away as a teen or adolescent? What about your children, grandchildren, nieces, nephews or students?

Girls often get involved in the juvenile justice system through “status offenses,” behaviors that would not be crimes for adults, but are illegal for youth (e.g., running away or skipping school). Our Scripture gives an example of Jesus running away and acting as “ungovernable” as a youth, yet Jesus’ community does not have him locked up. In what ways has our approach to juvenile justice and youth misbehavior changed over time? Would Jesus’ community respond in the same way today? Do you think there would have been a different response if Jesus had been a girl?

The story goes something like this: When Mary and Joseph realize that Jesus is not with them, they rush back to Jerusalem and spend three days searching for him. When they finally find him, Mary is “astonished” and says to him: *Child, why are you treating us this way? We’ve been looking for you. We’ve been so worried.* Jesus gives a flip response: *Why were you looking for me? Didn’t you know I’d be here?* Mary and Joseph don’t understand what he is talking about. Many of us will recognize some version of this dialogue from our own experience, whether as parents or children, teachers or students, adults or teens. Reflect back on your own experience. When have you been a participant in such a dialogue? Were you the “Jesus,” the “Mary” or the “Joseph”? Share your story.

Part of the project of adolescence, for many youth, involves pushing out into new experiences, testing boundaries and exploring beyond what they’ve known before. This can be scary or exasperating for adult authorities, but we must be thoughtful about how we’re called to respond, knowing when a graceful response is preferable to a punitive response. Unfortunately, in many cases, ordinary, exploratory, boundary-pushing adolescent behavior, when lived out by children of color, is met with an overly harsh disciplinary hand. Rather than respond to child and youth behavior with a child-development informed approach and a bit of a “grace margin,” adult systems rush to condemn and criminalize. Often, white children are given latitude and shown grace that children of color are not. This is one of the reasons why Black girls are six times as likely to be suspended from school as white girls. How have you seen these disparities play out? Why is this? What would it look like to offer grace more broadly to *all* adolescents?

Part 3: The Pain and Promise of Advocacy for Children and Youth in a Broken World

Thus says the LORD:
A voice is heard in Ramah,
lamentation and bitter weeping.
Rachel is weeping for her children;
she refuses to be comforted for her children,
because they are no more.
Thus says the LORD:
Keep your voice from weeping,

and your eyes from tears;
for there is a reward for your work, says the LORD:
they shall come back from the land of the enemy;
there is hope for your future, says the LORD:
your children shall come back to their own country. (Jeremiah 31:15–17)

When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:
“A voice was heard in Ramah,
wailing and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.” (Matthew 2:16–18)

Discuss

Consider the first part of the Scripture from Jeremiah. Why is the biblical Rachel weeping? What is happening? How does it feel to be Rachel?

Why did the prophet Jeremiah bring up Rachel’s story at that time?

Consider the school-to-prison pipeline, juvenile justice and mass incarceration. Who are the Rachels of today? For whom are they weeping and why?

This Scripture appears again in the New Testament at a very dramatic moment in Jesus’ birth story. What is going on at this time? How might it have felt to be a mother in Bethlehem living through Herod’s decree? Why do you think the Gospel of Matthew quotes this passage from Jeremiah?

We’re often told to get over our pain and move on — the world may be unjust and children may suffer, but there’s nothing to be done and there’s no time for moaning and groaning. Yet, in Jeremiah, Rachel is lifted up for doing just the opposite: she weeps for her children and *refuses* to be consoled. In other words, she won’t let anyone shut up her grief. Instead, she is using her grief to make this tragic injustice known and change the world. Who are examples of women you’ve known who have chosen not to keep silent about suffering but instead used their grief to propel change?

What would it look like for us to “refuse to be comforted” until the school-to-prison pipeline and the abuses of the juvenile justice system were undone? How long would we be groaning? Are you prepared for such long-haul labor? Why or why not?

Consider, now, the last section of the passage from Jeremiah, verses 16–17. What is the promise of God?

Jeremiah speaks of “hope for your future,” where “[y]our children shall come back to their own country.” That meant something specific for a people in exile. And it still means something for us today. What does this promise mean to you, specifically, as you think of your own community and your hopes for children and youth, today?

Thinking about the school-to-prison pipeline, what does it mean, for you today, to have “reward for your work”? Do you believe that such a reward will come? Why or why not?

Making Connections

Throughout this study, we’ve made reference to the school-to-prison pipeline. We encourage you to download our one-pager on the school-to-prison pipeline for your group study. It is available here: unitedmethodistwomen.org/racialjustice.

In addition, we encourage you to do a bit of research in advance so that you can share relevant statistics, specific to your own community.

- Look up information on racial disparities in school discipline by district and school here: ocrdata.ed.gov/districtschoolsearch.
- Look up state-level information on child and youth well-being here: datacenter.kidscount.org.

Creative Thinking

Consider Luke 2:39–52.

Creative Expression: Dramatic Activity Option 1 (~15 minutes)

This activity is for pairs. Invite one person in the pair to be Jesus and the other to be Mary. Act out this dialogue in a contemporary setting, with contemporary language. A few pairs can volunteer to share their dramatic rendering with the whole group.

Creative Expression: Dramatic Activity Option 2 (~20 minutes)

Divide into three evenly-sized groups: Jesus, Mary and Joseph. Imagine that you are your assigned Biblical figure, reflecting back on this situation the next day. You are explaining to a friend what happened, how you felt, and why you made the choices you did. Spend about ten minutes in your Jesus, Mary or Joseph groups. Then, return and facilitate a dialogue between these three person-groups where each is able to share their perspective, ask questions of the other and practice active listening.

Reflecting Back

Consider all three stories. Whether as parents, grandparents, teachers or community members, how do these three Biblical texts challenge or affirm us in our ministry with children and youth?

Life Application/Mission Focus

What organizations in your community champion children and youth? How is your church or circle connected to these efforts? What else can you do to help meet the needs of children and adolescents in your community? What else can you do to advocate for justice for children and adolescents?

Inviting and Including Others

Does your church have a youth group? Consider planning an intergenerational Bible study or facilitated conversation on topics relevant to your community. Allow youth time to both speak and listen.