



January 3, 2023

Suffer Little Children to Come unto Me

By Dodd Sims, M.D.

From an early age, this line from the King James version of Matthew has troubled me – “But Jesus said, ‘Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me: for of such is the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 19:14).’” Now, as an adult, I realize that “suffer” means “allow,” so it’s more like, “Let the kids come to me.” But still, the juxtaposing of “suffer” and “children” leaves a chill in my heart.

We’ve just returned from the funeral of a three-year-old. She and her older sister, who is in critical condition with a massive brain injury, were in the back of the minivan when it was rear-ended by a tanker truck. At the mosque where we gathered for the funeral prayers, a kind man tried to comfort us.

He lost a daughter twenty years ago in a similar highway accident. For him, the Qur’an teaches patience in tragic times. These are tests of our faith, and only in God’s time will we come to see how tragedy is all part of God’s creation.

In his tragedy, the baby sister who survived the accident grew into a girl who in every way resembled the daughter he lost. He believes God rewarded him, even before the tragic death of the older sister, with the joy of a new life to fill the void. It was God's way of preparing him for the test he would have to endure.

For a moment, his faith was comforting to me. At times like these, stories like his give us something to grasp as we are foundering.

But by the time we made our way to the cemetery for the grave-side prayers, that small comfort had dissipated into the cold, wet winter afternoon. Through the throng of believers, I glimpsed a tiny, shrouded body being laid in the bottom of a watery trench. It was just too much. I turned away. I shut my eyes. I had no thoughts which were comforting, nothing I could conjure up to make any sense of what was happening.

The hardest thing I had to do in my medical training was to notify parents that their child had died. On a quiet Sunday morning in the ER of the county hospital, we are suddenly pulled away from our coffee and the sports section when an ambulance arrives with a five-year-old. The boy has multiple bruises and crush injuries; he is intubated and receiving chest compressions from the emergency medical workers.

As we struggle to stabilize the boy so the surgical team can take him to the OR, a nurse comes in with the story. Child sitting on the driveway behind the minivan drawing with chalk. Dad on his way to get milk for Sunday morning breakfast backs right over the child.

The surgeons arrive. There are no signs of life; no need to take him to the OR. I am the most junior doctor. I get the order to tell dad that his son is dead.

And I do it. I tell him he has accidentally killed his own son. I give him the facts and sit with him in painful silence. There is nothing more I am capable of saying. The chaplain arrives. I linger for a few minutes. The chaplain shares words of comfort, words I suppose I should have offered but couldn't. I return to my work.

So, what is it about the death of a child that makes it so different from all the other tragedies in our lives? With all the other horrible things in the world around us, why do these images stick with us like no others?

The six-month-old son of my nephew who suddenly dies in his car seat. The death in utero of a grandson I will never hold. Why are these the tragedies which stay with us, the ones that haunt us, that hurt us, in ways that other tragedies in our lives do not?

The Qur'an is clear. From the time children have the breath of God breathed into them until they reach puberty, upon their death they are immediately transported to Paradise. The death of a child is a special case in Islam. Certainly, children cannot be punished, they cannot be called to account for anything they have done in their short lives. They go directly to Heaven – no doubts about their fate, no questions asked.

In our own tradition at Immanuel, we use a version of the Bible which varies from the King James version:

“but Jesus said, ‘Let the children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the Kingdom of Heaven belongs (Matthew 19:14, NRSV).’”

Now this may or may not be getting at the same point as the Qur'an. But for me, it is just as clear. Thanks be to God! The kids are in Heaven.