

There are no unflattering family pictures on Facebook. Everyone looks like residents of Garrison Keiller's Lake Wobegon where "all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average." Where are the real pictures, the ones with stay-at-home mothers at noon, unmade-up and still in sweatpants after the fourth in a row Snow Day? The ones with hapless fathers failing to change a tire, grill chicken, or assemble Swedish furniture? The ones with children in a full, face-down on the floor, kicking and screaming meltdown in the candy and cookie aisle at the Kroger? Where can we find those snapshots of reality? Well, friends, look no further. In 2006, Kristin Howerton—a mother of four children within four years via birth and adoption—started a weblog entitled "RageAgainstTheMiniVan.com" in which she explores and reveals sleep-deprived adventures in reality-oriented parenting. She is also the founder of the social media accounts Pinterest You Are Drunk and #WhenChildrenDressThemselves. Minivans are the icons of contemporary parenting; they personify the compromises, sacrifices, and tireless unappreciated gestures that today's parents make to raise their children. Just as no one grew up hoping and wishing that someday they would drive a minivan, no one expected parenthood to be what it sometimes is. On the site, parents post pictures with captions of their children in the middle of full-blown tantrums triggered by ordinary parenting efforts. Each caption always contains the phrase, "I am an awful parent because...." (Except they don't use the word "awful.") Famous examples include, "I am an awful parent because I put a band-aid on a wound," "I am an awful parent because I wouldn't let him drink expired milk," or "I am an awful parent because I told her that she will never be a dad." The site's humor comes from its acknowledgement that the reality of our daily lives as parents or as people rarely if ever meet our cultural expectation that we, our children, and our families must always seem to be perfect. God forbid that we should be thought of being anything other than the domestic goddess Martha Stewart, child psychologist Dr. Spock, or *The Sound of Music's* wise and

playful Maria von Trapp. More and more, we justify our ordinary, imperfect existence by trying to seem to be extraordinarily and perfectly effective.

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus hears His disciples argue about which is them is the greatest. Which of them is the most effective for their mission? Which of them is the most useful? St. Mark writes that, in response, Jesus "took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, 'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcome me welcomes not me but the one who sent me (Mark 9:37).'" It would be easy for us, in our cultural context, to misunderstand His point. The 17th century intellectual movement called "the Enlightenment" taught that human beings are born with souls and minds that are a *tabula rasa*: a "clean slate." Originally clean and pure, we become corrupted solely by our prejudicial and exploitative society, including the limiting and distorting superstitious influence of religion. As a result of the Enlightenment's influence, we sentimentalize childhood: we are training to think that all children are innately innocent, instinctively good, and worthy of worship. Any actual parent of any actual child knows this to be nonsense. We do not have to go as far as the monumentally influential Baptist preacher, author, and conference speaker Voddie Baucham who writes that babies are "vipers with diapers," but every parent has seen his or her toddler express self-centeredness in a way they never learned from us. Therefore, we misunderstand Jesus' embrace of the little child and His exhortation that we emulate that child to mean that to be great in the Kingdom of God is to remain innocent. The ancient world in the time of Christ had a very different attitude. Overwhelmingly, the Romans and the Greeks saw children not as being innocent but as being virtually useless until they turned five or six, when they would be expected to begin to care for animals, gather food and other materials, and perform household chores. In addition to being useless, children were costly and risky investments; even after those years of expensive feeding, maintenance, and training, their

long-term longevity was unlikely. In the ancient world, a 40% infancy mortality rate and a 50% child mortality rate meant that a mother would have to conceive twelve times to ensure the survival of even three children until the age of ten. This is why the Spartans would immediately kill any child born with any physical deformity; this is why the city of Rome had what they called “nursing columns,” where mothers could abandon their infants so that others might adopt them either as future playmates for their children or as future slaves. In the time of Christ, children were not seen as innocent treasures but as fragile, helpless, useless, and—in worldly terms—potentially worthless.

When Jesus takes that child into His arms, places that child before the disciples, and tells them to welcome and become personally involved with that child and all children as if they were welcoming and becoming personally involved with Him, He teaches them to love the helpless and care for the useless. He teaches His followers these things because that is what He has done for us. Without God we are helpless. That sounds deeply offensive to a culture that insists that we be masters and commanders of our own lives and, when necessary, pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps, but it is true. While we are wise to accept responsibility to do what we can with the things in this world that are transitory—budgets, habits, and daily plans—we are ultimately powerless over the things that really matter: life and death, evil and sudden danger, and chronic self-destructive self-centeredness. It is precisely because we are helpless that God entered the world in the Person of Jesus and became the world’s Rescuer and Savior. Furthermore, without God we are useless. That sounds deeply offensive to a culture that insists that we constantly make a difference, do all that we can do, and be all that we can be, but if we define human value by personal effectiveness, we will inevitably have contempt for those who fail—especially ourselves. We can have every intention, ambition, and plan to do something good in the world, but nothing good will come of it unless God is already involved in it, who is actually the One

who plants and inspires all of our good ideas and desires. In the 15th century, Thomas a Kempis wrote, “Man proposes, but God disposes.” God loves us not because we are effective, but because He simply loves us, just as we truly are. And God does not merely love us as we are; He loves us so much as we are that He constantly gives to us all that He has and all that He is. Jesus told Nicodemus, “So God loved the world that He gave His Only-begotten Son that all who believe in Him should not perish but have life everlasting (John 3:16).” In fact, according to St. Paul, “God proves His love for us in that while we were yet sinners”—while we were and still are helpless, useless, and even in open rebellion against Him—“Christ died for us (Romans 5:8).”

Rageagainsttheminivan.com therefore carries something of the Gospel, the truly Good News from Christ. We do not need to be perfect. We do not need to be useful. We do not need even to be competent. Without God, we are none of these things. But because of God, and because of what He has done for us—because He became one of us at His Incarnation, because He died for us at His Crucifixion, because He rose from the dead on the third day at His Resurrection, and because He lifts us upward to be with Him at His Ascension, we do not need to rage against our ordinariness. All we need to do is to relax into His grace.