# Children’s Sunday 2019: It’s Not Fair

*by the Rev. Alexa Gilmour and Adrian Marchuk*

Before using this liturgy, it will be helpful to have a grasp of the magnitude of the trauma being caused to children around the world who are detained, often without their parents and without legal counsel. We have focused on Palestinian children in the occupied territories and migrant children in the US, two situations where prejudicial bias leads to unjust cruelty.

This liturgy engages the congregation through prayer, music, poetry, and biblical passages. We reference the Good Samaritan story in the sermon. When they found the man lying at the side of the road, the priest and Levite asked themselves, “What will happen to me if I stop and help him?” so they did not stop. The Samaritan asked, “What will happen to this man if I do not help him?”

The children are crying out in anguish. What is a faithful response?

For some [background](#_Background/Resources) on child detention, please see the end of this document.

## Gathering

***\*****Indicates to rise in body or spirit.*

### Lighting the Christ Candle

### Acknowledgement of Traditional Territory

### Call to Worship

*Invite 4 people from different parts of the sanctuary (or up at the lectern) to read the following:*

One: I am a child of God

 who comes from El Salvador

Two: I am a child of God

 who comes from the United States

Three: I am a child of God

 who comes from Israel

Four: I am a child of God

 who comes from Palestine

**Whole congregation: We are all children of God,**

 **coming before our Maker**

 **to learn, lament, repent, and praise.**

 **Let us make sacred this time.**

 **Let us celebrate God.**

### \*Hymn

“I Am a Child of God,” MV 157

“Bring Many Names,” VU 268

“I Have Called You by Your Name”, MV 161

“Come, Children, Join to Sing,” VU 345

### Opening Litany

One: When the children’s suffering cries

 have finally managed to

 pierce our Netflix cocoon,

 when the borderlands of milk and honey

 lie littered with the rotted fruit of injustice,

 we must boldly confess our inaction

 and find the grace in God to repent.

 For those gathered here say:

**All: We are people of courage.**

 **We know the stories of sin and grace.**

 **We confess them now so that we may choose**

 **courage for God’s children.**

One: When Settlers arrived on this continent

 they tore apart Indigenous families.

 In the centuries that followed,

 enslaved families were torn apart.

 Now, in this ongoing evil age,

 families continue to be torn apart.

 Nursing babies are ripped from mothers’ breasts

 in the borderlands of Arizona.

 Frightened youth are torn from fathers’ arms

 in the occupied territories of the West Bank and Gaza.

 This suffering must stop with our generation.

 With our lives we choose our legacy,

 a legacy of complicity or of compassion.

 For those gathered here cry out:

**All: We are people of compassion.**

 **We know the stories of sin and grace.**

 **We confess them now so that we may choose**

 **compassion for God’s children.**

One: In our sacred texts

 we receive the call

 to care for the children.

 Through our sacred stories

 we discover that our own life’s meaning

 is wrapped inside the answer

 that we give to our neighbour in need.

 And our answer is this:

 We will not relent until children in custody stop dying.

 We will not relent until the children

 are returned to their families.

 We will not relent until all who come seeking refuge

 are treated with the dignity they deserve

 as the children of God.

 For those gathered here shout:

**All: We are people of hope.**

 **We know the stories of sin and grace.**

 **We confess them now so that we may choose**

 **hope for God’s children.**

One: Holy God,

 By our witness, may those in custody

 know that they are not alone.

 By our action, may those who are suffering

 know that they are not abandoned.

 By our presence, may those who oppress

 know that their time is up,

 for evil cannot stand against

 the forces of the Divine

 embodied here, today,

 in this sacred gathering.

 Together, we are of one voice, saying:

**All: We are people of justice.**

 **We know the stories of sin and grace.**

 **We confess them now so that we may choose**

 **justice for God’s children.**

One: And when we leave this gathering,

 drenched in the Spirit’s blessing

 poured out through the prophetic testimony

 of those who bear witness

 to the suffering in our world,

 we will have been made ready

 for the work of tomorrow,

 knowing deep in our marrow,

 that we are the ones who must act, for:

**All: We are people of courage.**

 **We are people of compassion.**

 **We are people of hope.**

 **We are people of justice.**

 **We will not be silent anymore.**

## Young at Heart Time

### \*Children’s Hymn

“This Little Light Of Mine,” Traditional

“What Does the Lord Require of You” VU 701

“We Are Marching,” VU 646

### Young at Heart Time

*Ask the children (and some adults if you have a small Sunday school group) to bring in something special from home for a show and tell. Quickly go around and let only half the group tell the congregation what their item is. Stop at the halfway point and tell the other half that you aren’t going to hear from them. When there is confusion, shocked looks, or outcry, ask all the children if they think it is fair that some got to share their treasures and others didn’t. This is your opening to talk about how important it is to value the gifts of every child of God. That it is unfair and wrong to treat some people as more valuable than other people. That God reminds us to give all children a chance to shine, and the world is richer when we treat all children with love.*

*Complete the circle by inviting the second half to share their special items with the congregation. Give thanks to God for the blessings that come from the opportunity to hear each person share. The Sunday school teacher may wish to incorporate the show and tell items into a Sunday school lesson.*

*If asking children to bring in a treasure from home won’t work in your context, you could ask them to share one word that represents what they think their greatest gift to others is (prompt them, if needed, by sharing what your answer would be or elaborating on the question by asking for a character trait or deed they are good at: I’m generous, my smile, my homemade cookies, I’m a good big sibling…). Again, let only half the group share so you can move into a discussion about the importance of valuing the gifts of all God’s children.*

## Walking with God

### First Reading: Matthew 18:2‒6 (True Greatness)

### Second Reading: Proverbs 31:8‒9 (Speak Out)

### Third Reading: Luke 10:25‒37 (The Good Samaritan)

### Fourth Reading (optional): “[Shoulders](https://poets.org/poem/shoulders)” poem by [Naomi Shihab Nye](https://poets.org/poet/naomi-shihab-nye)

### \*Hymn

“We Are Pilgrims,” VU 595

“When I Needed a Neighbour,” VU 600

“Walk with Me,” VU 649

“There Is a Balm in Gilead,” VU 612

“When a Poor One,” VU 702

“Long Ago and Far Away,” MV 195

### Sermon or Interactive Reflection Time

*If your congregation likes to participate in an interactive reflection time, you can give a brief synopsis of child detention and its effects or use one of the short videos found in the resource section (or a clip from one of them). You can then go in one of the following directions:*

*1. Show one of the videos listed in* [*Background/Resources*](#_Background/Resources) *(or part of one video), and have people reflect on what they heard. If the pastor has done their* [*research*](https://www.united-church.ca/social-action/act-now/israeli-military-detention-no-way-treat-child)*, they can provide statistics, anecdotal stories, and guidance to the conversation.*

*2. Show one of the videos listed in* [*Background/Resources*](#_Background/Resources) *(or part of one video), and then hand out one* [*Bible quote about children*](#_Bible_Quotes_about) *(listed below) to each congregant. Invite them to reflect on their own for 3‒5 minutes before joining a group of two or three to discuss for 5‒10 minutes what the Spirit might be saying to the church through the scriptures, videos, and any other resources they have experienced today. Have people share what they think God is calling them personally to do or the congregation to do. If there is interest, the United Church of Christ* [*study resource*](https://hatcnow.org) *might be a good next step.*

*Alternatively, here is a sermon outline that might inspire sermon ideas for this week’s preaching:*

The Maasai people, of Kenya retain much of their traditional ways and cultural heritage. For as long as anyone can remember, their warriors used to greet each other with the words, “Kasserian Ingera.” Today, that phrase, which translates to “How are the children?” is the most widely used greeting by the whole community. The traditional response is always “the children are well.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Nelson Mandela once said, “There can be no keener revelation of a society’s soul than the way in which it treats its children.”[[2]](#footnote-2) The Maasai are not simply asking after the health of the children but also the state of their community. If the children are well, the world is well. “If the children are unwell, the whole world is sick.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

Jesus said it would be better to hang a large millstone hung around one’s neck than to cause a child to stumble.

The question people of faith face is this: How are the children? While the children in our own homes might be thriving, our faith requires us to remove what stops us from engaging and consider more honestly at the state of the world around us. The only answer we can truthfully confess is that the children are not well.

(*Give some statistics or other details about Palestinian children in Israeli military detention, migrant and refugee children in US detention centres, or examples from Canada. See* [*Background/Resources*](#_Background/Resources)*.*)

What does God call us to do?

Jesus said we sin if we fail to love and care for our neighbour. A lawyer once tried to define the limits to who was his neighbour. Surely, we aren’t responsible for the children on the other side of the earth. When Jesus heard this, he told the lawyer the story of the Good Samaritan.

Over the centuries, Christians have puzzled over the motives that drove the priest and Levites to abandon the dying man on the roadside. Perhaps they were running late, scared that it was a trap, too tired from helping so many that day, or too ritually pure to touch blood. As the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. put it, in each of these instances the men were asking, “What will happen to me if I help this man?”[[4]](#footnote-4)

The Samaritan doesn’t ask this. Instead he asks, “What will happen to him if I do not help him?”

What will happen to the children if we do not speak up? If we give a modern-day Levite or priestly answer to the plight of our siblings? The situation is complicated, some will say. The children are not in our path but far away. These are semantics that Jesus would have no time for. The children are before us, every night on our television screens, screaming for our love. What will happen to the children if we do not help them?

In Canada we are living through a painful time of healing from the trauma caused to our children in residential schools. We know trauma’s long-term effects on children and the intergenerational effects on their families.

The painful truth is that we have been here before, and by the grace of God, Christ has always showed us the way through. Faithful Christians who took seriously the call to love their neighbour have taken active roles in putting an end to child labour practices, abolishing slavery, and closing residential schools. It takes courageous people to change the world. The pressure of countries, like Canada, helped end apartheid in South Africa. We can be part of ending the unjust detention of children.

Jesus once said that when the angels in heaven look down they see the face of God in the children (Matthew 18:10). He said we must not let the children suffer. He knew, like the Maasai, that the health of our society is rooted in how well the children are doing.

On the night before he died, Jesus told us not to be afraid, for he was sending an advocate. The Spirit would come upon us, and we would do even greater things than Jesus did in his lifetime (John 14:12‒14). It is time to live into that promise. Here, now, this day, it is our moment to shine with the love of Christ and care for God’s children. Our salvation depends on it.

## Holding the Light for Others

### Offering

### Solo or Choir Music

“None of Us Are Free,” Solomon Burke

“Another Day in Paradise,” Phil Collins

“Why Wasn’t God Watching?” Tom Waits

### \*Offertory Hymn

“Jesus, Friend of Little Children,” VU 340, verse 1

or

“Long Ago and Far Away,” MV 195, verse 2

### \*Prayer of Dedication

### Prayers of the People

*With sung response: “Lord, Listen to Your Children Praying,” VU 400*

Spirit of God, blow through this room today bringing memories of all the gifts you have given us: the childhood delights, the middle-age joys, the later-year smiles, and the moments of encouragement and comfort along the way. In this world that thrives on telling us we can do it ourselves if we just get the right education or buy the right product, help us to remember our childlike nature—that our lives are a series of gifts from you, from our first breath to our relationships to our last walk with you. Open our eyes to see how we and our fellow creatures are miracles to stand in awe of. Breathe your life into us and make us great servants of peace.

*Sung response: “Lord, Listen to Your Children Praying,” VU 400*

Holy Teacher, as we move into a week that includes home, work, and worldly happenings, may we be blessed to serve others and lift up the children. As we look out at the world of broken hearts, may we find Christ’s courage to serve those who have been hurt by violence, abuse, sexual assault, racism, poverty, war, and famine. Remind us that we are not alone. We are not required to solve every problem, but we are not exempt from doing what is ours to do. Breathe your life into us and make us great servants of justice.

*Sung response: “Lord, Listen to Your Children Praying,” VU 400*

God of community, blow through this room today bringing healing and comfort to all who need you. May each one of us feel, in the stillness of our praying, your embrace around us. Today, we ask for healing for our friends in discomfort; We pray for (*list those in need of prayer*). Today we pray for ourselves; hear us in the silence as we lift our joys and sorrows to you (*time of silence for personal prayers*). Holy One, Breathe your life into us and make us great servants of your beloved creation.

*Sung response: “Lord, Listen to Your Children Praying,” VU 400*

Holy One, we lift these prayers to you, with one final prayer: that we might be part of your answer to us. Amen.

### \*Closing Hymn

“Sent Out in Jesus’ Name,” MV 212

“We Are Pilgrims,” VU 595

“Walk with Me,” VU 649

### \*Commissioning and Benediction

### \*Sung Benediction

“Take Up His Song,” MV 213

or

“Walk with Me,” VU 649

*Music sends us out.*

## Bible Quotes about Children

**Matthew 18:2‒6** He called a child, whom he put among them and said, “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.

“If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, 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.”

**Proverbs 22:6** Train children in the right way, and when old, they will not stray.

**Matthew 18:10** “Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones; for, I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven.”

**Jeremiah 29:11** For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.

**Jeremiah 31:17** [T]here is hope for your future, says the Lord: your children shall come back to their own country.

**Proverbs 31:8‒9** Speak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights of all the destitute.Speak out, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy.

**1 Thessalonians 2:11-12** As you know, we dealt with each one of you like a father with his children, urging and encouraging you and pleading that you lead a life worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.

**1 John 4:4** Little children, you are from God, and have conquered them; for the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world.

## Background/Resources

While more just and less widespread, Canada has a practice of [child detention and family separation](https://globalnews.ca/news/5430731/canada-migrant-children-immigration-detention/) that many argue should be abolished. Research has been done on the devastating [psychological effects](https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2015-21194-011) on children in detention.

Israel is the only country in the world that systematically uses its military court to prosecute between 500 to 700 children a year. Only Palestinian children are prosecuted in this manner. Israel applies civilian criminal law to children in East Jerusalem. The [No Way to Treat a Child](https://www.nwttac.canada.dci-palestine.org) Canadian campaign sheds light on the abuses. The United Church is taking part in this campaign—see [Israeli Military Detention—No Way to Treat a Child](https://www.united-church.ca/social-action/act-now/israeli-military-detention-no-way-treat-child).

The United Church of Christ has an extensive study resource called “How Are the Children?” that includes a powerful 90-minute film, [*How Are the Children?*](https://hatcnow.org/) on the plight of incarcerated Palestinian children.

The non-profit [Immigration Counseling Service (ICS)](https://www.ics-law.org/) has used court transcripts to re-create hearings where children as young as three years old have had to represent themselves after crossing into the United States. Watch their four-minute video, [*Unaccompanied: Alone in America*](https://www.ics-law.org/services/unaccompanied-children/).

At least seven [children died in US custody](https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/why-are-migrant-children-dying-u-s-custody-n1010316) in less than a year in 2018‒19, after a decade without a reported incident of a child death in custody.

The World Council of Churches’ [*Churches’ Commitments to Children*](https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-programmes/public-witness/rights-of-children/churches-commitments-to-children) is an invitation to member churches to address the needs of children as an integral part of a commitment to justice and peace.

1. <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/reading/and-how-are-the-children> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <http://www.mandela.gov.za/mandela_speeches/1995/950508_nmcf.htm> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Rev. Traci Blackmon speaking on child detention, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=whotDovIji4> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/ive-been-mountaintop-address-delivered-bishop-charles-mason-temple> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)