

Snakes and scorpions for our children (Luke 11:1-13)

How could Jesus assume that all those who heard him preach would never treat their children in such a way?

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On the 4th of July, a toddler went to a neighborhood parade and left an orphan, his parents murdered by a 21-year-old with a semiautomatic assault rifle.

Mass shootings are so frequent now I have lost my patience with the hushed tones in which our news broadcasters read the names and ages of victims. But this particular detail of the mass shooting in Highland Park, Illinois, made me wish they could scream instead.

Even those who are evil know how to give good gifts to their children, Jesus says in this passage from Luke, but we seem to have lost the capacity. We can only hope that a typical school day or a neighborhood holiday parade won't become a bloody tragedy—the worst, or the last, day of their lives. We hand our children snakes instead of fish, scorpions instead of eggs.

What a vivid description of betrayal. If you've experienced abuse or betrayal by a parent, you know how shocking and disorienting it is when the one who should care for you hurts you instead. We may even continue to approach with the naive assumption that we will be heard—until at last we learn that we will not, and we despair.

How could Jesus assume that all those who heard him preach would never treat their children in such a way? He must have known there were those in earshot who handed out snakes instead of fish, or those whose own parents did so. He must also have known that we never imagine ourselves to be those parents, even as the serpent wriggles out of our hands.

For one's family to be murdered during a celebration of American independence is a particularly horrible betrayal, especially when so many in this country will continue to claim that their independence relies on the right of the murderer to his weapon. I look at my children and feel helpless, unable to give them the good things I wish I could, unable to give them even their safety.

It feels futile to protest—or even to pray, when prayer has been deployed so often by those in power as an alternative to action. The desire to gather my children to me, to bolt the door and retreat from the world, is intense. I do not want to hear any more litanies of lost children.

I keep returning to this passage in Luke to search the preaching of Jesus for a way to approach a God who is a better parent than I am, a God who always answers, who would never place a serpent in the hands of a child. But I keep finding myself in the friend who has barricaded himself in the bedroom: “Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up.”

Of course, the friend does get up, eventually, when the calls for help become so persistent he can't ignore them anymore. The calls for help are persistent. The whispered litany of victims continues. I'm praying for the courage to keep listening, to get up and answer the door.