
Blessing the Children

Mark 10:13-16

A sermon preached at Page Auditorium on October 4, 2015

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After a morning worship service, not at Duke Chapel, a little boy approached the choir director and handed this director some money. The choir director was puzzled at this gesture and asked the little boy why he was giving him money. The boy responded, “Because my dad said you are one of the poorest choirs he’s ever heard.” We might know children, as the old TV show declared, who say “the darndest things” and when they do, we may give that sweet, subtle southern response, “Bless your heart.” I wonder if we mean it literally as a term of genuine sympathy. I wonder what we mean by it. One dictionary argues that this phrase is really a linguistic mask “to express to someone that they are an idiot without saying such harsh words.” It can be viewed as an embodiment of being “nice nasty” or “nice meanness” or a method of “waterboarding someone with sweet tea in a culture war” (Candice Dyer). I wonder if we even know what we mean when we say the word, ‘bless.’

If you’ve been breathing the last couple of weeks, Pope Francis has been in the news, just a bit. I was struck by his interaction with children in particular. When he landed in the City of Brother Love, Philadelphia, he wanted that city to live up to its name so while he was in his Fiat leaving the airport, he stopped the car and stepped out of it in order to bless a 10 year-old boy in a wheelchair. He walked over to the barricade, reached over the barricade, kissed the boy’s head, and laid his hands on him to bless him. He not only demonstrates the words of Jesus, “let the little children come to me,” he proactively goes to children to bless them, showing that he will go to them. He shows a priority for the little ones of society, those naturally dependent on adults. His actions are really a form of righteous rebellion against the ways children are often silenced or made invisible.

In the ancient setting of Mark, children of the Greco-Roman world were held in low esteem, which is why Jesus embraces them as a sign of his own self-identification with the least of these (Mark 9:33-37). The ostracizing of children is also pronounced throughout the gospel of Mark because we never hear their voices. Maybe it’s Mark’s own version of ‘bless your heart.’ This intentional/unintentional literary tactic silences the little ones in this gospel narrative. Their bodies are there but we never hear from them. They are seen but not heard. They may even be healed but they never speak as I said a few weeks ago (Mark 5:21-24, 35-43; 7:24-37; 9:14-27); they don’t have a voice. This should be surprising when in the Christian tradition God came into the world as a child.

Children were in a precarious situation in that day, lacking status, being vulnerable, socially and physically powerless. Some estimates are that half of 1st century middle-eastern children died before their 16th birthday. They were subject to the adults and their priorities and the hierarchies that were in place. Right before the story about Jesus blessing the children, there’s a teaching about adult matters—marriage and divorce. It’s not a coincidence that this story about children is after this teaching because children are affected by divorce and not just the married couple. But what’s telling is how much more attention is put on the husband and wife who are married and divorced than on the children. There are eleven verses on the adults’ relational issues (vv.2-12) and a measly four on Jesus and the children (vv.13-16). Even in this respect, children are short changed and we see the privileging of adulthood, though all of us were children at some point in our lives and some of us take longer than others to leave our mischievous childish ways.

This isn't a case of physical violence, but the violence of soft neglect, inattention to children and their needs. It may not be intentional yet children, at times, appear to wear what scientists call "invisibility cloaks." Hidden in broad daylight, not self-created but forced to sport these cloaks, even in church. There but not there in voice or perspective like real human beings. Forget about the teaching on marriage, divorce, and adultery for adults, maybe we are cheating on our children when other things grab our attention and we unintentionally divorce children from the slate of meaningful human interaction, ignoring their voice, place, and perspectives. We divorce them from our schedules. "Bless their heart." I know Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world. That's not up for debate. What's questionable is whether we love the little children or have we divorced them from our lives?

Marian Wright Edelman, esteemed children's advocate and founder of the Children's Defense Fund says this: "What's wrong with our children? Adults telling children to be honest, while lying and cheating. Adults telling children to not be violent while marketing and glorifying violence... I believe that adult hypocrisy is the biggest problem children face in America." This isn't to put us on a guilt trip but a truth trip because the truth will set us free. Children didn't create some of the problems we have in the world with public education and poverty and refugee crises. Adults did. Children are passive recipients of created and instituted pain.

Apparently, the disciples don't care either because when "people were bringing the little children to [Jesus] in order that he might touch them," "the disciples spoke sternly to them." Sometimes, many times, followers of Jesus miss the mark, too, when it comes to the role of children in the world. To scold the people who bring children to Jesus for a blessing is a sign of how we can 'divorce' children. It's not enough that we never hear their voices or that we sometimes get antsy if they make too much noise in a church service, the disciples have to scold the constructive attempt to bless others. They prefer to keep the status quo of their day even though Jesus had already taught them to receive children (9:36-37). What kind of religious person would block a blessing?

What kind of impact does this disregard have on children? The director of the Center for Child and Family Policy at Duke, Kenneth Dodge led a four year study involving almost 1,300 children and their parents from across 12 different cultural groups from nine countries throughout the world. This study discovered that children who are taught to be hyper vigilant for hostility from others are prone to aggressive behavior. That is, if you expect aggression you will become aggressive. What if children were shown another way? What if, as Kenneth Dodge says, children were not only taught to do unto others as you would have them do unto you but think about others as you want others to think about you? What if a child was treated like a human being? What if children could expect a blessing, a good word and deed? What might that bring out of children?

Children need benedictions, good words spoken, and benefactors, good deeds done. They need good words proclaimed over their lives and good deeds performed on their behalf. When Howard Thurman, a former dean of the chapels at Howard and Boston universities and a pastoral presence to many Civil Rights leaders, finished eighth grade in segregated Dayton Beach, Florida, he was set to go to high school in Jacksonville. He packed an old trunk with no handles or lock and put a rope around it to secure it. He arrived at the train station, purchased his ticket but the agent refused to check the trunk on his ticket because the rules stipulated that the check had to be attached to the trunk handle and there was no trunk handle. Therefore, the trunk had to be sent express and he didn't have the money for it. He sat on the steps of the railway station and said that he "cried [his] heart out." As he sat there, a man dressed in overalls and wearing a denim cap came to him as he rolled a cigarette and lit it. This man asked him what he was crying about and Thurman told him. The man responded, "If you're trying to get out of this town to get an education, the least I can do

is to help you.” This stranger took him to the agent and paid for Thurman’s trunk to be sent. “Without a word, he turned and disappeared down the railroad track” and Thurman notes in his autobiography, “I never saw him again.” But the impact that the man had on Howard Thurman, as a rising 9th grader, is undeniable, because Thurman dedicates his autobiography, *With Head and Heart*, “to the stranger in the railroad station in Daytona Beach who restored my broken dream sixty-five years ago.”

One blessing, one good deed or word, can make an indelible mark on a child’s life for the rest of his or her life. It may even be the portal to an unknown, yet promising future. Children are dependent on adults as benefactors and the fact is none of us created ourselves. None of us arrived where we are today by our own will and resources. We didn’t just pull ourselves up by our bootstraps; someone gave those boots to us and we’re called not to forget the bridge that brought us over—the bridge of humanity, the great cloud of witnesses, who supported you on the journey. I’m sure you can name those names today. Those names should be a reminder that we have been on the receiving end of many things in life and now we build on, expand, and deepen what we’ve been blessed to receive.

All of us at some point in time received a blessing and we’ve benefited from benefactors, those who have treated us well. This weekend Duke celebrated Founders’ Day in which we honor the founders of this university. This tradition of honoring the benefactors of this institution began in 1901 and it used to be known as Benefactors Day. The first official observance was on October 3, 1901 in honor of Washington Duke; but this selected date was the birthday of Mr. Duke’s grandson, George Washington Duke, son of Benjamin and Sarah Duke, who died in early childhood. The roots of Benefactors Day, Founders Day, are linked to a child, and so we remember all of the children who have passed through these blue devil corridors because the gifts given to establish this university were given for the children, the youth of that day and our day. The heart of any university is the students who give the university a reason to exist—to bless students through teaching, research, and service. The university benefactors did a good deed in establishing this institution of higher learning for future generations. They founded it, and in particular the original Founders date, with children in mind. Let the children be remembered this day.

“Let the children come,” Jesus says. Only in Mark is Jesus indignant with the disciples for hindering the little children and only in Mark does Jesus bless children. Jesus is a child advocate extraordinaire. He responds to his followers and doesn’t want the children to stop coming to him. He welcomes them and holds them up as models for the kingdom, which may put in question some of our parental punishment standards. He then goes one step further by resisting the societal fear of touching the lowly, and in our day, touching children because of all of the abuse scandals.

Jesus takes a risk and engages in redemptive action. “He took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.” He brought near those who were usually far off and it was customary in that day to bring children to great men to be blessed (Gen 48:13-20). But what is a blessing? A blessing is a prayer for God’s favor and protection and many times it occurs with the laying on of hands, a touch. It’s a way of saying and showing—God is for you and I am for you. Jesus literally, “blesses fervently.” There’s intense force signifying his intense love for children and this is so antithetical to how others treat them. Jesus reveals that how we treat children is an indication of what we think about God and who God is and how close we are to God. Our treatment of children is a test of the texture of our faith.

One translation says Jesus “hugged the children.” If so, his hugging is a form of resistance to an oversexualized contemporary culture where touching can be viewed as predatory behavior, rather than a practice of faithful discipleship, following the welcoming way of Jesus. A hug can be a means

of healing. We can outstretch our arms and hands and raise them, not to bruise, but to give a benediction, a blessing over the lives of little ones. We can hug them, hold them, and love them, embodying the life of Jesus.

As Christians, we shouldn't need a National Hugging Day every January to remind us how to bless others with love. We just need to follow the path of Jesus. We may also need, as the poet writes, "Take our sticky adult minds and thin our thick thoughts until our flowing childhood wonder returns at every cricket and we are moved by every chocolate kiss..." (Michael Coffey) We may need to imagine and re-imagine what it means to be a child because welcoming children is a way of welcoming the Christ-Child into our midst, a Child whose body is bread for the world. When we welcome a child in his name, we may realize how much we are fed because we are in the eternal loving home of God, safe in the arms of Jesus.

And isn't that what we really want for children and ourselves—to be loved as we love? After all the struggle and fighting in life and seemingly not getting too far or reaching our goals, after all of the striving and drive to excel, don't we just want to be hugged and blessed, brought into the embrace of Christ where every need is met, where we are cared for like never before, like a humble child? I believe you may want a hug and I encourage you to give a hug, too. Hug others to God. It may be the most radical, rebellious, redemptive act you can do because it is a blessing, not a curse.

Jesus blesses the children even as he travels closer to his death. He leaves them with a blessing. What will your legacy be? Several months ago, I visited a woman dying in the hospital before I had to leave town. I wanted to see her, as I knew her days on earth were coming to a close. I went to offer a blessing over her life but as I spoke with her in the hospital and shared that I was leaving town, she struggled to speak through the tubes in her mouth. One of her daughters at the bedside removed the tubes very briefly (making the nurse nervous), because she wanted us to understand what she was saying. We all leaned in and she whispered this word to me: "Godspeed." She was about to continue her journey back home to God, but she blessed me with that one word—"Godspeed." I should have told her that as she traveled back home. I was there to bless her but she blessed me from her deathbed. When we bless each other, we'll discover as one writer notes that "all the world [will have] a new smell." May we not only taste and see that the Lord is good but also smell the fragrance of Christ's love.