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Kids Are People, Too: Preaching to All Ages

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# Abstract

Kids Are People, Too: Preaching to All Ages
By Kelsey Grissom

If the reading and interpretation of scripture is a formational moment for Christians, then the sermon should be available to disciples of all ages and abilities. Yet, few preaching resources explore why or how preachers can preach to all ages. This project seeks to identify a strong rationale for preaching to all ages and develop a set of priorities for preaching based on that justification. These priorities and the worship practices they yield were developed and tested in three contexts of varying size, worship style, and age distribution. In all three settings, scripturally and theologically grounded rationale for preaching to all ages allowed each congregation to embrace changes and recognize gifts it already had in order to bring children into full inclusivity in worship.

# Kids Are People, Too: Preaching to All Ages

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# INTRODUCTION

Jesus showed preferential treatment to children, particularly for his social context. Jesus spoke to, touched, blessed, and healed children. He raised them from the dead. These actions were not just for the benefit of adults who were watching or who were affected by Jesus's care for their children; Jesus's interactions with children were for the honor and benefit of the children themselves, and showed Jesus's close attention to children's gifts and needs. Jesus's teachings make explicit the claim that children have on the kingdom of heaven:

> At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" He called a child, whom he put among them, and said, "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me."[1]

Even at a surface-level reading, this passage and others like it demonstrate Jesus's high regard for children. However, many scholars assert that Jesus's treatment of and identification with children is more radical than we generally recognize. Jesus not only proclaimed children to be the recipients of the kingdom of heaven, but also taught that children are ideal models of discipleship[2] and are people who, despite otherwise limited knowledge, somehow know Jesus's true identity.[3] Jesus honored children *as children*, at

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[1] Mt 18:1-5 (NRSV)

[2] Judith M. Gundry-Volf, "The Least and the Greatest: Children in the New Testament" in *The Child in Christian Thought,* ed. Marcia J. Bunge (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdman's Publishing Co, 2001), 38-40. In this chapter Gundry-Volf also compares and contrasts Jesus's position to the prevailing Jewish and Greco-Roman views of children and childhood in antiquity.

[3] Gundry-Volf, "The Least and the Greatest: Children in the New Testament," 48. This portion of Gundry-Volf's analysis is based on Mt 21:14-16.

the present moment.[4] Children already qualify as disciples; indeed, the adult disciples are to see them as exemplars *now*.[5]

There is a clear mandate from Jesus, then, to include children in the full life of the church. Yet mainline denominations and individual churches have varied widely in their practices of including children. Some churches are age-segregated in both education and worship, while others are attempting to create space for intergenerational time and community, particularly during Sunday school.[6] Including children in worship can be an especially sticky topic, requiring church leadership to navigate the waters of disparate generational and cultural attitudes toward and expectations of children.

Some congregations mitigate these difficulties by creating a separate worship hour for children, totally apart from the adult worship service. Others attempt to include children during the parts of worship that children seem to tolerate best—the singing, prayers, and offertory—and then dismiss children to "children's church" (often a Sunday school-like educational time) during the sermon. Still other congregations ask children to sit quietly and calmly through the entire worship service.

If the literature available is any indication, very few congregations are actively seeking to include children in the entire worship service—especially the sermon. A plethora of resources exist to coach pastors and educators in designing and delivering

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[4] Bonnie Miller-McLemore, *Let the Children Come: Reimagining Childhood from a Christian Perspective*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2019), 82, Kindle.

[5] Bonnie Miller-McLemore expounds upon this point in *Let the Children Come*, bringing in John Dominic Crossan, Vernon Robbins, Judith M. Gundry-Volf, and others to show the rich interpretation, particularly of this teaching in Mark, that is available but frequently neglected.

[6] Spurred by Rich Melheim's book, *Let's Kill Sunday School*, the Cross + Gen and FAITH5 movements (www.crossgenconference.com and www.faith5.org, respectively) seek to foster intergenerational conversation and community at church and in the home, though the Sunday school hour (and not the worship hour) is usually imagined as the place of practice at church.

"children's sermons," but preaching commentaries rarely mention children, let alone direct the preacher to consider children's concerns and needs in the preparation of the "main" sermon. Resources for preachers seem to take for granted that the audience for the sermon is adult, an assumption based on the prevalent (if often unspoken) belief that a child's cognitive abilities and the necessary format for a sermon are incompatible.[7] Yet if Christians believe that God works through the sermon, through the reading of and interpretation of the scriptures, then why would we knowingly exclude anyone from this potentially transformative moment in worship? And if we take seriously Jesus's mandate to welcome children, is there a way to also welcome children to the hearing of the sermon?

Resources for theological explorations of childhood and the church's role in childhood do exist to aid the preacher in making a case for preaching to all ages, including children. But these theologies, even when they attempt to connect with practical applications,[8] rarely mention the sermon. When these books do touch on the sermon, they do so from the outsider's perspective of the academic or the children's minister, not the preacher. Of those few resources that coach preachers in how to include children in the main sermon,[9] the rationale for preaching to children is weak, based on

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[7] Carolyn C. Brown, *You Can Preach to the Kids Too! Designing Sermons for Adults* and *Children* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 10-12.

[8] See Bonnie Miller-McLemore, *Let the Children Come: Reimagining Childhood from a Christian Perspective;* Joyce Ann Mercer, *Welcoming Children: A Practical Theology of Childhood*; Scottie May, Beth Posterski, Catherine Stonehouse, and Linda Cannell, *Children Matter: Celebrating Their Place in the Church, Family, and Community*; Karen-Marie Yust, *Real Kids, Real Faith: Practices for Nurturing Children's Spiritual Lives*; Catherine Stonehouse and Scottie May, *Listening to Children on the Spiritual Journey: Guidance for Those Who Teach and Nurture.*

[9] Ally Barrett, *Preaching with All Ages: Twelve Ways to Grow Your Skills and Your Confidence* and Carolyn C. Brown, *You Can Preach to the Kids Too! Designing Sermons for Adults and Children* are the only two resources of this kind, as far as I am aware.

faith development theory or on children's future potential, which results in methods that subsist as "a few new tricks that will invite [children] to tune in for at least a few minutes."[10] Carolyn C. Brown's *You Can Preach to the Kids Too! Designing Sermons for Adults and Children* is the most well-known of these sources.

My rationale for preaching to children is different from the argument presented in preaching resources like Brown's *You Can Preach to the Kids Too!* I believe we should preach to children because they are people, too, and because they are already disciples as much as anyone else in the pews. This difference in the rationale for preaching to children matters for many reasons. The rationale matters because preaching to all ages will, in most cases, require a culture change; pastors need solid reasons to make dramatic changes. The rationale matters because how we think of children and who we understand children to be will naturally change how we speak to them, even in the sermon. The rationale matters because our motivation for including children will affect how we spend our time in sermon preparation as well as our ability to articulate how we will measure our effectiveness in preaching to all ages.

My aim for this project was to take the strengths of the resources available and combine them to develop a practice of preaching to all ages. In my context, this meant weighing the arguments for preaching to children, selecting the most compelling, and developing preaching priorities that are consistent with my rationale. Because my initial work took place in a contemporary worship setting in which I had a great deal of social capital, I also carried this rationale to two other contexts: a contemporary worship service within a traditional setting where I am not the pastor, and a small, traditional church

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[10] Brown, 8.

where I am the new pastor with no prior relationship to the congregation. In all three settings, scripturally and theologically grounded rationale for preaching to all ages allowed each congregation to embrace changes and recognize gifts it already had in order to bring children into full inclusivity in worship.

## MOTIVATION MATTERS

The primary resource for preachers who are interested in preaching to all ages is Carolyn C. Brown's 1997 handbook, *You Can Preach to the Kids Too! Designing Sermons for Adults* and *Children*. Brown's book and the less-widely known *Preaching with All Ages: Twelve Ways to Grow Your Skills and Your Confidence*, by Ally Barrett, are the only book-length explorations of preaching to children. Brown is a Presbyterian certified Christian educator in the United States, while Barrett is a parish priest in the Church of England. Of the two books, *Preaching with All Ages* is formatted as a series of talks intended for worship with the author's added reflections. *You Can Preach to Kids Too!* takes a more comprehensive approach, with a stated argument for preaching to kids and concrete guidelines and suggestions for preachers. Because *You Can Preach to Kids Too!* is the foremost resource for preachers learning to preach to all ages, I will focus on that resource in my argument.

Brown begins her rationale for preaching to children on the defensive: she addresses the concerns and objections that adults might have about including children in the main sermon time. When Brown comes to the positive argument for why pastors should preach to children, she grounds her argument in John H. Westerhoff III's tree

analogy of faith development[11] and on a study commonly known as the Search Report, *Effective Christian Education: A Study of Protestant Congregations*. In her discussion of Westerhoff's analogy, Brown states that two types of faith, owned faith and searching faith (the most advanced, mature types), are "not available to children," but that listening to sermons may point children "to the faith road ahead."[12] The implication is that the benefit of the sermon for children may come at some point in the future, when they are adults.

The Search Report, from which Brown excerpts the characteristics of a person with mature faith (many of which are beyond the reach of children's cognitive capabilities), shows that adults with mature faith often share a background of four family faith experiences: "frequent conversations with Mom about her faith, frequent conversations with Dad about his faith, frequent family worship experiences, and frequent family helping projects."[13] The sermon, Brown argues, can and should support three of those four experiences. Again, the implied purpose of providing that support is so that children may one day grow up to have mature faith.[14]

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[11] This analogy and its explanation can be found in John H. Westerhoff III, *Will Our Children Have Faith?* 3rd ed. (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2012), chap. 4, Kindle.

[12] Brown, 15-16.

[13] Brown, 17.

[14] It is worth noting that Brown seems to feel a tension with this rationale. Elsewhere in the book, she makes statements that show high regard for children *as children* and for their discipleship capabilities in childhood. In fact, in many places in the book, Brown's incidental comments directly contradict her stated argument. If they had been developed, Brown's insightful comments, no doubt based on her over ten years (at time of her book's publication) of experience with children, would have made a strong case for a different set of guidelines for preachers. However, Brown's explicit argument for preaching to children is based solely on a faith development perspective.

The unfortunate outcome of Brown's grounding her argument in the *future* worth of children for the church is that she is then forced to downplay the effort a preacher must make in order to include children in the sermon *now*. If children will only really be able to benefit from the sermon when they are adults, and if their hearing the sermon as children is training time for a later stage of life and faith, then we can settle for the idea that "the preacher's aim is to help the children tune in more often and stay tuned in longer," using "'hooks' throughout a sermon that are designed to draw children in for at least a little bit."[15]

While it is clear elsewhere that Brown understands the complexity of children's lives and their need for the Gospel, her expectations for preachers are astonishingly low. Nowhere does Brown suggest that preachers get to know children, speak personally with children outside of worship, or spend time with children in their Sunday school classes or schools. Brown seems to take for granted that preachers only have "ready access to the world of children and thus to illustrations of that world" when they live with children.[16] Other preachers must draw illustrations about childhood either from their own memories of childhood or from Brown's compilation of "childhood experiences with Gospel connections."[17] Brown's book is full of cheat sheets for the things that children like and experience and how those might relate to the Gospel, but Brown does not question or challenge the practices of preachers who "do not have regular contact with children," and suggests that these preachers "stay abreast of the world of children by reading books

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[15] Brown, 58.

[16] Brown, 65-66.

[17] Brown, 67.

about children."[18] The result is that Brown only expects preachers to know generalizations *about* children, rather than to know children as individuals and parishioners with unique experiences, gifts, and needs.

I suspect that using faith development theory in order to establish a reason to preach to children sets up the low expectations that Brown has for both preachers and congregations. Although theories like James Fowler's *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*[19] were intended to be used as models helpful in "giving us names for our experiences and ways to understand and express what we have lived,"[20] they are too often used as shortcuts to avoid inquiring about or exploring the experiences of those to whom we minister. Modeled after the earlier cognitive and psycho-social development theories of Jean Piaget and Erik Erikson, faith development theories like *Stages of Faith* seek to use research methods in order to establish a pattern of development for faith. Some problems with this endeavor are theological,[21] others empirical,[22] but these problems all contribute to assumptions that children need not be included as full and interested listeners of the sermon.

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[18] Brown, 66.

[19] John H. Westerhoff's tree analogy of faith development, cited by Carolyn C. Brown, is based on Fowler's *Stages of Faith*.

[20] James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1981), xiii.

[21] Although a number of authors discuss the absurdity of measuring faith, Craig Dykstra has been especially helpful in exploring the question, "Does faith develop?" concluding that faith is foremost a gift of the Holy Spirit. "The very idea of achieving excellence or of attaining the highest standards possible in the practices of prayer or forgiveness or service seems, on the face of it, internally contradictory. Why? The reason is that excellence has to do with human achievement. But faith is not a human achievement; it is a gift." Craig Dykstra, *Growing in the Life of Faith: Education and Christian Practices*, 2nd ed. (Louiseville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), Loc 1663, Kindle.

[22] Flaws in the empirical method—in particular the lack of replicated results—of Fowler's research have also been noted by Stephen Parker, "Research in Fowler's Faith Development Theory: A

In faith development theories like Fowler's *Stages of Faith* and Westerhoff's tree rings, the definition of mature faith is based on cognitive understanding and assent to abstract concepts, requirements that children (and many adults) are not yet capable of meeting. The result is that in the schema of the theory, children's and neurologically-differently-abled adults' gifts and experiences are undervalued or ignored.[23] This has multiple implications for preachers who may rely on developmental theories of faith. Fowler himself warned that theories like his "can also become blinders, limiting our ability to see only those features of our phenomena that we can name or account for."[24] When faith is understood only in terms of cognitive development and achievement, the preacher can overlook the insights, experiences, and challenges of children and fail to consider or consult them in sermon preparation or evaluation as they would an adult's experiences.

Preachers who lead from faith development theories may also *over*value other developmental theories, such as cognitive-development or language-development theories. Understanding children's age-specific language and cognitive abilities may be helpful in some contexts, but viewed from another angle, children's first and most important teachers are parents, adults who usually have no training in early-childhood education or in developmental theory. Yet, children have an impressive ability to grow

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Review Article," *Review of Religious Research* 51, no. 3 (2010): 233–52, accessed February 18, 2020, http://search.ebscohost.com.proxy.library.emory.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLA0001779187&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

[23] Stonehouse, Dodd, Estep, and others have pointed to this disqualification of children's gifts in faith development theories. Pertinent essays by these and other authors can be found in *Nurturing Child and Adolescent Spirituality: Perspectives from the World's Religious Traditions* and *Understanding Children's Spirituality: Theology, Research, and Practice*.

[24] Fowler, xiii.

and learn in environments (like the home) in which they are spurred to growth by language and ideas that are beyond their current capabilities. The preacher who leans too heavily on faith development theories may find him- or herself *studying* children instead of getting to know children and learning from their direct interactions, as in Brown's advice that preachers who do not live with children should read books about them.

Additionally, faith development theories encourage what Elizabeth Dodd calls a "spirituality of the final stage" by "focussing on the teleological movement of maturation into adulthood."[25] While ideally these theories would not value one stage over another, the orientation of the theories to move progressively toward a final stage of maturation inadvertently cultivates spiritual ageism. Children and other less mature people are measured against who they may become in the future. This directly leads to practitioners like Brown surmising that the main purpose of preaching to children is so they will get used to sitting still through sermons. The outcome is that preachers and churches have a hard time justifying major changes to the sermon or the worship service to include children. After all, the service and sermon are prepared for adults, and children's purpose is to become more like adults. Why, then, would a congregation make changes?

Meanwhile, the idea that one's faith moves linearly in only one (positive) direction throughout one's life is belied by categories like confession, forgiveness, and repentance, and by the real experiences of Christians (both lay and clergy) and the testament of scripture that life in Christ is anything but linear. Faith development theories also encourage the preacher to think of his or her parishioners in terms of what is

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[25] Elizabeth Dodd, "The Sacramental Image of the Child in the Thought of Thomas Traherne and Its Theological Significance" in *Understanding Children's Spirituality: Theology, Research, and Practice,* ed. Kevin E. Lawson (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012), 88.

"normal." Built on observed patterns, these theories lead the preacher to believe that a certain sequence of development can be expected, and if people fall outside of that sequence, they are anomalies. Yet scripture bears witness to the preference of the Holy Spirit to act in unpredictable, unpatterned ways and to disproportionally bless decidedly "abnormal" people. Faith development theory is therefore unhelpful for preachers who seek to invite the Holy Spirit to work in the midst of their congregations through worship, and directly challenged by the upside-down hierarchy of greatness that Jesus proclaimed.[26]

What, then, is the alternative? If faith development theories lead the preacher down paths that devalue children's spirituality and encourage distance between the preacher and his or her non-adult congregation, all while failing to provide adequate reason to support major changes in the sermon, is there a better rationale available to preachers?

Although the words of Jesus about children ought to be reason enough on their own, for preachers who need help articulating why those words should necessitate changes to worship and the sermon there are a number of scholars and researchers who have expanded our understanding of children's spirituality beyond the developmental framework. Child-centered research led by a great many medical and theological researchers[27] shows that children do in fact have rich spiritual lives, but that they often do

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[26] Notably, neither Barrett nor Brown reference Jesus's teachings about children in any of their arguments for including children in the main sermon time.

[27] *Understanding Children's Spirituality: Theology, Research, and Practice*; *Children's Voices: Children's Perspectives in Ethics, Theology, and Religious Education*; *Nurturing Child and Adolescent Spirituality: Perspectives from the World's Religious Traditions*; *Nurturing Children's Spirituality: Christian Perspectives and Best Practices*; and *The Spiritual Life of Children* provided me with a glimpse of the depth and breadth of this research as well as described alternative research methods to that of Fowler's question-and-answer interviews.

not report on their theological thoughts or questions unless approached obliquely (e.g., through discussing their art or talking about school, home, or friendships). Their experiences are diverse and necessarily personal, as children have not yet acquired cognitively advanced theological language. Nevertheless, children testify that they experience God in profound and life-changing ways that are not "less than" or somehow less godly than the ways that adults experience God.

These findings, though newly substantiated, are not new conceptions. In *The Child in Christian Thought*, essayists outline many of the ways that theologians have treated children and children's spiritual lives with high regard. In my own tradition as a United Methodist, I find ample support for preaching to children in John Wesley's practices and theology. Catherine Stonehouse relays that Wesley "believed that the early awareness of God and sense of right and wrong seen in children were not simply a natural phenomenon, they were evidence of God's seeking love within the child."[28] Richard Heitzenrater writes that "on the basis of firsthand observation and personal experience, Wesley presumes that a child can 'know God' and thus be truly happy,"[29] and quotes Wesley's journal entry in which he wrote that "God begins his work in children."[30]

Theologians such as Marcia J. Bunge and Bonnie Miller-McLemore, working from scripture and the history of childhood in Christian traditions, have called for the

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[28] Catherine Stonehouse, "After a Child's First Dance with God: Accompanying Children on a Protestant Spiritual Journey," In *Nurturing Child and Adolescent Spirituality: Perspectives from the World's Religious Traditions*, ed. Karen Marie Yust, Aostre N. Johnson, Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, and Eugene C. Roehlkepartain (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2006), 99.

[29] Richard P. Heitzenrater, "John Wesley and Children," in *The Child in Christian Thought*, ed. Marcia J. Bunge (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), 297.

[30] Heitzenrater, 298.

complication of our understanding of childhood and children. In contrast to faith development theories that *simplify* our picture of what it means to be spiritual and have faith, Bunge and Miller-McLemore ask us to view children and children's experience of faith as more complex. Bunge exhorts Christians to develop a conception of children that acknowledges "their strengths and gifts as well as their vulnerabilities and needs; their full humanity as well as their need for guidance; and their spiritual wisdom as well as their growing moral capacities."[31] She continues, "The Bible and the Christian tradition express complex and multi-faceted views of children and incorporate multiple dimensions of their strengths and vulnerabilities."[32] Miller-McLemore calls for children to be "fully respected as persons, valued as gifts, and viewed as agents,"[33] in contrast to the simpler view of children as wholly helpless innocents.[34]

In child-centered research and theology, we see a positive feedback loop: entering the child's world grants a deeper and more complex view of children's faith and spirituality, while at the same time a high respect for children's faith and spirituality leads practitioners to invest more time with children. In contrast to faith development theories which at worst cultivate a benign indifference to children and at best project a limited

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[31] Marcia J. Bunge, "Biblical and Theological Perspectives and Best Practices for Faith Formation," in *Understanding Children's Spirituality: Theology, Research, and Practice*, ed. Kevin E. Lawson (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012), 6.

[32] Marcia J. Bunge, "Biblical and Theological Perspectives and Best Practices for Faith Formation," 6.

[33] Miller-McLemore, 1. Miller-McLemore explores this thesis in a number of ways that are helpful to preachers seeking to unravel the influence of faith development theory in order to speak to children's real experiences and needs.

[34] Miller-McLemore's frequent observation that children have a "lively unpredictability" is perhaps one reason why they are served so poorly by faith development theories, which strive for predictability.

view of children's capabilities based on impersonal sources, research and theologies that respect children *as children* and spiritual beings encourage the preacher to invest thoughtful, observant time in relating directly with children.[35] The only problem is that these sources, while providing abundant scriptural and theological backing for including children in the sermon time, do not address how a preacher might do so—and, in particular, how a preacher might do so *as a preacher*.

## THE LENS OF CHILD-CONSCIOUS PREACHING[36]

I wanted to develop practices of preaching based on the alternative view of children "fully respected as persons, valued as gifts, and viewed as agents" discussed above. A number of preaching articles (though no book-length preaching resources) do begin with this perspective on children, and some offer brief lists of characteristics that sermons based on this perspective might include. In a 1985 *Faith and Mission* article, Will Willimon advises preachers to keep sermons "concrete, vivid, and brief" for the sake of children, and encourages preachers to spend time with children talking about the sermons, the scripture, and what they may be "getting out of worship."[37]

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[35] Heitzenrater notes, "[John Wesley's] rule was for the preachers to spend at least an hour a week with the children, if there were at least ten in any society. If the preacher claimed he had no gift for that work, Wesley's response was, 'Gift or no gift, you are to do it, else you are not called to be a Methodist Preacher.'" Heitzenrater, 298.

[36] The "child-conscious sermon" is Benjamin Espinoza's term for "a particular homiletical approach that understands and embraces the high status of children in the Bible." Benjamin D. Espinoza, "'Let Them Come, Forbid Them Not': Exploring Child-Conscious Preaching," *The Journal of the Evangelical Homiletics Society* 15, no. 2 (2015): 23, accessed February 18, 2020, http://search.ebscohost.com.proxy.library.emory.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLAiFZK190531000786&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

[37] William H. Willimon, "Preaching to Children," *Faith and Mission* 3, no. 1 (1985): 28, accessed February 18, 2020, http://search.ebscohost.com.proxy.library.emory.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLA0000955345&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

Many others follow in the same vein Willimon does. Benjamin Espinoza encourages preachers to use child-friendly language, stimulate children's spiritual imagination, use narrative, and "recognize and celebrate the place and contribution of children to the Christian community."[38] Ann Garrido urges preachers to "have a point and one point only," preach the great mysteries with wonder, focus on kerygmatic rather than paranetic preaching, consider nonverbals,[39] and read scripture "with the eyes of the 'small.'"[40] Joshua Whitfield reminds preachers that "joy is fundamental to preaching to children,"[41] while John H. Westerhoff reminds preachers that "we should be doing things *with* children, creating a relational model of equals—a model in which all of us have something to offer each other. Adults need children, children need adults. We all need each other."[42] Perhaps most reassuring, Ronald Cram maintains, "If a pastor loves children in attitude and action, she or he can make enormous blunders in regard to age-

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[38] Espinoza, 27.

[39] Garrido expounds: "Adults need to remember that the environment in which they speak and the quality of their presence is going to be speaking as loudly, if not more loudly, than whatever message they have to share." Ann Garrido, "Preaching among Children," *Liturgical Ministry* 15 (2006): 47, accessed February 18, 2020, http://search.ebscohost.com.proxy.library.emory.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLA0001595279&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

[40] Garrido, 48–50.

[41] Joshua Jair Whitfield, "5 Tips for Preaching to Children: Young Consciences Are Keener, Their Souls More Alert," *The Priest* 75, no. 8 (2019): 17, accessed February 18, 2020, http://search.ebscohost.com.proxy.library.emory.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLAiG0V190819000755&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

[42] John H. Westerhoff, III, "The Church's Contemporary Challenge: Assisting Adults to Mature Spiritually *with* Their Children," in *Nurturing Children's Spirituality: Christian Perspectives and Best Practices*, ed. Holly Catterton Allen (Euegene, OR: Cascade Books, 2008), 359. This is the same Westerhoff from whom Carolyn C. Brown derived her faith development theory rationale. In a much later edition of the same source that Brown relied upon, *Will Our Children Have Faith?*, Westerhoff added comments and revisions to many of his earlier beliefs and practices, including this change from a development focus to a "model of equals."

appropriate concerns and still create a sacred space of trust, mutual respect, and the praise of God."[43]

Although helpful in distilling child-centered theology and research into concise advice for preachers, these articles are a long way from establishing a practice of preaching to all ages that can be carried out in multiple contexts. In order to develop such a practice, I began with the context I was currently serving to identify priorities for the worship service based on the theological claim that children are people, too. Children are people who are different from adults but who are equally important. Children are people who are capable of experiencing God, serving as active disciples, and in need of the Gospel in their present lives. Based on these claims, I identified the following priorities: shaping the worship space to be hospitable to all ages, focusing on building relationships, honoring children's and youth's spiritual experiences, and expanding my understanding of what the sermon can look and sound like. Although my primary objective was to preach to all ages, attempting to change the sermon's audience would require reshaping our intentions for the entire worship hour.

I identified my list of priorities for the following reasons. Because children in my context have for so long been excluded from all or part of the worship service and particularly from the sermon, hospitality to children would show that children are important and that their presence is an honor. It would also show that children are

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[43] Ronald H. Cram, "Children and the Language of Preaching," *Journal for Preachers* 17, no. 3 (1994): 29, accessed February 18, 2020, http://search.ebscohost.com.proxy.library.emory.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLA0000876794&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

respected as valuable and contributing members of the congregation. The priority of building relationships would strengthen our communication as a congregation to help bind us through any growing pains while I drastically changed the service, and it would also allow adults who don't live with children to get to know children for the real people that they are. Honoring children's and youth's spiritual experiences would widen all our understandings of what God was doing in our midst and how children relate to God. And finally, I knew it would be necessary to expand my understanding of what the sermon looked and sounded like; in order to include children, the sermon would have to look different from a preacher reading or reciting a manuscript. I was open to making the sermon more flexible so that I could respond to any feedback my congregation gave me about listening to sermons as and with children. The following section details my efforts to enact these priorities in three separate contexts.

## ASBURY UNITED METHODIST CHURCH, "THE BRIDGE"

I was one of four clergy on staff at Asbury United Methodist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. Asbury is a large congregation (averaging approximately 2,000 in worship) with three regular services: two large traditional services and one small contemporary service (The Bridge). Asbury's congregation is almost entirely white, upper-middle class, and largely comprised of professionals with advanced degrees and their families. Age is distributed evenly in the congregation.

When my work on this project began, I had been assigned to be the lead pastor in The Bridge. At the time, The Bridge was averaging about 20 people on Sunday

mornings.[44] Because it met during the Sunday school hour (I instituted a change to the meeting time shortly thereafter), the service was not in the habit of having children's church available, and it did not have a children's sermon. I had a great deal of social capital with Asbury and with this service in particular because I grew up at Asbury, where my mother was on staff and my father was a church leader. As a teenager, I had been an adult Sunday school teacher, committee leader, and member of the band in The Bridge.

In working with this service to welcome children into all aspects of worship,[45] I was helped by the members' willingness to give me feedback. In particular, I had several children who were comfortable enough with me to offer feedback *while* I preached (asking questions, shouting answers), and who helpfully and patiently answered my questions when, outside of the service, I asked them what they remembered from the sermon. The adults in the congregation filled out numerous surveys for me and also offered much informal feedback throughout our time together as the service changed and grew.[46] I calibrated my preaching and worship practices at Asbury by their feedback both during and outside of worship.

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[44] In the four-and-a-half years that these priorities and practices were taking shape in The Bridge, the average weekly attendance of The Bridge increased by 228%. While attendance numbers cannot be a measure of "success" for preaching and worship, these numbers do show that the changes we made to be inclusive of all ages certainly did not hamper the church's ministry.

[45] I was working to include both children and people with special needs into the full life of the congregation. However, although my practices to include both groups stemmed from the same theology and often overlapped, I did not have the space in this paper to share my experience preaching to the special needs population.

[46] Quotations from parishioners in this section come from surveys conducted during and after my appointment in The Bridge.

My starting point towards preaching to all ages in The Bridge was making the service hospitable to all ages, particularly children. I recognized that preaching to all ages would be a culture shift in this church. In order for families to bring their children to worship and let them stay for the entire worship service, both children and their parents had to believe me when I said that I wanted children to be present and participating. From the moment people walked through the doors, they needed to feel and see that all ages were welcome. In order to foster this sense of hospitality and to recognize that children can and should contribute in the congregation, I recruited greeters, ushers, liturgists, and musicians of all ages. I wanted children and youth to see people who were their age in leadership and to be greeted and shown around by kids their own age. I wanted children to have as many opportunities to serve and express their faith as adults do. Families often served as greeters or ushers together in the beginning, but as relationships formed outside of the family group, it was not uncommon to have all-children or all-youth teams, or mixtures of unrelated adults and children, serving as greeters or ushers.[47]

We also served food and drinks in our service. I knew that no matter how often I told people to "make themselves at home," hardly anyone actually *feels* "at home" unless they are offered food and drink.[48] When the service eventually grew large enough for us to move into the gym and then later into our own new, renovated space (we had previously been sharing the youth room), we installed easily-replaceable carpet tiles so that parents did not have to worry about spills becoming permanent stains. Children were much happier to participate in worship when snacks were available, and adults enjoyed

[47] We called our ushers "hosts," a term more meaningful to people who are unfamiliar with church worship and more in-line with our stated priority of hospitality.

[48] This is true in Birmingham, Alabama. I am not sure if it holds true elsewhere.

the friendly atmosphere that food and drink invited.[49] One mother shared, "At a young age [refreshments] were helpful for my kids to break the ice of a group worship experience." This aspect of our worshipping life together became so popular that current church leaders report to me that "we could NEVER take [refreshments] away."[50] Refreshments made it easier for parishioners to relax and be open to an environment and practices that may have been new to them.

I formulated a greeting for the beginning of the service that introduced The Bridge and our priorities:

> *Good morning, and welcome to The Bridge! My name is Pastor Kelsey Grissom and I am the preaching pastor for this service. I want to tell you a little bit about The Bridge in case this is your first time with us. Here in The Bridge we try to be a place where people of all ages and abilities can worship together. What that looks like is that our kids usually stay with us all during worship, we are honored to have lots of special needs folks, and sometimes it can get a little loud or chaotic in here but we are all ok with that! We do not want you to feel any anxiety about that; what's important to us is that we're all able to learn to worship together. So please feel free to move around at any time during the service, help yourself to refreshments at the back table, and if you need anything or have questions about where to find restrooms or anything else, our hosts stay at that back door where you can easily find them. Now as we continue in worship….*

One couple in my congregation wrote about this greeting, "Oh how we wish we had heard that greeting back in the day, when we had two rowdy little boys with us!!" Another mother wrote, "having the words spoken from the pastor was assuring to [her

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[49] Our "common meal" of snacks became a frequent concrete reference point for sermons, as there are many places in scripture where meals are an important part of the story or theology.

[50] There were downsides to offering refreshments. Namely, as the service grew it became a significant expense; we had to worry about how to accommodate various food allergies and diet preferences; and the other services (where food was not allowed) became outwardly envious of The Bridge's refreshments. Our leadership in The Bridge chose to keep refreshments because of the many positive effects, but this was by far the most conflict-generating of all the changes I made. As we navigated these conflicts, we often drew comfort from the ample evidence in the scriptural epistles that we were not the first Christians to have disagreements about food in the worshipping community.

children] at a young age." I published a similar but expanded notice in the bulletin[51] and updated our website to answer questions about why we included kids in all of worship, even and especially the sermon.

We kept our bulletin very simple to make reading it and following along easier, and I worked with our office staff to enact a policy about cover art on the bulletin. In order to accommodate non-readers, I wanted the cover, which changed each week, to always be carefully chosen to illustrate the scripture and to never contain words. We also tried to use as few written words as possible on our screens, and when we did use introductory or seasonal videos, we chose videos that non-readers could follow as well as readers.[52] Each time I issued a survey to gauge responses to new aspects of the service, the adults in the congregation had not noticed any of the changes made to accommodate non-readers. However, those changes in particular were an important cue for the leadership of the service and the staff of the church, including me. Each week as we chose our bulletin cover and our slides within these requirements, we were reminded again about our priorities and why it was important to us to spend the time and effort to make even these small parts of the service hospitable and accessible to all.

Because children are generally more active than adults and enjoy listening while they move or work (as opposed to solely listening), we provided children's worship bags, small tote bags that contained drawing supplies, paper, and a couple of activities that

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[51] Available in Appendix A.

[52] Although it is common for contemporary services to use a lot of television and computer media, I deliberately avoided the use of electronic media wherever possible. We opted instead to cultivate a quieter, simpler atmosphere than is usually found in a contemporary service. A helpful discussion of this kind of atmosphere can be found in Scottie May, "The Contemplative-Reflective Model," in *Perspectives on Children's Spiritual Formation: Four Views*, ed. Michael J. Anthony (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2006), 45-82.

changed weekly and complemented the scripture and sermon. I encouraged the children to draw during the service and sermon and to share their drawings with me.[53] Later, along with these worship bags, we also provided noise-dampening headphones for children who wanted them, after we discovered that younger children's ears were often more sensitive to the volume of the music.[54]

I frequently emphasized that we were all "learning how to worship together," and repeated that it is more than ok to learn as you go, to practice worship.[55] I began this emphasis in order to lessen the pressure that parents felt having children in worship, but then heard from many adults that they appreciated the explicit welcome as well because they had not grown up attending worship and often felt lost or inexperienced. In the beginning when our service was small, I planted "mistakes" in the service. For example, I planned for one of the musicians cell phones to remain on a music stand and ring while I was preaching, so that I could respond light-heartedly and show the congregation that I was unbothered by these interruptions. Eventually, as the service grew, the interruptions came unbidden and I no longer had to make plans in order to show parents that I, along with the rest of our leadership, would not be flustered by noise and wiggles.

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[53] I found that I had to be explicit when I told the congregation I wanted to see the children's drawings. It is not enough to say, "You can share your drawings with me." I had to say instead, "I want to see your drawings, if you are willing to share them. Parents and grownups, please let them bring their drawings to me. I am not too busy."

[54] This discovery was made when we provided noise-dampening headphones for our worshipers on the autism spectrum, but noticed that young children wanted to use them as well. Until then, we had not known they felt overwhelmed by the volume and vibrations of the music.

[55] When I have coached other churches in implementing these priorities, they often want to know "what to call" this type of service. When a distinguishing name is necessary, I have encouraged them to call it a Learning Service. Churches very often want to call worship that is inclusive of children a "family service," but I think it is best to avoid this designation. As important as it is to include children, it is equally important to avoid excluding single people, those who attend without family, or those who believe they do not fall under the traditional understanding of "family." "Learning service" leaves the door open for anyone to participate.

Because we knew that children often felt comforted by routine and repetition, we never varied the order of worship and we rarely made changes to our liturgy. The children loved learning the "schedule" by heart and demonstrating that they knew exactly when and why we do things in worship. When we did have to insert something unusual into worship, I thought carefully about where it should be placed so that it was a natural part of our regular components of worship, and informed the congregation at the beginning of the service that they could expect something different later in worship.

Hospitality towards children led me to my first major change in sermon preparation. I made use of several online tools that measure the reading level of user-provided texts. I copied my sermon manuscripts into the tools and was emailed a report about how "difficult" my sermon was to read based on vocabulary, grammar, and sentence structure. In using these tools repeatedly for a few weeks, I experimented and learned how to lower the reading level of my sermons so that they were more accessible to children and adults with lower reading-comprehension levels. I also learned how to explain vocabulary and concepts succinctly yet clearly as I preached, so that I could still include faith vocabulary but also help those with less-developed language skills to expand their vocabulary. Additionally, I made a habit of explaining any humor I used in sermons, so that children (who love jokes but who often do not have the grasp of language necessary to understand a joke the first time) could be included in the humor.

Defining words during the sermon served to honor children as people because it is based on the assumption that abstract words like *mercy* and *forgiveness* are important to children's lives, even if children do not yet have the language for them. However, many adults responded that this style of preaching was helpful for them too. As one couple

wrote of my sermons, "They were easy to follow. We always knew what the message was when we walked out …You explained things so kids could understand, but your explanation and background were also helpful to most adults who would be too afraid to ask." This is one of many examples of how including children also serves to include more adults.

Another priority in learning to preach to all ages was to focus on nurturing relationships. *Growing Young*, a resource from the Fuller Institute, examines data that shows that warmth and personal relationships are more important to young people than programs,[56] and that "young people want honesty and authenticity, and to be able to share even the 'ugly' parts of their lives."[57] While my relationships with children and youth would be important for me to preach to them, I also knew that as an itinerant United Methodist pastor, I would not always be the pastor of this congregation. I wanted adults, children, and youth to bond and build faith-supporting relationships with one another so that when I was one day moved, they could continue to worship and grow together under the guidance of these priorities no matter who the leadership might be.

In order to foster personal relationships in and with this congregation, I had three main strategies: get to know young people outside of worship, create opportunities for non-related adults and children to build relationships within the service, and create safe opportunities[58] for non-related adults and children to build relationships outside of the service. First, I worked on my own relationships with young people and children in

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[56] Kara Powell, Jake Mulder, and Brad Griffin, *Growing Young: Six Essential Strategies to Help Young People Discover and Love Your Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2016), 167.

[57] Powell, Mulder, and Griffin, 172.

[58] Of primary importance in meeting Jesus's mandate to welcome and protect children, we followed Safe Sanctuary protocols (our United Methodist child protection policy) at all times.

particular. I learned all of their names, visited and talked with them before and after the service as I did with adults, and attended the important events in their lives. Getting to know children was not only important for my sermon preparation, but also helped them to understand that I cared about them and their lives and wanted to share in their interests. I asked them to share their summer reading lists with me, and I read along with them throughout the summer, sometimes incorporating what we read into my sermons. I asked them to share their favorite songs with me and tell me what those songs meant to them. These were all easy and enjoyable ways for us to get to know each other better.

In fostering relationships between non-related participants in the congregation, I began by changing the "passing of the peace" (which had become a meet-and-greet time). Instead of asking members to shake hands with each other and introduce themselves, a practice that many members found awkward, I gave them a specific question to ask and answer with someone who was a different age group from them. The question was related to the scripture and sermon for the day. For example, on a Sunday when we would be hearing scripture about the gift of Jesus Christ, I asked them to share the favorite gift they had ever received. Children lit up when adults gave them their full attention to hear the answers, and instantly connected with "grown ups," for whom answering the question usually meant sharing a story about a gift from childhood.

In order to build relationships between non-related adults and children outside of worship, I started a quarterly "lunch and serve." The preparations were simple: no reservations required, and no one has to bring anything. We provided pizza, chips, and drinks, and asked anyone who was able and willing to stay after worship for lunch and an on-site service project. Our members loved getting to know the other adults and children

in the service in a low-pressure, casual environment, and it was a delight to watch them work together, tease each other over their projects, and help each other with unexpected talents and gifts. They formed special relationships at lunch and serves, and these relationships were evident in our worship together and how our members began to support each other both inside and outside the church walls.

Finally, in order to let children and youth experience what it was like for adults to share their lives in an authentic, even "messy" way, I often challenged the congregation to try a spiritual discipline in their lives, and invited people to share testimony in front of the congregation about what it was like. I usually had to invite and encourage specific individuals to be willing to share, but I assured them that it was ok to share if the practice did not work out, or if they could not see it through, and why. The result was that our members shared beautiful, poignant stories of what it was like to try to live their faith in the midst of their busy and unpredictable lives, and what it was like to fail sometimes. Members reported that they "love the different perspectives" on these practices and appreciated the "transparency" in their fellow Christians. Our children and adults grew from the public acknowledgement that we are *all* learning what it looks like to be faithful, regardless of age.

Perhaps the most important priority for me was to honor all ages' experiences of God. In addition to acknowledging as their pastor that these experiences are real and legitimate, I wanted the adult members to be able to see and learn from the experiences of children and youth. I did this primarily during the sermon time, so this priority was tied up with my priority of expanding my understanding of how a sermon could be formatted and delivered. First, I began occasionally incorporating small group time into the sermon

(we used folding chairs instead of pews, which made this easier). I asked those present to divide into small groups, turn their chairs into a circle, and discuss a question or passage together. I let the groups form naturally, but chose a leader for each group based on my knowledge of the participants and who would be sure to include everyone and guide the discussion responsibly. Then, I gave plenty of time for discussion. At the end of ten or fifteen minutes, I asked someone from each group to share a question or insight from the discussion.

This practice yielded an extraordinary amount of growth. Many adults came away from these discussions surprised and moved by the experiences and insights that the children and youth in their groups had shared. They were impressed with how seriously young people approached the discussion. Children and youth liked being given the opportunity and choice to share (or not share), and liked hearing adults' thoughts about something other than schoolwork and their behavior. One adult participant wrote, "I have always shied away from 'breakout sessions' but for some reason I got a lot out of the occasional small group discussion we had during sermon time. My groups always had a wide range of ages, from youth to senior citizens, and it was very meaningful to hear the different perspectives." When I invited the group leaders to share what their group had discussed or learned, adults often began by explaining how shocked and impressed they had been with the contributions of the youngest members of their groups.

However, sermon discussion time was also a practice that most of the adults dreaded and that I had to use all of my coaching skills to lead. Once the congregation could be persuaded to participate, they enjoyed that time and grew as a result of it, but I kept these discussion times infrequent due to the fact that they always initially felt

uncomfortable. Because the fruit that these discussions brought to our congregation's faith was so evident, I considered them worth the effort I had to make to push the congregation to participate. Such an effort, though, also requires sensitivity to the amount of personal sharing the congregation can tolerate.

I also changed the sermon by making it more flexible and asking questions of the congregation throughout the sermon. This practice took some time to instill, because adults in this context were used to listening passively to the sermon. In the beginning, it was most often children, accustomed to a classroom setting in which answers were expected by a teacher, who answered my questions aloud. As the congregation grew more used to this practice, the adults joined in too, but children and youth usually beat everyone else to the answers. Sometimes these questions asked basic queries about worship, liturgy, and the world of the Bible, while at other times they were more deeply reflective about life and the experience of God. Occasionally, I followed Tobin Hart's suggestion for question-asking. After reading the scripture I would say, "You've just heard the scripture and it had some puzzling things in it. Instead of giving me answers about it, I want you to give me as many questions as you can think of."[59] Questions and answers during the sermon allowed all those present to "see" how much children are listening and thinking, and enabled everyone to understand that faith is not just about having answers, but is also about living with important questions and celebrating what we have learned and experienced.[60]

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[59] Tobin Hart, *The Secret Spiritual World of Children* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2003), 102.

[60] Tone and structure are important in asking questions, so that it does not feel like a test or an attempt to one-up the congregation in knowledge. Also, inviting questions and answers into the sermon time means that the preacher will not be able to lean on a manuscript. I preached from a short outline,

Outside of the sermon, another way that I sought to honor children's spiritual gifts was in the practice of memorizing scripture. While many denominations heavily emphasize the memorization of scripture, our church did not, so this was a new practice. Each week, we read aloud the same brief scripture passage together at the beginning of the service. I asked those present to work on their own to memorize the passage, in any version of the Bible, and then recite it privately to me. I told them that whenever five people of any age had recited the scripture passage to me, we would move on to the next one. Children memorize rapidly and with ease, and so children and youth in particular loved "showing off" their skills, but adults also participated eagerly. I had whole families stopping by the church during the week to recite the scripture for me when they had memorized it, and groups of youth who worked on it together at school. Scripture memorization was a fun and useful way to turn the tables at who was "good at" doing church, and we all enjoyed cheering each other on as we learned.

Finally, in continuing to expand my understanding of how the sermon can be formatted, I began to preach in small bursts throughout the entire service instead of in one 25-30 minute block. I took moments during every aspect of the worship event to share brief stories or explanations about why were doing a particular practice and what it could mean for our faith and our life together. These mini-sermons lasted no more than one or two minutes, but the congregation listened intently. The mini-sermons forced me to do even more intensive planning and editing of what I wanted to preach, but there were many advantages. Even if children (or adults) had to leave the service early, they were still receiving lots of instruction, challenges, and inspiration. It also modeled for parents

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knowing that at times, I would have to improvise on the sermon's direction depending on the congregation's contributions.

how they could talk about or teach their children about the liturgy and other elements of worship, or talk about faith. The mini-sermons (and the subsequent shorter main sermon that these mini-sermons necessitated) were a relief for children and adults whose attention spans have been shaped by the television culture of our time.

I also made "homework" a regular part of the worship service. I started incorporating ways for my parishioners to practice their faith at home by giving them specific tasks or reflection points for each week, related to the scripture and sermon that day. Sometimes I requested that they email or share their homework with me, and other times it was just for their own experience. Without prompting from me, members starting to bring notebooks so they could write down the homework each week. As one parishioner wrote, "This is SO important to good worship! I like the challenges. Makes people go do something to further their worship, knowledge and connection." An added advantage for me was that when the congregation shared their homework with me, I was better able to understand how the sermon had been heard, received, and implemented. There were many times when I came back the following week and clarified a portion of the sermon that had not been communicated well.

## CAMP BRANCH UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

After serving The Bridge at Asbury for five years, I was reappointed to Camp Branch United Methodist Church in Alabaster, Alabama. In direct contrast to Asbury, Camp Branch is a tiny, rural congregation. The average attendance is 20 people, all over the age of 60. There were no children, and worship is traditional. All members are white,

and most are blue-collar workers. With the arrival of my family, the congregation became 12% multi-racial and welcomed three children.

At first it seemed to be an absurd challenge to try to incorporate all-age-inclusive practices in a congregation like Camp Branch. However, after a period of getting to know the congregation, I began adding in these practices and noting feedback. Even when only adults were present, I still preached in ways that are hospitable to children and that honor the experiences of children. Soon, it became clear that even a congregation that has "no children" *does* have children. Members began bringing their grandchildren to worship when possible after it became obvious they would be welcomed.

In some respects, it was easier to institute child-honoring practices at Camp Branch than it was at Asbury. As a small church, Camp Branch did not have the resources to offer a children's church or age-specific Sunday school, and there was no staff besides the pastor. It was already expected that adults and any children would be together during worship, and adults were delighted to have any children present. I did not have to make the extended arguments for including children in worship and in the sermon that I frequently had to make at Asbury with the large staff and clergy team.

The Camp Branch congregation also especially enjoyed having questions to discuss with each other. As at Asbury, it took some time for them to get used to answering questions during the sermon, but they did catch on and began to participate. Also like Asbury, the congregation especially enjoyed homework. I noticed that they soon began bringing notebooks to write down their homework just as Asbury had.

Although we do not have food and drink in the worship space, there are other ways that Camp Branch lets children know they should feel 'at home.' The members

mark pages in the hymnals each Sunday so that children can easily flip to the right page. Children are offered first right of refusal to distribute items whenever we have bulletins, forms, or small tokens to pass out. While Camp Branch does not provide worship bags with special activities, they do provide drawing notebooks and pencils, and they stay after worship to see what the children have drawn and hear them talk about it. They also encourage children to play piano for worship (even the simplest arrangements), and loudly applaud when they complete the tune.

I did not have to institute "lunch and serves" at Camp Branch, because the congregation already hosted frequent potlucks after worship. This is another example of how small churches are often even better suited to welcome children than large, heavily-resourced churches. All on their own, Camp Branch pulled together to purchase a high chair so that my youngest child would have a chair, and they surprised him with special silverware just his size. They instinctively let the children run and play during potlucks, and I have loved watching them play with the children and sneak them extra dessert. It is clear that just because a congregation is "traditional" or tiny does not mean it does not have special gifts for welcoming children into worship and the full life of the church. Camp Branch just needed permission to incorporate their natural gifts into the worship hour.

## PLEASANT HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Curious about how these practices might take hold at a church where I am not personally in leadership, I began coaching a clergy colleague, the Rev. Monica Harbarger, associate pastor at another Birmingham-area United Methodist. Pleasant Hill

United Methodist Church is a mid-size congregation in a suburban area. Members are white, middle-class, and evenly distributed by age. The congregation has three services: two traditional services that are well-attended, and a small contemporary service that, according to my colleague, was struggling to find its "reason for being." Pastor Harbarger believed the small contemporary service could benefit from the changes I had implemented in The Bridge to be inclusive of all ages and abilities.

Pastor Harbarger and I met to talk about the service's current state and think through how she could begin to work toward an inclusive worship service. Pastor Harbarger wanted to include all of the practices I had begun at Asbury, but she knew refreshments were not feasible and worried the congregation would not want to lose the children's sermon or children's church. Pastor Harbarger and I talked about other ways a relaxed atmosphere could be created, and we worked on her greeting for the service to make explicit the information that all are welcome to participate as they are. I encouraged Pastor Harbarger to gather a team of leaders in the service so that she could first share with them about the changes she wanted to make, and why. These leaders would then be able to help her implement the changes and also help communicate the rationale to others in the congregation.

Because we could not eliminate the children's sermon or the offering of children's church, we worked on how to make the children's sermon a moment in worship where the children have the special privilege of having the full attention of the preacher. Sometimes volunteers led the children's sermon, so Pastor Harbarger and I also discussed ways to teach the volunteers to avoid object lessons, behavioral lessons, and the exploitation of children's "cuteness" for adult entertainment. Instead, the goal of those

leading the children's time would be to address children as spiritual beings who have real problems, concerns, questions, and gifts.

Instead of introducing changes gradually, Pastor Harbarger "kicked off" all of the new practices in worship at once about a month after I began working with her. The response from the congregation was immediately positive, especially in regard to having stated priorities for the worship service. Pastor Harbarger began printing the goals of the service in the bulletin and introducing herself and the aims of the service each week. Looking back over the first three months of these changes, Pastor Harbarger shared that it took her some time to get used to "doing little tweaks like remembering to introduce myself (which I never would do) as well as explaining the intention of the service, but all of this is becoming more natural with time."[61] Being explicit about the service's aims has made parents more comfortable including their children in worship. One mother shared, "I think the first thing I loved was the front page of the bulletin. I love that one of the goals of the service is to make families with small children feel welcome—noisy children like mine included. That has made us feel much more comfortable keeping him in the service with us."[62] This is not a congregation in which children had ever been *unwelcome*, but prior to Pastor Harbarger's explicit message in her greeting and in the bulletin, the fact that children were welcome to worship was unclear.

Pastor Harbarger's favorite change has been involving all ages in the leadership of the service. "It [has] been great to see people excited to have a role and responsibility and

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[61] Monica Harbarger, email message to the author, December 6, 2019.

[62] All quotations of parishioners in this section come from email messages sent from Pleasant Hill members to Rev. Harbarger for the purpose of providing feedback for this project, and are used with permission. Any names have been changed.

a great reminder of how important it is to bring people into the process of worship, even if it makes it a little more difficult for us," she wrote.[63] Her parishioners also cited this change as important to them. "I also love seeing everyone involved in the service and seeing different faces helping every Sunday," one woman wrote. Another parishioner who volunteers to coordinate people of all ages to help in leading worship reported that this role "has pushed me to make more relationships." Although involving lay people in the leadership of the service—especially lay people of all ages—requires more work initially in the form of training and scheduling, the congregation is more invested in and committed to worship and to each other as they grow in leadership.

Although Pastor Harbarger invited and encouraged children to stay for the entire service, most children still leave for children's church, a cultural habit that is hard to change. Fortunately, Pastor Harbarger has begun to expand the sermon time so that she is preaching mini-sermons throughout the service, and she has also made her "main" sermons more inclusive of all ages. Pastor Harbarger commented on her experience of preaching this way, "I feel creative in worship and more connected to the worshippers. It has stretched me in regards to my preaching and generational relatability."[64] Her parishioners have responded enthusiastically to this style. As one adult member reported to Pastor Harbarger, "Everything about your sermons—the way you talk, the words you use, the way you break it down, everything—feels more common sense and on my level and more like I'm having a discussion over coffee instead of being preached at." Although it is disappointing that children are not choosing to stay for the sermon, if that

[63] Monica Harbarger, email message to the author, December 6, 2019.

[64] Monica Harbarger, email message to the author, December 6, 2019.

ever changes they will find a sermon that includes them ready and waiting, and in the meantime adults and youth are benefiting from sermons that are preached with all ages in mind.

The changes Pastor Harbarger and her team have made—including all ages in leadership roles, scripture memorization challenges, teaching moments and mini-sermons, constant reminders about the aims of the service, and an all-ages-inclusive preaching style—have changed the atmosphere of the service, and this is what seems to have been most meaningful to parishioners. The following two testaments, from a mother and a father, respectively, from different families, describe the fruit of these changes.

> I really enjoy the new type of service. I love that children are included and involved, and it's valuable in our walk as a family that we have the opportunity to fellowship alongside them with our church family. It's allowed me to see worship through their eyes and in those moments, I always feel more love, unity, and a closeness to God.
>
> I used to never be a fan of the 9:00 service because it felt informal and not "church like." This may not make sense, but this new format feels intentionally informal. To me, that's different than how it used to feel, and I love it … After we missed the Sunday before last, Lucy[65] announced on Thursday that we had to go to church on Sunday. Attendance wasn't optional. She genuinely enjoys being there and feels like she's missing something if she doesn't get to go … I like having kids of all ages in the praise band, and I like hearing the babies screech. I like the kids reading scripture or reciting the verse that I can't for the life of me make my 50 year old brain remember word for word. That all makes the service less intimidating and more productive for me and the rest of my family.

The deliberate changes made to include all ages in worship are still new in Pastor Harbarger's congregation, but already they are drawing the members closer together and helping to grow their faith. In the testament above, a child, Lucy, insisted that her family attend worship. Her father noticed that she enjoyed the service, but what he may not have noticed is that Lucy has become a faith leader in her family, urging her parents to attend worship when they otherwise might not have. She is a disciple seeking to live faithfully.

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[65] Lucy is this member's late-elementary school-aged daughter.

# CONCLUSIONS

When I first became interested in preaching to all ages, I thought I had to become a semi-expert on child development and I struggled to articulate why I felt compelled to include children during the sermon. The resources available, such as *You Can Preach to the Kids, Too!*, offered "tips and tricks," but also gave the impression that children were strange and foreign animals who think so differently from adults that we can only hope to communicate to them on the surface-level. Faith development theories, though they may have their purposes, only encouraged me to study children, or to charm them into sticking with the congregation long enough to become contributing adults of mature faith.

In contrast, understanding my rationale in light of Jesus's teachings and theologies that respected children's spirituality as equal to that of adults led me to approach children as complex human beings who have as much stake in the good news as adults do, and maybe more. I stopped studying children and started listening to them and spending time with them, not because of who they might become but because I had so much to learn from them *now*. As it turned out, they could learn from me, too, and our mutual education did not require additional coursework in cognitive-development theory.

Working to include children in the sermon forced me to confront the many ways that children were routinely ignored in traditional homiletics. This, in turn, opened my eyes to the ways other groups are ignored. Adults are not all as educated or well-read or linguistically-gifted as we preachers often think they are; even within the adult population, many adults struggle with abstract thought and metaphor, find reading the Bible challenging due to dyslexia, or live with other special needs. They are people, too.

No two people are alike, and as a preacher, my first task is to know individuals as unique human beings, and know them well enough to meet them where they are when I preach.

In conducting this research and sharing my findings with colleagues, I have also learned what a gendered question this subject of preaching to children can be. So much of the contemporary theology written about childhood and children was written by women, and I have often encountered the assumption that I care about children's spiritual lives because I am a mother. In reality, although motherhood has informed and deepened my concern for children's spirituality, I was occupied with this question long before parenthood, and I care about it because I am charged with preaching the Gospel to all people.

My hope is that more preachers will begin to include children in sermon preparation and delivery. They will become qualified and confident enough to do so not because they have any special training in children's homiletics, but because they have taken the time to get to know the children in their congregation as people and as disciples. They will begin to see that children face challenges and faith crises just as adults do. They lose parents, siblings, and friends to death, or they may face death themselves. Some endure abuse and neglect, and all experience the powerlessness of having no economic means. They commit wrongs, sometimes out of ignorance and sometimes willfully; they damage relationships and test loyalties; they experience jealousy, remorse, frustration, and longing. But they also experience hope, joy, faith, and love, and they can forgive before they can explain what "forgiveness" means. They carry extraordinary gifts to anyone who will receive them, and they are often open to God and

to receive love in ways that adults have long forgotten. Kids are people, too. They can and do love, serve, and wonder about God, and the sermon can help them in that task.

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# Appendix A: Bridge Bulletin Notice

*This notice was printed on the inside flap of the bulletin every Sunday in The Bridge. It was created with the help of the Rev. Ruth Grissom, Pastor of Children's Ministry at Canterbury United Methodist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, and in collaboration with special needs teachers Tori Rebman and Marjorie Lenoir, members of The Bridge.*

The Bridge strives to be a place where people of all ages and abilities can worship together. In our quest to fulfill that mission, we are becoming more aware of how we can help our families with children and our special needs families during worship. It is our prayer that every child will feel welcome in worship and that adults will understand the importance of having all ages worship together regardless of how well-behaved or attentive children may be.

For all adults who have children with you in worship: we know you may feel anxious when your kids talk, cry, or won't sit down during worship. But consider that there is probably a person sitting in front of you or behind you who finds great delight in being around a child again, or reminisces about their parenting days (giving thanks to God for patience and understanding!). Please remember that your church family understands the chatter and movement of children to be a healthy part of their development and we rejoice that we get to be a part of their lives and their faith story.

We also understand that families of children with special needs face additional challenges during worship. It has come to our attention that some families who have children with special needs do not attend worship for fear their child will be disruptive. We want special needs families to know that your presence among us is more important to us than having a perfectly quiet and calm service. We also want your children to feel as comfortable as possible in a service with many lights and sounds that may be disruptive to *them*, and so we offer the following aids to any people who would like to use them:

- Noise-reducing headphones for those who have sensitivity to loud noises or peripheral noise
- Fidget toys for those with attention issues, to help bring calm and focus
- Weighted lap mats for those who feel over-stimulated or have difficulty with tactile processing

These items are available for check out at the refreshment table. As always, please let us know if there are other ways we can make worship more accessible to all people. If you have ideas, please email Pastor Kelsey.

Appendix B- Sermon 1

Luke 17:11-19

Why Christians Say "Thank You" to God

*This sermon was preached at Camp Branch UMC and is an example of how I preached as if children were present even though they were not. Notice that I still use metaphor, although I only use metaphor when the feeling that it evokes is not scary or confusing if a person does not comprehend the metaphor. I use story-telling and frequent explanations of vocabulary words, and occasionally invite input from the congregation. This is a transcript of a sermon. I preached from a short outline.*

Let's take a closer look at our scripture for today. We have…how many lepers? [Wait for answer- Ten.] What do we know about lepers? It's not "leopard," which is an animal, a big spotted wild cat. Have you seen a picture of a leopard? Yes they are cool. But our scripture reading is not about leopards. It is about "lepers," l-e-p-e-r-s, and in the Bible it means someone who is sick with a skin disease. We don't know exactly what disease it was, but at that time in history people were very afraid that skin diseases might be contagious, meaning you could catch it from someone. A disease like *leprosy*, which is what they called the skin disease, meant that someone who was a *leper*- a person with leprosy, we should say- would be excluded, or left out, from the rest of the community. They would have to live outside the area where everybody else lived, and when someone who did not have leprosy came near them, they were required to yell out, "Unclean! Unclean!" to warn them. That sounds like a very hard life, doesn't it?

So in our scripture passage, we have a group of people who had leprosy standing by the side of the road. They must have been very brave because they approached, or came near to, Jesus. The Bible says that they kept their distance, but they called out to

him and asked him to have mercy on them. What does it mean to have mercy on someone? In this case it means to show kindness or help them somehow. They were asking Jesus to help them. And Jesus did! He gave them instructions on how they could be healed and they *were* healed.

We are told that one of them—only one—when he saw that he was healed, turned back to Jesus and praised God in a loud voice. He kneeled at Jesus's feet and thanked him. It might be important that the Bible says that he "saw" that he was healed. Very often in the Bible, when someone is said to have "seen" something, it means they understood something or realized something. Maybe they recognized something. So this means that of the ten people with leprosy, *one* of them realized that it was God who had healed him, and he turned back to thank Jesus.

Jesus told the man, "Your faith has made you well." This probably means more than just that his faith healed him of the skin disease. It probably also means that his faith made him whole, that it saved him. His faith? This is interesting. We—and presumably Jesus—know nothing about this man, really. We do not know anything about his religion, although he is called a foreigner so there's a good chance he had a different religion. We do not know if he was baptized, where he stood in debates on religious matters like the Ten Commandments in the courthouse or pro-choice/pro-life. All we know about this man—the only qualification he has to be called "faithful"—is that he thanked God.

This makes me think that for us Christians, part of being faithful or having faith must mean thanking God. It must be very important for us to thank God. Now, let's talk about being thankful, or saying thank you.

Most of us here today, by the grace of God, live in the South. (And to any visitors we have from up yonder: be warned that it is only a matter of time before you fall in love with us and move here.) Y'all know that saying thank you is just polite. It's what your mama taught you. As a kid, how many times did your parents sit at your heels at your birthday party ignoring absolutely everything going on except whether or not you said "thank you" and said it loud enough? That's right. It's important to us to be polite and to write our thank you notes and to say our "thank you kindly"s.

But the kind of "thank you" that we're reading about in the Bible today is much more meaningful than just being polite, just sticking to the rules of manners. This kind of "thank you" is sincere—that means we really mean it. It comes not because of good manners and etiquette class, but out of a deep sense in our hearts that we feel grateful, really thankful. When we say "thank you" the way the person who was healed said it, we are saying, "I have good things in my life that I didn't do for myself. You, God, did it for me."

Here in America it's important to us to pull ourselves up by our bootstraps---that's a funny expression that means: we got where we are by our own effort, our own work. But that's not how Christians see life. No, as Christians, we see, we understand, that the good things in our lives are from God. We see that so much of what we enjoy is a kindness to us, a mercy to us, and we didn't make it happen. It was a gift from God. So saying "thank you" in this way is also meaningful because we are giving God credit, instead of trying to take the credit ourselves. We are saying that we know God has power in our lives. "Thank you, God. *You* brought this good thing into my life."

This kind of "thank you" is also more meaningful than a polite thank you because it changes us. It is a thank you that changes us. What do I mean by that?

Most of you know that my family has had a very hard year. My wonderful Dad was diagnosed with cancer last summer, at the age of 58, and we were told he would not live very long. Then, while he was sick, my beloved grandmother was also diagnosed with cancer, and she died shortly thereafter. My Dad continued to decline, and he died in August, as you know. We have been very sad for a long time.

My son and I have a bedtime routine, maybe like one you have at your house. Every night I read him a chapter of a book, then we sing a song together, and we say a short prayer. Then it's lights out. He would probably tell you, and I can admit, that I have not been putting a lot of energy into bedtime this past year. I have been so exhausted, so tired, and so heartsick from losing my loved ones, that maybe I have been just going through the motions at bedtime. I even pick the shortest song to sing, and eventually started combining the short song and prayer, landing on "Johnny Appleseed" in order to hit two birds with one stone, which means to do two things at once. Johnny Appleseed is a sung prayer. Maybe you know it:

*Oh, the Lord's been good to me, and so I thank the Lord, for giving me the things I need, the sun and the rain and the apple seed, the Lord's been good to me. Amen.*

You know, I only chose to sing that song because it was short, and I was tired. But as my son and I sang it together night after night, something happened in me. I started to notice the words. I started to think about the words. I started to see—to realize—that God *has* been good to me. That I do have what I need. That, although there was a lot wrong in my life and a lot of suffering, I did have the sun and the rain and food

and also the love of many, many people. That prayer…it changed me. It changed my heart.

Take a look at our bulletin, at what we call the "order of worship." I want you to notice with me how much of what we do on Sundays is thanking God. We started out with a prayer that thanks God for God's faithful love that lasts forever. Then we sang a hymn called "O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing," which is all about how we wish we had even more languages that we could use to praise and thank God. A little bit later we read our first scripture passage, Psalm 66, which was all about praising God in a loud voice! At the end of that scripture reading what did we say? "The word of God for the people of God…*Thanks be to God*!" Later on we prayed together, and one of the things we did was thank God for the good things in our lives. We put our tithes and offerings in the plates, which is a way of saying thank you, and that we see that our money came from God. Then we sang the Doxology! The word Doxology means "a word of praise" and it is all about praising God for everything God has done! We sang a hymn called "Now Thank We All Our God," and later we will sing another hymn thanking God. Our whole service is one big "thank you!" to God!

I want to tell you about something from when I was a child. When my sister and I were little girls, our family had land in Tennessee. It was just forest land, all trees, and we were allowed to wander around in the woods by ourselves, as long as we stayed together. We spent many happy hours in the woods that way. This land used to be logging land many, many years ago. Logging is what happens when people come in and cut down the trees to use to make things. In the old days, the loggers would walk deep into the woods,

cut down the tall trees, and then load the trees onto wagons. Finally, mules or horses would drag the wagons of heavy trees back out of the woods to be sold.

When Lindsey and I walked into those woods, the trees had all grown back tall and strong. It was a little bit scary, in a good way. We were just two little girls, and the trees were so tall, and the leaves overhead made it dark and mysterious in the woods. Plus, we didn't know where we were going. But the wagons from a long time ago had big, heavy wooden wheels that left deep ruts, deep grooves in the dirt. Even a hundred years later, those ruts could still be seen and felt in the dirt on the forest floor. So Lindsey and I knew that no matter where we went in the woods, we could follow the ruts from the wagon wheels and get home again.

Here is why I tell you about that. On our best days, when we are really feeling thankful, we get to come to worship and we have all these ways of thanking God laid out for us, and that feels wonderful to get to sing our praises and say our praises in lots of ways. But on our worst days, when life is hard, and when we are struggling to feel thankful, this worship service is full of prayers and songs and responses that *lead us* through thankfulness. They are the wagon wheel ruts of praise, and we can follow them home. So that even when we do not feel thankful, we can let these songs and prayers and words work on our hearts until we start to see, start to recognize, all the good in our lives.

The writer Anne Lamott has said that her two favorite prayers are "Help Me, Help Me," and "Thank you, Thank you." The prayer of "thank you," when it is prayed like the man healed of leprosy prayed it, is not just a polite, good manners, perfunctory (which means you only do it because you have to) thank you. It is a thank you that comes from deep in our hearts, where we really mean it. It is a thank you that acknowledges—that

says out loud—that we know God is the one who is working in our lives. And, if we need it to be, it is a thank you that can lead us home. It is a thank you that can change us, and make us well.

These are the reasons why Christians say “thank you” to God. Amen.

# Appendix B Sermon 2

## Matthew 6:9-14

## The Lord's Prayer: Your Kingdom Come/Your Will Be Done

*This sermon was part of a church-wide series at Asbury on The Lord's Prayer. While the traditional services received a traditional sermon, The Bridge received a sermon that combined traditional sermon elements with group discussion, a practice I shared in the main body of this paper. I began preparing for the small group discussions a month in advance. I contacted colleagues at different churches of various denominations in the US, Canada, and Europe. I asked my colleagues to open a discussion with their congregations about where, in their communities, they were praying to see "God's Kingdom Come" or "God's Will Be Done." I asked them to have their congregation write a letter to The Bridge, sharing about what they were praying for and how we could pray for and with them. Many letters arrived over the course of the month, and I carried those letters into this sermon for my small groups to read and discuss together. This is a transcript of that Sunday's main sermon time in The Bridge.*

Today we are focusing on verse 10 of the Lord's Prayer in Matthew. "Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." What do we mean when we pray this? These two lines are essentially saying the same thing two different ways, aren't they? In God's kingdom, everything is done God's way. God is in charge, God is the boss, and everything is done God's way (which we understand to be the *best* way for everyone involved).

When we pray "Your will be done," we are not only saying that we hope that comes to be the case. 'I want for your will to be done, Lord.' We are also saying two other things: not only do I want you, God, to bring your kingdom, to make sure that things happen your way on earth, just as they do in heaven, but I also want to work for that. I also want to contribute to doing things your way. And it also means we are saying, I want to do things, not *my* way, but God's way. So this part of the prayer involves a giving up or surrendering of our own way, and an openness to God's way. A willingness

to commit not only our prayers, but also our lives, the things we do each day, to God's way.

Well what does that look like? What's an example of this? We know in general what God's way is- the way of love, mercy, forgiveness, justice—which means fair treatment. What does it look like in a particular time and place? To help us think about that I have asked churches in other parts of the US and the world to write to us about what is going on where they live, how they are praying for God to bring God's kingdom, God's way of doing things, to where they live, and how we can pray with them. Up front on the altar table here you see a stack of letters. In a moment I will draw off your small groups, and then I want you to send a child or youth up to pick one of the letters for your group. I have not opened or read these, so I don't know what they will say. Your task is to read the letter, think of it in light of the verse we are focusing on today—"Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven"—and pray for this church.

*The groups assembled quickly because they were excited about this discussion. Children and youth came to the front and chose letters, and then I gave all but ten minutes of the remainder of the service to the small groups to read, discuss, and pray. As the reading and discussions ensued, it became clear that it had been a good idea not to open the letters or assign them. Our church is located in a particularly conservative and powerful county in Alabama, and many of the letters were in direct conflict with our members' publicly-stated political views.*

*A church in Wisconsin wrote about their plan to receive a refugee family and asked that we pray for them to receive the supplies they needed to give a home to God's people. A church in Michigan was located near Flint and asked that we pray that the*

*citizens there would receive justice for the harm they had endured. A church in England was experiencing record unemployment in their community and asked that we pray the government would provide aid in time. As I watched the members read these letters, I was nervous for the discussion because I knew their own views. I should have given them more credit; they surprised me when we came to the end of the discussion time. I noticed that the presence of children and youth in the groups led the adults to talk with more civility and care, and that the children asked questions that were both naïve to the conflict around these subjects and also jarringly pointed in regard to our theological imperative to care for others.*

Let me have your attention please. Let's come back together and share what we have read and talked about. Please choose one person from your group to share with the rest of us.

*The group that contained my most conservative member—a leader in Alabama's Republican party and a vehement defender of anti-immigration policy—received the letter about a church seeking to house a refugee family. When the group's leader shared their discussion, he remarked that it had startled them to read about this issue from the other congregation's view, and that the congregation's confidence that this was what God was calling them to work toward was challenging. When all the groups had shared, I continued:*

Now that we have heard from other congregations, what do you think it means for us to pray for God's will to be done in our community? Where do you see God's kingdom *not* yet come?

*The congregation responded overwhelmingly that they believed drug abuse in our community, particularly among teenagers, was not what God willed for our community and our family members. I then invited our congregation to spend the remainder of the service praying the Lord's Prayer at the altar rails or in their pews, and we dismissed with the charge to go out into the community and help to work for the things we had prayed for God to accomplish.*

# Appendix C- Mini Sermons

*The following are three examples of mini-sermons used in The Bridge. They vary in length, and although each concerns a Christian practice and theological reflection, they do not all quote scripture. These three examples were chosen because of the different places in worship when they would be used.*

## Infant Baptism

*Our baptisms usually take place around a bowl and pitcher on a pedestal. About half of our baptisms are infant baptisms, the other half being youth or adult baptisms. With the permission of youth or adults who are being baptized, or of the family if an infant is being baptized, I invite any children in the congregation to come and sit close around the pedestal so they can see. I pour the water into the bowl from very high up so that everyone can see and so that droplets splash out on the children, who by now know what to expect and hold their hands up high to feel the water splashing on them.*

One thing that makes us different from some of our Christian neighbors is that we baptize infants as well as youth and adults. Some people might say that it is silly to baptize babies when they can't understand what is going on. But first of all, we don't really know what babies do and do not understand. They probably don't understand all the words we're saying, but that doesn't mean they don't have some understanding of what is happening. We are not babies anymore so it's hard for us to say.

Also, let's think about this. I would bet that baby Katie's family tells her often that they love her. Is that true? Yes, they do. All of us tell Katie that we love her, even though she doesn't understand English yet. Why do you suppose we do that? We say those words to her, and her family hugs and kisses her, even if she doesn't know what it means. We do that because that is how she will *learn* what it means. Humans learn through experience. So we teach Katie that she is loved by telling her that she is, even before she knows the words, and through connecting those words with her experiences she will come to understand what the word "love" means. The same is true of baptism.

We baptize Katie, and as she continues to experience baptism, not just being baptized but also watching baptisms as she gets older, as you are today, she will understand more and more what baptism means. I don't know about you, but I am still discovering all that baptism means. That is an ongoing thing no matter how old we are.

There is another reason why we say "I love you" to Katie before she knows English. We say it because it is true. True things are worth saying. And again, baptism is the same way. We baptize Katie because even *if* she doesn't understand it, it is true that God loves her and claims her as part of God's family. It is true that we are committing ourselves to living in faith with Katie. All of these things are true, so we baptize Katie today knowing that this is the first step in telling Katie the truth about who she is: that she is a child of God, just like you, just like me. There are other reasons of course but we will talk about those another time, and if you have questions you can always ask me.

## Prayer

*A baby cries. The preacher stops what she is doing to comment:*

One of the early church fathers, Cyprian, wrote an explanation of why he thought infants should not be kept from baptism. Among other reasons, he remarked that infants and newborns, "deserve more from our help and from the divine mercy, since crying and weeping immediately from the very beginning of their birth, they do nothing other than pray."[66] *They do nothing other than pray.* Have you ever thought of babies and their crying like this? We may say, "All my baby does is cry," but what does it change to

[66] Cyprian, and Rose Bernard Donna. *Letters (1–81). Fathers of the Church: A New Translation* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1964), accessed February 26, 2020, http://search.ebscohost.com.proxy.library.emory.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=498902&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

think, “All my baby does is pray.” This is what praying is—crying out, to God. That is exactly how our Psalmist talked about prayer earlier in the service. I wonder if our self-imposed standards for our prayers are too elaborate, or fancy, sometimes. I wonder if babies can teach us something about just crying out for what we need, and trusting that someone will respond.

## Blessing and Laying on of Hands

Today is Senior Sunday, when we celebrate our high school seniors, their upcoming graduation next weekend, and bless them as they start a new phase of their lives. We always have a special prayer to “send off” our seniors, but today we are going to lay hands on them as well, if they would like. So first let me invite our seniors to come up to the front of the room to the altar rails, where you may kneel. Once they are settled, let me invite all of our children up to the front to stand behind them.

There are a lot of us here today, so unfortunately we cannot all crowd around the front, but the children are going to be our representatives. We are going to learn a practice today that has been important in the life of the church. We call this “laying on of hands.” Kids, I would like for you to hold up your hands so we can see them. Great. Now very quickly—name things that you do with your hands every day. [Brush teeth, write, color, zip jackets, eat.]

We can do so many different things with our hands. Hands are important in our relationships too. When you meet someone, you shake hands. When someone is hurting, you give them a hug and maybe rub their back. When we are scared, we might hold hands. In the church, we use our hands to bless people and to ask the Holy Spirit to be in

their lives in a special way. We only do this when they give us permission, just like any kind of touching, but if they are willing [here demonstrate asking a senior for permission, "May I bless you by the laying on of hands?" Receive permission, and then continue,] we take our hands, like this, and place them gently but firmly on their head or on their shoulders. Seniors, if you do not want anyone to lay hands on you, just raise your hand a little bit and they will just stand around you instead of touching you, and that is fine, too. But if your senior is ok with it where you are standing, go ahead and lay hands on him or her.

We are told in Acts that when the early church sent people out into the world to preach or to share God's love, the Christians prayed, laid hands on those people, and sent them off [read aloud Acts 13:1-3]. So that is what we will do today. As we lay hands on our seniors, we will pray, and then we will send them off to the many places they will go next. Are we ready? Yes? Let us lay hands on these disciples and pray.

Lord, we give you thanks for these seniors—each and every one of them. We thank you for the life they have brought to our congregation, for the ways they have made us laugh, for the joy they have brought us as we watched them grow up. We thank you for the questions they have asked and the ways they have challenged us. We thank you for the insights they have shared and the ideas they have brought to our community. We thank you that they have been a part of us for all these years. We are so happy for them that they have reached this milestone of life, graduation, and we know that it will represent stepping into a new part of life. This new life may be scary, a little uncertain, but we know who these seniors are, and we know that wherever they go next, they will carry your love with them. We ask that whether they go to college, or to work, or to trade

school, or to take additional time to ponder what is next, that no matter where their feet take them, they remember that you walk before them and beside them. We ask, also, that if they find themselves unsure, or lonely, or struggling, that they will think back to this moment…to this prayer…and remember how it felt to have these small hands on their shoulders, on their heads. Help them to remember how much we love them, how much we look up to them. As they remember what these hands upon them feel like, let them also remember that they always have a home here, no matter what. Send your Holy Spirit upon them, and accompany them forward in the strength of your presence, and with the blessing of our love. We ask these things in Jesus's, name, Amen.