Sunday, October 5, 1997
**DO NOT STOP THEM**
Mark 10:13-16

Some lessons are difficult to learn. A few days earlier, according to the Gospel of Mark, one or more of the disciples of Jesus tried to stop a man who was casting out demons because he wasn't in their group. Evidently, some or all of the disciples thought they had exclusive rights to dispense God's grace. Jesus, however, said to them, "Do not stop him." I talked about this in last Sunday's sermon.

Now some of these same disciples are at it again. This time, they are trying to exclude children, once again attempting to limit God's grace. It's a familiar story to most of you. We read it every time a child is brought here for baptism: "People were bringing their children to Jesus that he might touch them, and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw it, he was indignant and said to them, 'Let the children come to me; do not stop them.'"

An earlier translation of Mark's gospel says, "The disciples rebuked them." "Rebuke" is a word we don't use much these days, but it's very descriptive. The "rebuking" disciples…

It's an easy habit to acquire, to become a "rebuker," especially in religious life. To be a rebuker is to scold, find fault, censure, berate, or criticize. There are always those among us who want to restrict God's love to those we think deserve it, and to rebuke others.

It's been my experience that most "rebukers" are people with a haunting fear that someone, somewhere, is happy — and they don't like that. Today, many people would apply that caricature to overly religious individuals.

Erma Bombeck touches on this in one of her columns:

"In church the other Sunday, I was watching a small child who was turning around, smiling at everyone. He wasn't gurgling, spitting, humming, kicking, tearing hymnals, or rummaging through his mother's handbag. He was just smiling. Finally, his mother jerked him about and, in a stage whisper that could be heard in a little theater off-Broadway, said, 'Stop that grinning! You're in church!' With that, she gave him a swat, and as the tears rolled down his cheeks, she added, 'That's better,' and returned to her prayers.

"Suddenly, I was angry. It occurred to me that the entire world is in tears, and if you're not, then you'd better get with it. I wanted to grab that child with the tear-stained face close to me and tell him about my God. The happy God. The smiling God. The God who must have a sense of humor to have created the likes of us… By tradition, one wears faith with the solemnity of a mourner, the gravity of a tragedy mask, and the dedication of a Rotary badge.

"What a fool, I thought. Here was a woman sitting next to the only light left in our civilization — the only hope, our only miracle, our only promise of infinity. If he couldn't smile in church, where was there left to go?"

Paul Tournier, a Swiss doctor, tells of patients who come to him: a man harboring guilt over an old sin, a woman who cannot stop thinking about an abortion that took place ten years before. What the patients truly seek, says Tournier, is grace. Yet in too many churches, they

encounter shame, the threat of punishment, and a sense of judgment. In short, when they look to the church for grace, they often find ungrace.

A divorced woman once told me of standing in the sanctuary of her church (not this one) with her 15-year-old daughter when the pastor's wife approached her. She said, "I hear you are divorcing. What I can't understand is, if you love Jesus and he loves Jesus, why are you doing that?" The woman told me that the pastor's wife had never spoken to her before, and her brusque rebuke in front of her daughter stunned her. She went on to say that both she and her husband loved Jesus, but the marriage was broken beyond mending. "If she had just put her arms around me and said, 'I'm so sorry,'" she said.

It reminds me of a prayer by a little girl: "O God, make the bad people good, and the good people nice."

Why do we so often try to stop people from experiencing the grace of God? We become "rebukers," like the disciples, and try to keep others from the joy and happiness of the Christian faith.

Here's a true story from someone who works with the down-and-out in Chicago:

"A prostitute came to me in wretched straits — homeless, sick, and unable to buy food for herself and her daughter. She told me of all the awful things she had been doing to earn money, even renting out her daughter for kinky sex. Finally, I asked if she had ever thought of going to a church for help. I will never forget the look of pure, naive shock that crossed her face. 'Church!' she cried. 'Why would I ever go there? I'm already feeling terrible about myself. They'd just make me feel worse.'"

What struck me about this story is that women and men like this prostitute fled toward Jesus, not away from him. And he didn't turn them away. The worse a person felt about themselves, the more likely they were to see Jesus as a refuge. Has the church lost that gift? Too often, we try to stop people — consciously or unconsciously — just like those disciples who wanted to keep the children from getting near Jesus.

When Jesus saw the disciples rebuking the children, Mark says, "He was indignant." If you want to know what Jesus cared deeply about, look at the things that aroused his indignation. Usually, when he was angry, it was over a wrong done to people, especially those considered unimportant by society, or over some blindness to human need, or an attempt by someone or a group to decide who was worthy of God's love and who was not.

In this story, Jesus did more than become indignant. He said, "Bring the children to me; do not stop them." An earlier translation says, "Do not hinder them." I like this translation better. Most of us wouldn't be callous enough to outright forbid children or anyone else from knowing God's grace, but the word "hinder" is another matter. Hindering can be subtle. It may come from neglecting to take positive action.

All the time, we can be hindering people, adults and children alike. For years, churches have hindered differently-abled people from entering church buildings and other spaces. We don't do it on purpose. We often aren't even aware of it unless we have a relative or friend in a wheelchair or on crutches. We wouldn't think of locking all the restrooms in the church, yet if they are inaccessible, they might as well be locked.

We can also hinder children by not providing adequate space or resources for them.

On the positive side, I'm proud of what this congregation has done over the years to not hinder people from coming to know God. We do our best to be inclusive, not exclusive. We have even extended our outreach through radio and television to bring the message of God's grace to people who can't physically get here.

Our First-Plymouth Preschool is another example of not hindering children. We provide tuition assistance to many preschool children who otherwise wouldn't be able to attend. We even run a transportation program so that children whose parents don't have cars can get here. And we provide a transportation program for others, using the taxicab system for those who have no way to get here.

So, the first point this story makes is that we should not hinder people or stop them from coming to know and experience God's grace.

The second point is this: Jesus said, "Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it."

In childhood, Jesus found a wonderful analogy for participating in God's grace. "Look at the child in my arms," he said, "to such belongs the Kingdom of God." He wasn't talking about being "childish" but "childlike."

What are some of the characteristics that children have, which we sometimes lose, that help us be more aware of God's grace?

First of all, children have an active and creative imagination, helping them to see things we do not. They have an instinctive spirituality that is shown in their creativity and imagination.

A little paperback book, Dear God: Children's Letters to God, illustrates this beautifully. Here are a few examples:

"Dear God, you and I have something in common. We both have a lot of names. You have Lord, God, Jesus, Father. Signed, Rodney William Peter Johnson, Jr. (age 8). P.S. Please look — I also have a nickname. It's Rodent. What's yours?"

"Dear God, I saw the Grand Canyon last summer. Nice piece of work. Love, Alan."

"Dear Ms. God: I believe you are a woman. In fact, I am sure for sure. I think that is why the rivers and sky and birds are so beautiful. If by some fluke you are a boy, please do not take it out on me. Boys should not hit girls. Love, Trisha."

A teacher once described an experiment she frequently used. She said, "If I hold up a sheet of white paper and put a black dot near the center with my pen, what do you see?" She used this demonstration with thousands of adults in seminars, and they invariably answered, "A black dot!" But when she did the same thing with kindergarten children, the answers were many and varied. "A Mexican hat," said one child. "No, that's a burnt hamburger," said another. "A squashed bug," observed a third.

As children, we're naturally more creative because we let our minds run free. But as we grow older and are taught to follow the rules, our thinking can narrow. While rules and guidelines are

often helpful, it's important not to let them stifle creativity or our openness to new ways of seeing.

We must avoid the temptation to become prisoners of a point of view, afraid to consider new ideas or try something different. When we fall into that trap, we might even find ourselves, like the early disciples, trying to stop children from sitting on the lap of Jesus.

Above all, remember that in this story, the children represent the "nobodies" of the world — those who have been pushed down, pushed aside, and pushed out.

Finally, this story tells us by implication that rather than hindering people — whether children or adults — from experiencing God's grace, we need to be conduits of God's grace. When we do that, something amazing happens. We become filled with God's grace in the process.

Dear friends, it is my hope that this congregation will continue to be one that does not hinder people but rather invites them to experience God's grace. Remember the words inscribed above our main doors: "Come unto me all you that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

This morning, on World Communion Sunday, we invite you to taste the grace of God in the bread and wine. All of you who want to know of God's grace are welcome. Amen.