
Change and Become like Children: Learning from Trans and Non-binary Youth in Matthew 18:1-6

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Six days after foretelling his suffering, death, and resurrection, Jesus and three of his beloveds climb a high mountain. In this secluded place surrounded by his friends, Jesus is transfigured. His face and clothing begin to glow. A voice from the clouds proclaims, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased...” (Matthew 17:5). From this declaration, those present gain insight about Jesus’ identity. Jesus is God’s child, who is loved and who brings pleasure to God, echoing what was proclaimed at his baptism (Matthew 3:17). The voice from the clouds also issues a command for all present, “listen to him!” As Jesus lives into the fullness of his identity as both human and divine, those closest to him are called to listen to him even more closely.

For many LGBTQIA+ folx, especially trans and non-binary kin, the story of the Transfiguration is akin to Jesus’ coming out story. Jesus shares this intimate moment with close beloveds as he more publicly embodies and embraces his identity. In this act, many find space for contemplating their own experiences of coming out, transitioning, and/or living into the fullness of the *imago dei* within them. The Transfiguration is also a space of fear and uncertainty as witnessed by the disciples’ reactions (Matthew 17:6 “When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear”). As trans theologian Shannon Kearns explains, coming out is a fragile and risky space for Jesus and for queer folx. Coming out “invites intimacy that can lead to wounding” by those closest to you along with the growing risks of harm in the broader political climate.¹ Jesus experienced this as well. He knew that speaking “his truth might get him killed, and yet he also knew declaring it was something he had to do.”² Despite the risks, Jesus comes out to his disciples. He embraces his identity. He then comes down from the mountain knowing the path will lead to Jerusalem, to his state-sponsored death.

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coming out. First, he cures a boy with epilepsy who the disciples were unable to cure due to their little faith (Matthew 17:14-20). Second, he engages in conversation about the temple tax using children as an example (Matthew 17:24-27). Finally, he responds to a question about greatness in the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 18:1-6). Placing a child among the disciples, Jesus explains that entrance into the kingdom of heaven involves becoming like a child, embodying childlike humility, and welcoming children. Jesus’ engagements with children, just as he is living more fully and publicly into his identity as God’s child, call us to pause and consider the importance of children in understanding Jesus’ message in the first century CE and today.

Protecting children

In the United States, the notion of how best to protect children has recently become a hotly contested topic. The call to protect children has become a rallying cry of white Christian nationalist movements. They have initiated a variety of legislative actions from banning books to questioning the safety of vaccines, all in the name of protecting children. Research has shown that white Christian nationalist understandings of family values are rooted in preserving a white supremacist social order and uplifting traditional white, cisgender, heterosexual nuclear families.³ Such understandings of protecting children encourage practices that limit children’s autonomy, require their obedience, and justify the

1. Shannon T. L. Kearns, *In the Margins: A Transgender Man’s Journey with Scripture* (Chicago: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2022), 116.

2. Kearns, *In the Margins*, 119.

3. See Samuel L. Perry, “Order begins at home: Christian nationalism and control over children” *Social Forces*, 2025, soaf058, <https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/soaf058>.

use of violence to ensure compliance. A topic that has generated some of the most intense public debate around such family values is that of gender-affirming care for trans and non-binary youth and young adults. On local, state, and federal levels across the U.S., legislatures have scrutinized, and at times banned, forms of gender-affirming care for minors and young adults. Much of this debate has occurred among adults, without listening to the very children and young adults they claim to protect. Such a refusal to listen and to claim to know what is best for trans and non-binary youth and young adults has had death-dealing implications stemming from increased harassment, violence, and stigmatization, limited or no access to gender-affirming care, etc. The following essay reads Jesus' engagement with the child in Matthew 18:1-6 alongside the wellbeing of trans and non-binary youth in the present U.S. socio-political climate.

I employ childist and queer lenses to focus on the child in this passage. Childist interpretations aim to "plac[e] a child, children, youth or concerns related to young people as the center of attention."⁴ Such interpretations seek to lift up the agency and importance of children in the text, rather than ignoring or infantilizing them. Queer interpretations open space to explore both the ways in which queer lives are present in the text and its interpretations, as well as ways the text queers systems of power, hierarchies, and relationality through challenging binary assumptions and normative practices. In using these lenses, this reading examines what it means to become like a child and its relationship to discipleship, along with Jesus' warning about protecting children from stumbling in its ancient and contemporary socio-political contexts.

As a white, cisgender, queer lesbian, I acknowledge that I have not experienced the lived realities of trans and non-binary youth personally. I draw on the experiences shared with me by friends, family, and community members who are presently struggling to find safety and to secure gender-affirming care for themselves, their children, and/or trans youth and young adults in their community. The experiences of state-sponsored hate and discrimination, having your family move to a different state or country, traveling over ten hours to a gender-affirming clinic, overwhelming experiences of gender dysphoria and suicidal ideation because socio-economic realities prevent access to care, or the fear of being removed from one's home and family by Child Protective Services, impact the present lives of many trans and non-binary youth and young adults. These impacts are even more gravely amplified by race, class, citizenship status, etc. These realities shape the following reading of Jesus' command to become as a child, asking what it means to become as a trans child to enter the kin-dom of heaven.

Children in the ancient Mediterranean

An engagement with this text begins with an exploration of the status and perceptions of children in the ancient Mediterranean.

4. Julie Faith Parker, "Children in the Hebrew Bible and Childist Interpretation" in *Currents in Biblical Research* 17.2 (2019), 138.

The experiences of state-sponsored hate and discrimination, having your family move to a different state or country, traveling over ten hours to a gender-affirming clinic, overwhelming experiences of gender dysphoria and suicidal ideation because socio-economic realities prevent access to care, or the fear of being removed from one's home and family by Child Protective Services, impact the present lives of many trans and non-binary youth and young adults.

Children experienced high mortality rates, with up to 50% dying before they reached the age of ten.⁵ Disease, poverty, infanticide, exposure, war, and malnutrition were some of the threats to life. Children who survived were viewed as being under the guardianship of the *paterfamilias*, usually the eldest male in the family. Within this familial framework, children were under the power, control, and protection of the *paterfamilias*. Their role was frequently depicted in a similar manner to enslaved persons and barbarians, namely as powerless and a "symbol of non-participation in the rational world of the adult citizen."⁶

These realities led scholars to believe that children were not valued in Roman society. Children's importance centered on their ability to carry on familial legacies, for inheritance purposes, and as laborers. While the dire realities of ancient Roman childhood are acknowledged, the work of Sharon Betsworth, Julie Faith Parker, and others have helped to complexify this traditional understanding of ancient childhood. Betsworth highlights that despite challenges, Roman historical records and legislation also depicted multiple ways affection occurred between parents and children.⁷ For example, Betsworth highlights Cicero's deep care for his daughter, Tullia, from calling her "my darling little Tullia" as a young child to showing deep care for her health as she moved into married life. Similarly, funerary inscriptions and memorials depict the care and mourning that parents experienced at the death of

5. Warren Carter. *The Roman Empire and the New Testament: an Essential Guide* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006), 116.

6. Thomas Wiedemann, *Adults and Children in the Roman Empire* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 21-22.

7. Sharon Betsworth, *Children in Early Christian Narratives* (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), 14-17.

their children.⁸ While the socioeconomic positionality of a family would impact the ability to generate such displays, they highlight that affection occurred within family units. Thus, children existed in a precarious and vulnerable place in society impacted by high mortality rates and a lack of rights, while being important to many families and their legacy.

Becoming like children

In Matthew 18:1, the disciples come to Jesus and inquire “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” Instead of directly calling out the disciples’ lack of understanding and faith, Jesus teaches them about power and value in God’s kingdom. Jesus calls a child to stand among them and says, “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me” (Matthew 18:2–5).

A childist interpretation invites us to pause on the child Jesus summons, “focus[ing] on the agency and action of children and youth in the text, instead of seeing them primarily as passive or victimized.”⁹ First, we notice that Jesus calls the child to the center of the crowd in a way that is similar to how he calls the disciples and crowds to himself (cf. Matthew 10:1, 15:10). The child is not a passive prop for Jesus’ message. Instead, Jesus calls the child to him because the child’s whole self is essential for understanding discipleship. Jan Grobbelaar points out that unlike Paul, who often uses children to highlight childishness and immaturity of adult believers, Jesus employs the child as a model of faith and discipleship.¹⁰ Jesus’ words center the child. The text does not provide us with specific identity markers of the child, nor does it capture the child’s own voice. Instead, the text leaves space to explore multiple identities for the child and to challenge contemporary interpretations that portray the child as a white, cisgender, able-bodied boy. It invites us to consider children who are most vulnerable today whether based on gender, sexuality, ability, citizenship, etc., akin to a Palestinian child living under Roman occupation. In doing so, we can ask what if Jesus invited a trans or non-binary child into the midst of the disciples? What are we called to learn from this child who is silenced by society and the gospel writers, but centered by Jesus?

Jesus teaches about three major characteristics of discipleship which are to be learned from this child. First, those who seek the kin-dom of heaven must accept that they need to change in order to become childlike. The call to become as a child goes beyond traditional readings of the text that focus on concern for the

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vulnerable Other. Instead, it calls disciples to change themselves, embodying new levels of vulnerability and solidarity with those marginalized by society. Jesus’ call disrupts societal and familial understandings of power and status. As Grobbelaar puts it, “to be a real leader in Jesus’ community, the disciples must grow backwards” and exist as those with no power or voice in society.¹¹ This call to relinquish hierarchical power systems is coupled with an invitation to learn from children how to do so. Becoming childlike requires those in power to look outside themselves to understand what it means to be vulnerable. It necessitates building relationships with those who are most vulnerable and listening to their experiences, needs, and dreams. This is especially true of listening to children, learning about their experiences of the world, and seeking to understand how they experience love, care, violence, and oppression. For trans and non-binary children, it involves listening to them share about their identity and the multiple forms of care that are needed to support them living into their fullest embodiment of themselves. Embodying this practice leads to the second characteristic named by Jesus, humility.

Jesus identifies those who are humble as the greatest in the kin-dom of God. Such humility involves a willingness to let go of relying on oneself and systems of power to determine one’s worth and how one interacts with society. Instead, humility further invites relationality with God and with others. It asks those who are becoming childlike to place their faith in Jesus over the powers of the Roman Empire. It also asks followers to have the humility to listen to children and other populations in order to learn of their needs rather than making assumptions about what is best for them. Such humility challenges ideas of charity and aid that have too often been driven by white, Euro-American, heteropatriarchal determinations of the best way to support victimized and vulnerable communities. Instead, Jesus asks followers to engage in a radical reversal of power in which agency and the voices of the vulnerable guide societal transformation. Trans and non-binary youth and young adults, not white Christian nationalist organizations and ideologies, should shape gender-affirming care. Having

8. Betsworth, *Children in Early Christian Narratives*, 36.

9. Kathleen Gallagher Elkins and Julie Faith Parker, “Children in the Biblical Narrative and Childist Interpretation,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Narrative*, ed. Danna Nolan Fewell (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 425.

10. Jan Grobbelaar, “Doing theology with children: A childist reading of the childhood metaphor in 1 Corinthians and the Synoptic Gospels” in *HTS Theologies Studies/Theological Studies* 76.4 (2020), 6.

11. Grobbelaar, “Doing theology with children,” 7.

the humility to listen to youth and co-create spaces of care rather than prescribe their care is life-giving. This humility is redemptive. It ushers in the kin-dom of God not through power and control, but through vulnerability and openness to change.

The final characteristic Jesus shares is that of radical hospitality and welcome for the children and other vulnerable populations. Receiving a child into a home or congregation is not a one-time event, but rather a commitment to prolonged relationality and support. This is a welcoming or receiving of children on their own terms, not those dictated by family, culture, or society. For Christian communities, receiving a child in Jesus' name is a call to action. It challenges us to move past merely opening our church doors with the hopes that those who are vulnerable will enter. Instead, it is a call to listen and learn from those who are vulnerable about how best to meet them where they are and welcome them. This is particularly true of LGBTQIA+ folx, many of whom have experienced great harm caused by the church. Welcome involves actively seeking out ways to support and empower queer folx, especially queer youth, within faith communities and in broader society. This requires not only working within faith communities to ensure congregations are educated, bathrooms are accessible, and liturgies and curricula are inclusive of queer folx, but also to partner with knowledgeable organizations working with queer youth in our communities. Faith communities are called to public witness that counters white Christian nationalist transphobia by offering support and care to trans and non-binary youth. Welcoming trans and non-binary youth, and thus welcoming Jesus, involves risk and sustained commitment to countering the imperial ideologies of today.

Empowering trans youth in the age of 'Millstone Acts'

In the verses that follow, Jesus warns "If any of you cause one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea." In recent years, this text has made an appearance in several U.S. state legislatures. Fueled by white Christian nationalism, Matthew 18:6 has been co-opted as inspiration for the title of several bills called "Millstone Acts." This legislation has sought to ban or severely restrict gender-affirming care for trans youth and young adults in states such as Texas and Oklahoma. Such legislation assumes that all children are cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied, and white. It views affirming trans and non-binary children as part of a radical liberal agenda and frames gender-affirming care as an abusive parenting practice. They view gender-affirming care as causing children to sin and those providing it as needing a millstone placed around their necks. The impacts of such rhetoric and legislation are dire on the lives of trans and non-binary youth. This is echoed in research conducted by the Trevor Project in light of recent legislation, especially the 2025 United States Supreme Court ruling on *U.S. vs. Skrmetti*, which upheld Tennessee's law restricting gender-affirming care for

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transgender youth and paved the way for other state-level bans on hormone therapy and other medications for treating gender dysphoria for transgender youth. The Trevor Project found "[e]nacting state-level anti-transgender laws increased incidents of past-year suicide attempts among [transgender and non-binary] young people by 7–72%," with even higher rates among trans youth of color. Such dire consequences have led parents and support systems of trans and non-binary youth to drive hours to other states or even flee the country to find safety and seek gender-affirming care.

Addressing this reality asks us to explore the ways we can support and empower trans and non-binary youth. It calls us to address death-dealing uses of Matthew 18:6 text by returning to Matthew 18:1-5. If we are called to become as children, we are called to protect and empower those we are called to emulate. This involves ensuring that all children have the resources to thrive and come to understand themselves fully, just as Jesus came to understand through his baptism and transfiguration. We must encourage children, especially queer children, to live into their identity, examining how they understand their gender and sexuality, race/ethnicity, ability, and agency. We have to have the humility to allow children, especially those most marginalized by society, to lead us. Such a reading refuses to erase queer folx from our biblical texts as well as refusing to infantilize children.

This reading asks us to consider what it means to cause a child to sin in Matthew 18:6. The term translated "sin" is more aptly translated as to cause a child to stumble in the sense of losing trust and deserting one whom they are to trust. It asks communities to consider what barriers exist in the lives of trans and non-binary youth that would lead them to stumble, that hinder a child's relationship with God and their ability to grow into their unique embodiment of the *imago dei*. Identifying stumbling blocks for trans and non-binary youth, such as denying access to gender-affirming care or arresting parents who provide such care for their children, helps us to name what systems and legislation as well as scriptural interpretations and religious ideology need to have millstones attached to them and be cast into the sea. To assist in this work, it is helpful to once again turn back to the characteristics

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of a Jesus follower we gained from the child in the text. Following the three major characteristics learned from the child, we are called to consider the following:

1. How can we listen to and learn from trans and non-binary children and young adults today? What unique responsibilities do faith communities have to counter the ways in which their voices and experiences are most often ignored or underrepresented in conversations about gender-affirming care?
2. How do we embody humility to help us name and address the stumbling blocks the church has placed in front of trans and non-binary youth and other minoritized populations?
3. How do we work within our congregations and communities to become truly welcoming and affirming spaces that celebrate and support trans and non-binary children and young adults?

While the answers to these questions will vary, they call communities to action. They invite faith communities to consider how

they can grow backwards and become childlike. This requires challenging those individuals and systems who cause children to stumble and who prevent children from living into their authentic selves. Nurturing communities where children, especially trans and non-binary children, can thrive helps us learn how to live more fully into becoming the kin-dom of God. But this work takes time and commitment. It must be dynamic. It must adapt to the changing needs of children. Most importantly, this work is a call to listen to and learn from children. They are waiting for and begging us to listen, to work together in ushering in the kin-dom of God. The song of a 17-year-old transman titled “Speak” encapsulates this call:

Please listen to me
I have a voice and I want to speak
Let me be free
Let me be me

I have so much to say
Just you always look the other way
Please give me something to feel relief
Please I just need to find peace

Just let me say what I want to
Don't be too quick to accuse
You don't know what it feels like inside
Don't tell me you understand my life

You don't understand
You don't understand what it feels like
You don't understand
You don't understand what it feels like

Please just let me be me
Please just let me be free
Please just listen to me speak.¹²

12. “Speak,” Trans Youth Equality Foundation, accessed July 31, 2025. <http://www.transyouthequality.org/youth-writings-art>.