

**Bishop Bill Muhm & Carrie Bucalo**

# *Matthew 18*

**A conversation between a survivor of childhood  
sexual abuse and a Catholic Bishop**

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## CHAPTER ONE

# Jesus and the Child

*At that time the disciples approached Jesus and said, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” He called a child over, placed it in their midst, and said, “Amen, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever receives one child such as this in my name receives me.”*

(Matthew 18:1–5)

**Bishop Muhm:** Carrie, it’s good to speak with you in person without masks! After years of talking virtually and wearing masks, I’m glad to have the opportunity to engage in this important conversation face-to-face with you. After all, we are destined for eternal life without masks, when we see Him face-to-face in the Kingdom of Heaven (see Revelation 22:4).

It’s tragic that children have been gravely harmed by ordained and lay ministers in the Catholic Church. This injustice cries out to heaven, and it breaks my heart. I, as a successor to the apostles, offer you and all victims of abuse my heartfelt apology. Children belong to Christ and to His Church. If there’s any way the Church can succeed in inviting them back, we must move heaven and earth to do so.

In Matthew 18:1–5, Christ teaches us very clearly about the place of children in the Kingdom of Heaven. As much as the abuse of a child angers and distresses Our Lord, He is overjoyed when His children are loved, respected, healed, and cared for. We, the Church, must persevere in working to make this ideal a reality.

I’m sorry that you felt unaccompanied during the darkness of your childhood. Thank you for trusting Christ and His Church. Thank you also

for trusting me. Although you were betrayed and abandoned by those who represented the Church, Christ never betrayed nor abandoned you; He will never betray nor abandon anyone. Just as you have relearned to trust, we all must relearn to trust. Why should we settle for a broken, wounded Church when Christ can heal us?

**Carrie:** Bishop Muhm, from the bottom of my heart, thank you. I cannot tell you how much healing and light your friendship brings me. Matthew 18:1–5 has been a difficult place for me to stand. In my childhood, I had a sense that Christ was different from what my abusers told me about Him, but the suffering and the pain of the abuse were often too much for me to bear. I felt like running away from Christ. I feared Him. I did not want Him to touch me.

It has taken His whole mystical body, the Church, to convince me that I should stay. My brothers and sisters in Christ have shown me God's face and ministered to me in ways they could never imagine. I'm especially struck by those who have refused to live their lives without Christ, even when they faced impossible circumstances. They gave a witness to loving and befriending Christ even if it seemed like their lives would be destroyed because of it, and each time, something remarkable happened.

I see these living witnesses all around me, in my everyday life. My "hundredfold" family has come through. Justin takes the time to help me on my bad days, even though he has his own crosses to carry. He patiently fills in the gaps, and I am speechless. I have countless friends who have gone out of their way to help me, especially when my spiritual and emotional wounds were debilitating. And even you, Bishop, bring me joy on some of my darkest days, and I cannot tell you how much good it does my soul.

I would be remiss if I did not tell you how much I love God, and how much Christ has healed me *within* His Church. What seems to have been a wreckage of my humanity, Christ has turned into an opportunity for hope. I am relearning to trust every day. I sense that, as broken as I am, I'm already sitting in Christ's presence in the Kingdom of Heaven. I trust that one day I will be fully healed and will see Him face-to-face in the Kingdom of Heaven with the peace and calm of the child in Matthew 18.

**Bishop Muhm:** Carrie, I'm amazed by your trust! Because I represent the Church, I know it takes a lot of faith for you to proceed with this



conversation. I intend to honor your trust and hope to help the Lord in some small way in His work of making you whole.

The term *Kingdom of Heaven* has enormous meaning and value for all of us. It means the new creation, the right relationship between God and His people on earth. In other words, when human lives, human activity, and human society are properly aligned with God's will, then God's healing and redeeming grace will flow uninhibited through the world to set things right. When a broken, sinful world is brought into alignment with reality, then God will be able to work many miracles through His people, the Church. In this way, the ministry of the Church makes the Kingdom of Heaven present here on earth in a real but incomplete way.

The Kingdom of Heaven began on earth when God called Abraham to be the father of God's Chosen People, the Jews. It progressed as the Jewish people learned to put their faith in God and obey His will. It took a giant step forward when God became a man at Bethlehem. The Kingdom of Heaven reached its climactic moment in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ two thousand years ago. It continues to unfold today in the world through the ministry of the Church whom Jesus Christ established upon His ascension to His Father's right hand, and through Pentecost. The Kingdom of Heaven will finally attain total fulfillment when Our Lord Jesus Christ comes in glory at the end of time to inaugurate absolute justice, absolute truth, and absolute goodness in a new heaven and a new earth.

So, even though the Kingdom of Heaven began thousands of years ago, we are still waiting for it to reach its fulfillment. In the meantime, maybe we could define the Kingdom of Heaven as the ongoing renewal and redemption of the human race—or as things gradually becoming the way they're supposed to be.

One of the signs of the Kingdom of Heaven is that people grow toward becoming the way God made them to be. One very important component of this transformation is the ability to trust. God designed the human person to trust. When we trust, we act in sync with our deepest human nature. This is easy to see in children. They are naturally "wired" to trust. They also express their emotions quite readily and unselfconsciously. When we observe them trusting others, we can see that they're happy and free. On the other hand, when we observe children being distrustful of others, we can see that they're unhappy.

Tragically, adults have betrayed the trust of children in many ways. Probably the worst possible betrayal by adults of childlike trust is sexual abuse. In recent times, society has come to realize that sexual abuse of children by adults has been pandemic throughout human history. One way in which victims are left broken by this outrage is that they lose their ability to trust. We cannot live without trust.

When I was a Navy Chaplain Candidate, I spent the summer of 1992 interning at a Naval Hospital. One of the chaplains showed a training video to sailors going through rehabilitation for alcohol dependency. The video, produced by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, is titled *The Consequences of Our Choices* (or *The Pump*).<sup>2</sup> In this eight-minute video, a man dying of thirst faces a dilemma: either trust written instructions left by someone he doesn't know—and possibly live—or refuse to trust and certainly die. At the beginning, the video shows a message saying: “If you trust too much, too easily, you will live to be deceived. But if you do not trust enough, you may not live at all.”

People who have trusted and then been victimized can lose their ability to trust. No one could blame them for doing so. But those who lose their ability to trust are missing out on the fullness of life. The wisdom of the world says that trust is immature and unrealistic—while refusal to trust is mature and realistic. But the exact opposite is true in the Kingdom of Heaven!

The Kingdom of Heaven—the new creation—is the real world. In the Kingdom of Heaven, children teach everyone to trust. Jesus illustrates this by teaching about the Kingdom of Heaven in the presence of a child. Everyone must unlearn the wisdom of the world—and learn (or relearn) that trust leads to happiness in the Kingdom of Heaven.

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