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in•ter•cede: Children

Mark 10:13-16

We are well into a New Year sermon series on prayer called "Intercede." Each week, we are focusing our prayers as a congregation on a particular topic and providing a simple bulletin insert to assist you in this discipline of prayer.

Last week I challenged you to pray for marriage. I shared a remarkable statistic about couples that pray together daily. What percentage of those couples get divorced? 1%! 99% of couples that pray together daily stay married their whole lives. You promised to pray together at least once last week. So how many of you did pray together at least once? More than once? How many of you prayed together for the first time? Awesome!

Today, we turn our prayers toward children. Our text comes from Mark 10: 13-16:

And they were bringing children to him that he might touch them [and pray], and the disciples rebuked them. But when Jesus saw it, he was indignant and said to them, "Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it." And he took them in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands on them.

A member of our congregation told me that recently he was in a restaurant with his kids. When the meal came, they bowed together to offer thanks. As they prayed, a man walked up and shouted at him, "Child abuser!" My friend was taken aback and replied, "What are you talking about?" The aggressor said, "You are indoctrinating your kids with religious lies. That's child abuse!"

Praying with your kids... child abuse? Wow, our culture is so screwed up! I would dare say that not praying for your children is abusive... or at least neglectful. With all that our children face in schools and on TV and on their dumb, dumb, dumb phones... if you are not praying for your children and grandchildren and for kids that you love and care about, you are leaving them defenseless against a very wicked world.

The picture we have of Jesus and the children from today's text is a favorite of many. But this story is actually way more profound than we might understand because the culture of the time was so very different. In first century Jewish

society, children were considered adults-in-waiting. Childhood wasn't precious or sweet; not something to be enjoyed. Childhood was something to be tolerated until, finally, they grew into adulthood when they would, finally, become productive members of society.

Rabbis, particularly, did not waste their time on kids. They were too busy sharing their wisdom with adults. Naturally, the disciples figured that Jesus, their rabbi, didn't have time for silly kids. Boy, were they wrong.

We read that "they were bringing children to him that he might touch them." Matthew adds "and pray." We don't know who "they" were—probably parents—and we shouldn't be too surprised. This is the "kid-friendly" section of the gospel of Mark. In chapter 9 a man brings his demon-possessed boy to Jesus who delivers him. And later in that same chapter when Jesus talks about who is greatest in the Kingdom of God, we read, "And he took a child and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in his arms, he said to them, 'Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me.'"

Even in a culture where children—truly—were to be seen, not heard, as these parents noticed the way Jesus treated and spoke about children, they gained courage. If Jesus welcomed and blessed lepers and demoniacs and a hemorrhaging woman... maybe he would welcome and bless their children, too. So, they decided to give it a shot! What good parent wouldn't want the blessing of Jesus upon their child?

But the disciples saw themselves like bouncers outside a dance club. They were the ones who decided who would get in to see Jesus and they were quite certain that he wouldn't have time to fiddle around with kids. So, the disciples rebuked the parents for their efforts. That word, rebuke, is a harsh word. It is the same word used to describe how Jesus spoke to evil spirits. So the disciples' greetings to the parents went something like this: "Get out of here! Jesus doesn't have time for this foolishness! Go away!"

But as harsh as the disciples were, Jesus is harsher. Mark tells us that Jesus was "indignant." This is the only place in the gospels where Jesus is described as being indignant. It means that Jesus was furious. And not just the brooding kind of furious. No, the kind that caused him to lash out verbally. He gave the disciples a tongue-lashing! "Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it."

If this passage doesn't give you an idea of how precious children are to Jesus, then I'm afraid I can't help you. I thank God that this place throbs with children! Especially during Upward basketball and cheerleading season, Chapel Hill is hopping with kids. And God help us if that is ever not the case! A member of my LifeGroup

said, "One of my joys is walking in to our church and finding the hallways filled with the love, laughter and shrieks of children." If you do not share that opinion, I suggest that you either pray that God convert your hard heart or find a church with less noise and fewer kids because, believe me, those quiet churches are out there! Lots of them. May we always be noisy!

You might have heard the expression, "Children are the church of the future." How do I feel about that expression? I hate it! Kids are not the church of the future! Children are the church of right now, just as surely as we adults are. If the words of Jesus in this story teach us anything, they teach us that!

Jesus loved those kids and welcomed them to himself, and notice how. They were bringing their children to Jesus so that he might "touch them." And at the end of the story, touch is mentioned two more times. "And he took them in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands on them." Touch, touch, touch!

This was also counter-cultural. In Jewish society, there were many things you did not touch. Especially if you were a rabbi, because if you did it made you ceremonially "unclean." But Jesus was a toucher... even of unclean things. In Mark alone he touches a leper, he is touched by the woman who had hemorrhaged for twelve years, and he touches a dead girl and raises her to life. All of those were unclean things. Jesus didn't care.

Children weren't religiously unclean, but children are always unclean, right? I was holding Reed Hackman last night, and he sneezed right in my face! Snotty noses, smelly diapers, filthy hands... and Jesus reached out and wrapped his arms around every snotty, smelly, filthy child in the bunch. Touch conveys something. It conveys blessing and affection. You will see me fist-pumping kids that walk by me. I touch them because I want them to know they are precious to their pastor.

And notice that after Jesus touched them, there were two spiritual interactions. First, Matthew tells us, Jesus prayed for them. Intercession! Lifting up the needs of kids before our heavenly father. I hope—I pray—that no child in this church closes their eyes at night before one of their parents has prayed for them. Those were my most precious moments with my kids when they were young. One of my friends tells me that, although he has trouble praying with his wife, his nightly prayer with the kids is a treasured ritual. In fact, they look forward to it so much, they can't get to sleep until they've been prayed over by their dad.

So here's my first challenge: Start this ritual. Every night! Kneel beside their bed, touch them, and pray for them. If you don't know what to pray, I would suggest the Four S's: Salvation, Significance, Spouse, Safety. Salvation: Pray that they will know, love and follow Jesus forever. Significance: Pray that they will become the unique person God created them to be. Spouse: This might seem weird—I know my kids giggled every time I prayed this for them—but can you think of anything in this world that is more important, that has a greater chance of bringing pure delight or

pure hell than the person they marry? Start praying for that spouse now. And finally, Safety: By this I mean, that line from the Lord's Prayer: "Deliver us from evil!" Our kids are surrounded by a culture that wants to harm them. (And by the way, if you have given your child a "smart" phone without any kind of filters or limits on its use, you have just invited that evil right into their bedroom. For what it's worth, our kids didn't have a smart phone until college and their dumb phones went on the kitchen table at night. Barbaric, I know. But they survived just fine.)

Salvation, significance, spouse, safety. That's a great starting point. But there is one more spiritual interaction between Jesus and the children. What? Blessing. Blessing is different than prayer. Prayer asks God for things. Blessing pronounces spiritual hopes and affirmations over your child. The benediction after every service is not a prayer; it is a blessing I pronounce over you. And dads, I'll say this: there is something especially impactful about a father who speaks blessing over his children.

So what does blessing look like? Well, if you turn back to chapter 1 you hear the blessing that God the Father spoke over Jesus at his baptism: "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased." Now if God knew Jesus needed to hear words of blessing, how much more do your children need to hear these same words from their parents?

This blessing comes in three parts. Triple AAA: Adoration, Affection, Affirmation. First, Adoration: "You are my son; You are my daughter. You belong to me; you belong in this family." This is not a word of possession; it is a word of adoration. Of belonging. "You are so precious to me. I'm so glad you are my kid." So, first, Adoration: "You are MY son/daughter."

Then, Affection: "You are my beloved son." Every child longs to hear the words, "I love you!" You can't say them enough. And actions aren't enough. Tell them... with words. I am always astounded by the number of men who tell me, "I have never heard my father say 'I love you.' Ever!" Let's break that chain. Speak the words!

Adoration, Affection, and finally, Affirmation: "With you I am well pleased." In other words, "I am so proud of you!" Every child blossoms when they hear their parent's words of praise and encouragement. And don't make this just performance-based. You are proud of them for what they do, yes, but more, for who they are... the person they are becoming. Tell them specifically the qualities that make you proud. Encouragement!

So, briefly, that's blessing. Adoration, Affection, Affirmation. "You are my precious son/daughter. I love you. I am proud of you." So after you've prayed for them, put your hand on their head and pronounce those words. They will never get tired of hearing that from you.

You will find those notes in the insert. Do this tonight. It could be the start of a treasured tradition. And if you don't have children at home, you have grandkids, nieces or nephews. And you have a church full of precious rug rats. So today, before you leave, touch the head of one of these kids and say, "Jesus loves you!" And then, will you join me this week in praying for children. All children! God knows, they need it.

That's what it means to be part of a family.

Another part is sharing a meal together. And now, as God's family, we gather around his table.

Communion