

## on child protection (2019)

Scripture Reading: Matthew 18:12-14

Preacher: Robert Steiner

The word protection comes from the Latin *protegere* which means literally “to cover”. I love the English expression, “I cover you”, which means that I have your back, I will make sure that nothing will happen to you. To cover is of course also about adding another layer over something or someone to avoid any harm or danger. Such layers of protection go beyond a warm coat against the cold and a pair of shoes to soften the walking. They include ongoing debates and new insights at the intersection of sociology, politics, theology, and psychology.

In the following I want to briefly look at each of those dimensions of protection in conversation with the parable of the lost sheep as told in the Gospel of Matthew 18:12-14 (NIV).

¶ 12 “What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? ¶ 13 And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. ¶ 14 In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should perish.

### ***Progress is possible (socio-political insights)***

“What do you think”? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off?”

What do you think? Yes, the growing concern for the wellbeing of children worldwide shows a clear shift and a stronger commitment to the wellbeing of children.

Here are the most recent global statistics on progress made in the area of child protection, based on the 2019 Global Childhood Report (<https://campaigns.savethechildren.net>).

Every child has a right to childhood. The concept of childhood is defined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). It represents a shared vision of childhood: healthy children in school and at play, growing strong and confident with the love and encouragement of their family and an extended community of caring adults, gradually taking on the responsibilities of adulthood, free from fear, safe from violence, protected from abuse and exploitation. This ideal contrasts starkly with the childhood many children experience.

This index does not capture the full extent of deprivations or hardships affecting children. Instead, it focuses on some key rights or “guarantees” of childhood: life, healthy growth and development, education and protection from harm. If a child experiences all of these, his/her childhood is considered to be “intact.”

The index tracks a series of events that, should any one of them occur, mark the end of an intact childhood. These events are called “childhood enders” and include: child dies, malnutrition permanently impairs child’s development, child leaves or fails to enter school, child begins work life, child marries, child has a child, and child is a victim of extreme violence. Ender events erode childhood. Depending on the number and severity of enders experienced, the loss of childhood could be complete or only partial. But once a child experiences an ender, childhood becomes fractured rather than complete. Each event represents an assault on childhood. At some point, as the assaults mount up, childhood ends. Countries are scored and ranked according

to performance across this set of indicators, revealing where childhood is most and least threatened.

The survey captured the situation of children in 176 countries and put them together in a kind of ranking of countries: The Global Childhood Report. The report also considers the development since the year 2000. It gives rise to both despair and hope.

Some positive developments:

The amount of children without a childhood has decreased:

- in 2000: 970 million affected children
- in 2019: 690 affected children
- in 173 of 176 countries the situation of children has improved

Concrete examples for the improvement

- 4.4 million children less who die in childhood
- 49 million children less who suffer growth problems because of a lack of nutrition
- 94 million children less who have to work
- 115 million children less who cannot attend school

And so within one generation the probability that a child has to work, has decreased by 70%. The stats show that children who are born today have much better chances to grow up healthily and in safety and go to school than ever before. They have the possibility to fully realize their potential. As per last year the best conditions for children are in Singapore. The country scored 989 of 1000 possible points, 17 more than last year. A big improvement for children was noted in Bangladesh, on the Philippines and in Mexico. The biggest positive jumps regarding the childhood index:

Sierra Leone: from 345 to 591  
Ruanda: 503 to 744  
Ethiopia: 414 to 651

But all in all the situation in the Sub-Saharan countries continues to be very worrying: Tschad, Niger, and the Central African Republic are those countries with the lowest score. The ten countries with the lowest score are all in Africa. But the situation is very volatile also in other parts of the world:

In Afghanistan: Despite enormous progress, the country is still on place 158 out of 175 countries. Last year, for example there were 200 military attacks against school. Compared to the year before the number of such attacks tripled according to Unicef.

In regions of crisis and conflict little progress has been made: The number of children, which live in war zones or are forced to leave their home country because of conflicts, has significantly increased since the year 2000. The amount of refugees has increased by 80% in the last two decades. Children are affected by this more than adults: More than half of the refugees worldwide are children and young people, even though they only make up 30% of the world population.

Another area of concern: teenage pregnancies remain a grave problem: Complications during pregnancy or at birth are worldwide the highest cause of death among girls between the age of 15 and 19. Little progress has been made in that area since 2000.

The search for the most vulnerable and the most powerless is gaining momentum and involving experts across all disciplines. This is encouraging. There are many different reasons why a child goes astray. And experts from

different fields of research become better at speaking to each other about those reasons. Faith communities have been challenged to what extent their teachings have contributed or prevented the common search for the lost. This brings me to the theological dimension of child protection.

### ***Debunking original sin (theological insights)***

“What do you think”? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off?”

What does it mean to go astray? And does such wandering always have something to do with sin? And if we speak of sin, then whose sin are we talking about? You already know what I am hinting at. We know that so many children “wander off”, “go astray”, “get lost” not because of any evil intentions on their side, but because of the need to find refuge and shelter from those who do not have their wellbeing in mind. Chapter 18 of Matthew’s Gospel is concerned with building healthy communities. An emphasis is made on „the little ones“ who need protection and are in danger of being led astray. In contrast to the parable in Luke 15, Matthew’s version and context wants us to think of the sheep that wanders off as one of the little ones in the community. The parable is meant to evoke empathy and compassion for the most vulnerable and not judgment and criticism.

The song “Amazing grace” has amplified the idea that to be lost is to have sinned, to be a wretch that needs to be saved. And the doctrine of original sin has for centuries clouded our ability to understand children’s behavior. Original sin says that everyone is born sinful, i.e. with a built-in-urge to do bad things and to disobey God. To be a newborn is to be morally damaged, all because of Adam and Eve’s disobedience, marked by the moment when they ate the forbidden fruit in the garden of Eden. According to the church father St Augustine, who is said to have invented this doctrine in the fourth century, the defect is handed on from generation to generation through sexual intercourse, at the moment of conception. (Please note that the Catholic theologian Wilhelm Geerlings speaks of the doctrine as an “invention” of St Augustinus.) As Augustine, the bishop of North Africa’s Hippo, became older, his view of humankind became very depressing. He increasingly felt surrounded by sin and heresy. He certainly would have considered Erich Fromm’s reading of the garden of Eden as a grave heresy. Fromm believed that through the expulsion from Paradise, humankind discovered its individual freedom and was put into the position to give shape to its history and development.

At best we may credit him with an honest wrestling with the dark side of the human condition and a desire to give God all the glory. But do you have to put the former down to lift the latter. At worst we have to blame him for a very misogynistic, anti-sex, and gloomy view of humankind. Either way, such a doctrine is fear infusing, and we have become suspicious of dogmas that give the church power and control over people. For St Augustine only baptism would save a newborn and only a priest could perform such a cleansing and saving ritual.

Interestingly Judaism does not know about such a teaching on original sin. And Jesus, the Rabbi, does certainly not teach anything like this. To the contrary: Leading up to our parable of the lost sheep we hear that we all have to become like children to enter the kingdom of God. We might have to change the word “children” in the bible to “newborns” to make his point even clearer!

“I once was lost, but now am found. I was blind but now I see”, we sing. Well, in Jesus’ mind the blind are not the children, but those who show no concern for them. To see is to care and to protect, to know where and how to look. This brings me to the final section. Insights of developmental psychology have opened our theological eyes and helped us rediscover key themes in our own tradition. The problem is that we did not allow them to affect our understanding of discipline. Why? Because the idea of original sin encouraged us to think of newborns as being selfish and rebellious when crying, and of children being stubborn and evil when throwing a tantrum. It has been a long journey for myself to discover how those dangerous traps are and how they limit our own emotional intelligence.

### *From coercion to connection (psychological insights)*

“What do you think”? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off?”

There are books that mark a turning point in one's life. Books, that we wish would have read earlier. But then again, we ourselves need to be ready to receive their teachings. Last year on Child Protection Sunday I talked to you about the need to move beyond corporal punishment as a way to discipline children. This year I would like to take a step further when thinking about child protection. It is not only about protecting them from physical violence and abuse. It is also about shielding them from emotional abuse. For some of you, this might be taking it too far. But I hope that I will nudge you enough to read the book yourself and to discover its beautiful and liberating truth. As far as I am concerned, I would love to run a small reading group that reads and discusses the merits of its argument in the second part of the year.

Before I go into any details, it is important to acknowledge that this is a life long journey of learning. As parents, mentors and caregiver we always try to do our best, based on the information, resources, and support available. At the same time we need to remember that it is never too late to turn around, think differently about discipline, and start building stronger connections with our children.

The shortest way into the topic would be to re-examine our own reactions towards a crying child. Speaking personally, I have to say that I can hardly tolerate it. I find it deeply painful. And my first reaction is always to stop the crying as quickly as possible. I have now learnt an important lesson that I would like to share with you. And just because I have now understood it intellectually does of course not mean that I am always getting it right in practice. But my compass has been readjusted. And to speak with Michelangelo: “Ancora imparo.” I am still learning.

My personal challenge is to learn to tolerate the crying, while offering a strong connection. How does one do that? The first step would be to learn more about the research on human tears. In the following I will be quoting Pam Leo and her wonderful book *Connection Parenting: Parenting through Connection instead of Coercion, Through Love instead of Fear*.

“Research on human tears shows that the tears we cry of emotion contain stress hormones. Tears release pain and stress. Other ways we release emotional hurts and stress are screaming, raging, talking repeatedly about the hurt, shaking, laughing, perspiring, and yawning. Without this information, parents and caregivers don't know what to do when a child cries or rages. If our attempts to comfort or fix the problem don't stop the crying, we become frustrated and even angry with the child. Children need adults to stay with them and support them while they release their pain instead of stopping them from crying. Interrupting the crying interferes with the natural healing process.”(Pam Leo)

So often adult responses disrupt the healing process. The message that children receive is, that it is not acceptable to express painful feelings. Pam Leo put together a helpful and fairly comprehensive list of damaging responses:

- Invalidating—“There, there, there's nothing to cry about or be afraid of.”
- Shaming—“Don't cry. Be a big boy/ girl. Don't be a sissy. Don't be a baby.”
- Threatening—“I'll give you something to cry about!”

- Placating or fixing it—"I'll get you a new one." • Distraction—"Let's go get a cookie."
- Isolation—"Go to your room until you can stop crying."
- Ignoring—Unspoken or spoken, "I won't talk to you until you stop crying."
- Outdoing—"You think that's bad, listen to what happened to me."
- Guilting—"You have so much; you shouldn't be upset over this."
- Humoring—Child falls on the pavement, "Did you hurt that driveway?"

Pam Leo then takes us to the playground and reminds of an experience we have all made: "A child falls and then looks around to see if anyone noticed. If no one noticed, he or she will probably not cry. There is no one who will listen. But if someone does notice he or she may very well cry and not stop crying. And yes, if the cry is louder and longer and more dramatic than it should be, then the tears indicate that there is much more going on than this particular hurt. It becomes clear that we need the attention of another person in order to release our painful feelings. And the tears we don't cry are stored."

This also explains temper tantrums: "When there is no more room to store hurt, there will be a spillover." What a radical shift in thinking:

"Crying and tantrums are not misbehaviors or manipulation; they are healing behaviors. Tantrums appear to be manipulation because the most common trigger for a tantrum is the disappointment and feeling of loss a child experiences when we say "No." The "no" is the last straw, the final drop that unleashes the hurt. Children grieve the loss they experience when we deny their request. If this "no" is the hurt that occurs when there is no more room in the cup, the cup spills. Whenever we say no to a child, either we can expect a little crying to grieve the disappointment or we can expect a tantrum."

It involves a broader journey from punishment to restitution. Leo's argument is compelling:

"Many adults who refrain from using corporal punishment use the punishments of loss of privileges, being grounded, timeout, and threats as discipline. The theory behind the use of punishment as discipline is that, if the punishment is painful or unpleasant enough, it will „teach“ the child acceptable behavior by making the child fear future punishment for repeating the unacceptable behavior."

"Most of the time, when people say discipline they mean punishment. Although we use the words punishment and discipline interchangeably, as if they have the same meaning, they are different. Punishment is defined in the dictionary as „arbitrary harsh treatment for wrong-doing.“ True parental discipline means teaching or training children to do what is right. Punishment is not discipline because it does not teach children to do what is right."

"We have only to look at the rate of repeat offenders in prison to see that punishment does not work to deter people from repeating unacceptable behavior. Punishment causes children to think more about the wrong that was done to them than the wrong they did. Punishment undermines children's natural desire to behave in ways that bring them love and acceptance. Using any kind of punishment as discipline breaks connection and trust."

"Punishment gives children the message: You did wrong and now you must suffer because you are bad. Restitution gives children the message: You did wrong, and now you can choose to make it right."

Child protection is also about emotional protection, the creation of safe places, where it is fine to cry and give expression to one's pain. Otherwise children learn to stop trusting their feelings and feel rejected. Adults need to become better at taking moments of time-out for themselves. This will enable them to be open and ready for more time-in with the children, especially in those moments where our first reaction would be anger and punitive forms of discipline.

Amen.