

“Bless the Children!”

Jewish mothers often took their children to distinguished rabbis to be blessed. So it's not surprising that children were brought to Jesus. Once when this happened the disciples spoke sternly to the parents and told them not to do this. Why? Perhaps they wanted to protect the Lord from this "intrusion" into His busy schedule. I mean, Jesus had more important things to do for the kingdom of God than entertain children! Maybe the disciples themselves just didn't want to be bothered by noisy, squirmy kids – the disciples had grownup things to deal with! But Jesus was *indignant* when the disciples did this. Indignant means "angry", "annoyed". Jesus told them, “Let the children come to me. Don't stop them! For the kingdom of God belongs to them!” Jesus says if you don't come to God like a child, you won't get into the kingdom! The point? We need to have the *simple trust* of a child, the *humble dependence* of a little child.

Mark goes on: Jesus “laid his hands on them, and *blessed* them” (Mark 10:16). *Children are important to Jesus. So we know children are important to God. Jesus blessed the children. He wants to bless children today – through us!*

My message today is a simple sermon, with just a couple of points. The first one is: *Parents: Invest yourself in the lives of your children.* (Some of you are *grandparents*, so I'll talk to you as *grandparents* too). Hebrews in the Old Testament viewed children as a gift of God, a sign of God's blessing. I think sometimes we've moved away from that Hebrew ideal.

There are people today who seem to act like the parenting role isn't a high priority. Children can get in the way of our building a successful career, having time to pursue the hobbies and interests that *we* enjoy as an adult. Our culture, for example, tends to look down on stay-at-home moms – like if you really have anything on the ball, you'll have a job or career outside the home.

As we all know, many more mothers are in the job force today than 40 or 50 years ago. And, truthfully, many households depend on two incomes just to survive. Many children today spend their weekdays in a professional day care setting, or in someone else's home.

For a number of years there was an ongoing debate over whether having moms work outside the home was good or bad for their children. Some saw this as the root cause of the breakdown of the home and nation. Others saw it as liberating for women, a step forward. I'm not sure there is any definitive data to prove either side.

My own opinion: It all depends! There are many more factors that determine the emotional health of a child than whether mom works outside the home or not. For instance, you can have a mom employed, who is happy, and able to spend quality time with her child or children. On the other hand, you can have a mom who stays at home, and if she's unhappy, perhaps resentful, or depressed, that she's tied down, this emotional state of the mom is not a healthy environment for the child.

The key, I believe, is this: Is the mom, is the dad, emotionally present with their child? What do we mean by being "emotionally present"? Do they spend quality time with the child, so the child feels valued and important? I think one of the healthier things happening today is that more *dads*

are realizing *they* need to spend time with their children...*they* need to be nurturing ones, just as much as the mother.

For a parent to be emotionally present means creating those moments when you get your mind off other things and really focus on the child (reading that bedtime story, letting the child work with you in garden, etc.). Taking time to do things *our children* want to do. Remember the “Candyland” game. I got to be so tired of that game! Our kids loved it. So we played! Being emotionally present means trying to keep communication open – talking with your child, *listening* to your child. And when you do talk, not talking down to him or her (when they get to their teenage years). I know, when the teenage years come, kids often go into a hole, shut down communication. But don’t give up. Keep offering, so if your kids want to talk, they know they can come and we’ll listen, and won’t just criticize, or pontificate about how things were when *we* were children.

We can be “emotionally present” if we invite discussion of the process of their growing up. Ask things like: How am I doing as a father/mother? You’re getting older now. Do we need to adjust the rules here at home to be more age appropriate? What’s fair to expect of you, and what do you need to do to show us you’re growing up?

With the hectic lifestyles of so many families today, being emotionally present for our children can be hard. We can be around each other all the time, yet not be emotionally present with our kids.

This is where grandparents and extended family members enter into picture. Many of us have grandchildren, nieces and nephews. We can make the effort to connect with them in ways that make them feel valued and important. Nancy and I know a couple who have grandchildren who live near them. For years, they made it a point every Saturday to take one of their grandchildren to breakfast. They’d rotate the schedule, so each got time alone with the grandparents. What a neat thing to do! It must have been a big deal to those kids, for they were still doing it when the grandchildren were in high school!

Even if our grandchildren, nieces, nephews live out of the area, there are still ways we can stay in touch, and make them feel valued and loved. *What could be more important than this!* Remember, they don’t stay little for long!

But the big debate currently is not over whether moms should work outside the home. That’s pretty much a given. The more pressing question today has to do with *how much parents should be involved in the education and development of their children*. We see this in the hot debate over how much input parents should have in their child’s school curriculum, or what books are acceptable in a school library. There’s an angry divide around that question. I think I can see both the teacher/ administration side, and the parent side.

Illust. There is also the sticky question of how much authority schools have to provide health treatments to students, without the parents’ being notified. If a biological boy wants to be called

a girl's name, or a biological girl wants to be called a boy's name in the classroom, must teachers must do that, and in some cases *not even tell the parent?* Does the school have the authority to provide birth control measures, abortions, mental health counseling, even gender transforming treatment, without notifying parents? States have different laws on this. You get different answers, depending on whether you're getting the news from a conservative news outlet, or a liberal news source.

At the risk of thinking I'm into conspiracy theories, or going off the deep end, it's noteworthy that *socialism and communism* call for the end of the nuclear family. Karl Marx said that communism would ensure that children would be educated by the state, and not their parents. In 1917, Alexandra Kollontai, the Soviet's first People's Commissar for Welfare, wrote: "The old family, narrow and petty, where the parents quarrel and are only interested in their own offspring, is not capable of educating the 'new person'". So, these are things I think we need to keep our eye on.

Jesus blessed the children. If we're to bless the children of our generation, it's so important for parents to invest themselves in the lives of their children.

The other big point I want to make in this message is this: *There are children other than our own who need to be cared for.* A friend from out of town sent me a book to read (ugh). My friend was all enthused about this book. I thought I'd just skim it, but I got into it. It's called *Reaching Out To Lonely Kids*, by Valerie Bell. The author had wanted another child, but it didn't work out. Instead, God led her to begin a ministry to children besides her own.

In the book she writes about "Self-Care Children" – often called "latchkey" children. She uses the term to describe kids whose parents, for a variety of reasons, just "aren't there" for them. She writes poignantly of how her home became a place where lonely kids just hang out – how she became a "spiritual mom" to kids like Molly, whose worldly-wise mom had little time for God or faith. She tells of having to force herself to befriend some of the nasty, dirty kids in her neighborhood – but how God sometimes used her loving heart to open a door that changed them. This book touched my heart!

There are all kinds of children whom Jesus wants to bless through us. It can be as simple as opening up our house to neighborhood kids as a warm and fun place to come. One woman recalls the way a friendly welcome was extended to her as a little girl over 50 years ago. "I remember two elderly women from my own childhood... my friend, Helen, and I were typical tomboys – wild, rambunctious, and clumsy; but something happened to us when we dressed up in our mother's dresses, hats and high heels to visit Miss Ramsey and Mrs. Shaw in their 'fussy' house on the corner of Fifth and Plum. We would be invited in with, 'We're so glad to see you, Miss Elliott and Miss Smith. How charming you look today!' We would click-clack to 'our' drawer for paper-doll books, crayons, and scissors. Conversation would follow. Our problems, our joys were listened to with interest. We were treated like *real* people. We were important enough to be served tea and cookies, and not at the kitchen table, but from a beautifully set table in the dining room".

With the great number of divorces, step-parents, and absentee parents today, we're seeing a generation of children growing up feeling lonely and neglected. Somebody has said, "Christian families who say, 'Come, play at our house!' may be making the best childhood memories some kids will ever have."

Some children grow up in homes where they are not only loved, but they are also fortunate enough to receive Christian teaching. A grandmother tells of her 6 year-old grandson, who rarely missed Sunday School. One day visiting the grandparents, he complained of a stomach ache. He said, "But I don't know if it's my large or small testament." (Not too many children are *that* Biblical in their thinking!) A mother tells of kindergarten aged son named Mitchell, who would place magnetic letters on the refrigerator to practice his spelling: dog, cat, etc. He would proudly display them for the family to see. One day he bounded into a room holding 3 magnetic letters – G O D. "Look what I spelled, Mom!" Mitch said, with a proud smile on his face. "That's wonderful! Now go put the letters on the fridge so daddy can see them when he gets home" (mom was feeling great about her spiritual influence). Just then, she heard Mitch's voice from the kitchen: "Mom. How do you spell 'zilla'?"

As our American society gets further from our Judeo-Christian roots, we are seeing more and more children growing up without exposure to Christ and Christianity. Who will reach out to them? A 72 year-old widow tells of a 7-year old neighbor girl Betsy. "She weighs more than she should; she's nine now and wears a size sixteen. For some reason she keeps coming over any time. If I'm taking a nap, she keeps ringing the doorbell until she wakes me up. She says she comes for peace and quiet because her mom and dad do a lot of arguing. She says she wishes they were divorced." They play games, sing Sunday School songs. She continues: "I wonder how many little Betsys are in this world. Betsy's parents won't let her go to church with me. But I guess I'm the only friend she has. Sometimes when I'm tired, I almost wish she would leave me alone, but this would not be a very good witness. So I love her for Jesus' sake. Who knows how these hours will affect her life in the future?"

Maybe God's bringing a child or children across our path – someone to befriend. I was maybe a junior or senior in high school, maybe even in college. Somehow I got to playing catch with a little boy up the street. Cute little thing. An only child. Sometimes he'd walk to our house, ring the doorbell, and ask if I could come out and play. Looking back, I only hope God brought something good out of those times we played together!

In one church I served there was an elderly lady who had a Down Syndrome child. The boy's father had died. At one point the mother was looking for someone to do things with her son on weekends. I put a notice in the church bulletin and newsletter. There was no response. I felt embarrassed. But then I thought, well, I considered it, but never followed through.

George Darby was a pastor in our conference, finishing up his ministry as a conference appointed evangelist. We had him for a weekend at the church I served in Easton. He did the sermon that Sunday. George talked about the problems we were having as a nation, about the youth, and how we can see the situation as hopeless. But it's not, he said. If every one of us

adults "adopted" a youth – took an interest in them, communicated with them, loved them, there was hope. He challenged each adult in the church to “adopt” a youth. One of the ladies, Jeanene, adopted our daughter Karin. At the time, when I had been appointed to the Easton church, Nancy and our kids stayed back in the Media area, so Karin could finish high school at Penncrest. I was separated from my family through the week. Karin and Nancy would come up most weekends. It was a hard time for our family, and Karin. Jeanene sent cards to Karin, gave her gifts, and cared for her. What a beautiful thing Jeanene did for Karin, and for us.

Jesus wants to bless children today through you and me. Maybe it's a son or daughter, a grandchild, a kid in our neighborhood, a niece or nephew. Christ wants to bless children today through *churches and congregations*. Maybe there are kids that we don't even know, just waiting to find a friend in us!

Let me close this sermon with a poem. It goes like this:

Some would gather money
Along the path of life;
Some would gather roses
And rest from worldly strife.

But I would gather children
From among the thorns of sin;
I would see a golden curl
And a freckled, toothless grin.

For money cannot enter
In that land of endless day,
And the roses that are gathered
Soon will wilt along the way.

But oh, the laughing children,
As I cross the Sunset Sea
And the gates swing wide to heaven
I can take them in with me.

Harry L. Kaufhold, Jr.
Community United Methodist Church
May 12, 2024

