

Welcome the Child

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United Methodist Church of Westport and Weston

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Real Life Faith V

1 John 4:7-11
Mark 10:10-13

Since we're focusing on faith and our children today, I wanted to share some prayers of children. They get down to some basic issues.

Larry wrote, "Maybe Cain and Abel would not kill each other so much if they had their own rooms. It works with my brother."

"I didn't think orange went with purple until I saw the sunset you made on Tuesday. That was cool," said Eugene

"Are you really invisible or is that just a trick?" wondered Lucy.

Norma asked, "Did you mean for the giraffe to look like that or was it an accident?"

Jane posed an existential question: "Instead of letting people die and having to make new ones, why don't you just keep the ones you got now?"

And Nora spoke for a lot of us when she said, "I don't ever feel alone since I found out about you."

I'm going to resist the temptation to give you lots of parenting tips today. I'll leave that to our own "Dr. Jeff" in the parenting discussion group that starts Wednesday. I do want to share a few thoughts related to the spiritual lives of our children, though.

The first is that we need to take charge of our children's faith development. We're up against an increasingly formidable competition when it comes to shaping the values and aspirations of our kids. We've all seen the statistics of the growing influence of alcohol and drugs on teens. Last week we parents of Staples' students received an extraordinary email from Principal John Dodig about the extent of drunkenness among the students at this year's Homecoming football game. Many of the seniors were totally inebriated; many got sick; several had to be hospitalized (girls as well as boys).

Where are the parents in all of this, we wonder? But don't just blame them. The clues from every part of our culture point to excess: whether in over-spending, over-indulging, or over-consuming.

It's pretty clear, as Stephen Covey says, that, "If we don't teach our children, our

society will. And they---and we---will live with the results.” Who do you want raising your kids, YouTube or you? The values of MTV or more enduring, time-tested ones?

Every children’s expert I’ve ever heard speaks of the irreplaceable role of parental involvement of a positive, constructive sort. Approval, acceptance, affirmation, communication and responsibility all play a major role. And so does faith and “religious orientation,” as one study put it. I should think that, if nothing else, our experience of the last year has taught us again of the limitations of materialism. As the Bible might put it: Trust not in bulging wallets and easy credit but in things that last.

Now that I’ve urged you to take charge of your child’s life, I also want to suggest that you let them go. Life is full of paradoxes, isn’t it? But the fact is that we can’t live our kids’ lives for them. As Nancy Salzman says in her book, *Loving Your child Is Not Enough*, “From the moment the umbilical cord is cut, a child is a separate individual. We readily accept the fact of physical separation but often forget that a child is not a psychological extension of ourselves.”

It’s true, isn’t it? We just love them so much that we want to protect and do whatever we can to make them happy. We want them to get straight-A’s, so we do their homework for them. We want them to be accepted, so we buy them the latest gadgets and clothes. We cover their problems and fix their messes. But the more we do for them, the less they learn to do and think for themselves.

One way my faith helps me with this control-desire is to remind me that, while Olivia and Will are my children, they are also children of God. God gave them to Sara and me, and God has an eye on them and a will and a way for them that may not be ours. While never forsaking our responsibility as parents, we need to turn some of our control over to God and to our children, and encourage them to work out their lives together.

So, parents, let me ask you a very challenging question. Can you trust God with your child? Do you believe that God can have a positive influence over him or her? We’ve placed Natalie in God’s hands today, and we have prayed both for God’s blessing and for God’s direction in her little life. Our job as her family and her church is to continue to nurture her spiritual life, to pray not only for her but with her, and to encourage her to develop her own relationship with God so that her faith will one day blossom as her own, not just something she inherits from us.

Jesus seems to have understood the ways of children. That’s why he loved to be around them. Sometimes Jesus held up children as examples of the childlike qualities that God loves in those who love him---trust, openness, joy in simple things. Other times Jesus lifted up kids because he wanted his followers to know that his kingdom included the little ones who were helpless and vulnerable. Love for him meant love for them. And, maybe, every once in awhile, Jesus lifted up little children just because he wanted to hold them. He wanted them sit them in his lap. To laugh and dream with them. To

play.

It continues to be a deeply-held belief of mine that one of the very best things we can do for our children is to help them get to know this loving, gracious, joyful Jesus. But he can't welcome them without us---he needs guides to show the way to his welcoming presence.

Pastor and author Walter Wangerin tells how his mother helped him through a childhood crisis of faith. For a long time, Walter thought that he was the only person in his church who couldn't see Jesus. His mother took him to church every week. He noticed how happy everybody was when they talked about Jesus, and he wanted to meet this Jesus for himself. But he had never seen Jesus in his church. So little Walter set out on a quest to find Jesus.

He searched all over his Sunday School classroom, but found no signs of Jesus. He crawled under the pews but still didn't spot Jesus. He poked his head in the pastor's study. He even sneaked up to the pulpit and looked inside, but no Jesus.

Finally, little Walter thought of one room, holy and mysterious, into which he had never dared venture. The ladies room---that must be the place where Jesus hung out. So that Sunday Walter worked up his courage and sneaked into the ladies room during the service. He checked all the stalls, but Jesus was nowhere to be found. Walter returned to the sanctuary just in time for the Holy Communion. Ordinarily he paid little attention to this ritual. This time, though, he noticed how peaceful and happy his mother looked after eating the bread and drinking from the cup. He leaned in close to her, sensing that she held the answer to his quest.

"Mama, what is that?"

She tried to deflect his attention, but he wouldn't give up.

"What is that, Mama? What is that smell?"

She finally replied, "Oh, son, that is Jesus. It is Jesus inside of me."

And little Walter finally understood a tiny piece of the mystery. Jesus wasn't lost. Jesus was living inside of his Mama.

Some of us probably wouldn't have found Jesus if he hadn't lived inside our Mama or our Papa or our grandparents or some other loving adult. That's how most of us come to Christ, through the influence of someone very close to us. And so the question for all who care about faith and children, parent and non-parent alike, is this: Could a child sense Jesus in your life? Could a little one find faith in your witness? Could a teenager know that you are a follower of Jesus by the way you respect and relate to them?

What we want for our children is the same thing Jesus wanted for the children of his day: That they have a happy and blessed life. He wants our kids to have the assurance that they are never alone, the sense in their souls that they are loved beyond measure, a joy in their spirits that life is good and so are they, and the deep inner conviction that their lives have meaning and a purpose in this world. Jesus can help his little ones find all of these things. May we be graced with the wisdom and the faith to help them find their way to him.