Book 3X

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 was not in their group. Evidently some or all of the disciples thought they had exclusive rights for dispensing 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. Only this time they are wanting to exclude children. Once more they are trying 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 very much these days, however it's very descriptive. The "rebuking" disciples.

It's an easy habit to acquire, to be a "rebuker," especially in our religious life. To be a rebuker is to scold, to find fault, to censure, to berate, to criticize. There are always those among us who want to restrict the love of God 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 same caricature to overly religious people.

Erma Bombeck talks about this in one of her columns.

"In church the other Sunday I was intent on watching a small child who was turning around smiling at everyone. He wasn't gurgling, spitting, humming, kicking, tearing the 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 theatre off Broadway said, 'Stop that grinning! You're in church!' With that, she gave

him a belt and as the tears rolled down his cheeks, added. 'That's better,' and returned to her prayers..."

"Suddenly I was angry. It occurred to me the entire world is in tears, and if you're not, then you'd better get with it. I wanted to grab this child with the tear-stained face close to me and tell him about my God. The happy God. The smiling God. The God who does 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 mask of tragedy, 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 put out of her mind 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 in the church for grace, they often find ungrace.

A divorced woman 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. She said, "I hear you are divorcing. What I can't understand is that if you love Jesus

and he loves Jesus, why are you doing that?" This woman told me that the pastor's wife had never spoken to her before and her brusque rebuke in the daughter's presence stunned her. She went on to say that both she and her husband did love Jesus, but the marriage was broken beyond mending. If she had just put her arms around me and said, "I'm so sorry."

It reminds me of a prayer of a little girl. She prayed, "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. At last 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 am already feeling terrible about myself. They'd just make me feel worse."

What struck me about this story is that women and men much like this prostitute fled toward Jesus, not away from him. And he didn't turn

them away. The worse a person felt about herself, the more likely she saw Jesus as a refuge. Has the church lost that gift? Too often we try to stop people, consciously or unconsciously as those disciples wanted to keep the children from getting near Jesus?

When Jesus noticed that the disciples were rebuking children, Mark says, "He was indignant." If you want to know what Jesus cared deeply about, one sure clue is to be found in the things that aroused his indignation. On the whole, when he was angry or indignant, 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 group of people 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, "Bring the children to me, do not hinder them." I like this translation better. Most of us would not be callous enough to absolutely forbid children or anyone else from knowing God's grace, but the word "hinder" is another matter. For the hindering may be subtle. It many come from neglect to take some positive action.

All the time we can be hindering people, adults and children. For example, for years churches have been hindering the differently-abled from entering our church buildings and other places as well. We don't do it on purpose. We 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 our church building and yet because until a few years ago, they were inaccessible to some people, they were the same as locked to them. We can also hinder children by not providing adequate space for them.

On the positive side, we can all be very proud in this congregation what of we have done over the years to not hinder people from being here. We do our best to be an inclusive not an exclusive congregation. We have even gone out of our way through radio and television to bring the message of God's grace to people who cannot get here no matter how accessible our building is.

Our First-Plymouth Preschool is another example of not hindering children. We are providing

tuition assistance to large numbers of preschool children who would not otherwise be able to be here. We even run a transportation program so that children of parents who do not have cars can come here. And we provide a transportation program for other people by using the taxicab system for those who have no way to get here.

So the first point that is made in this story is that we are not to hinder people or stop them in any way from coming to know and experience the grace of God.

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 was not talking about being "childish," but "childlike."

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

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

A little paperback book, DEAR GOD, Children's Letters to God, illustrates this. A few samples:

"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) Please look, I also have a nickname. It is 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. Trisha."

A teacher describes an experiment which she frequently uses.

"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 has used this demonstration with thousands of adults in seminars, and invariably gets the same answer. "A black dot." When she does the same thing with kindergarten children, a lot of hands go up and the answers are many and varied. "A Mexican hat," said one child. "No, that's a burnt hamburger," said another. "A squashed bug," observed a third youngster.

As children, we're more naturally creative because we let our minds run free. But as we're taught to follow the rules, our thinking can narrow. This is not all bad. There are rules and guidelines which are very helpful and important. It wouldn't do to create a new way of driving home from work if it meant driving down the

wrong side of the street in an attempt to be creative, or going the wrong way on a one-way street just to be different. We have to learn when it's okay to be out-of-bounds and when it's necessary to stay in bounds.

But there are plenty of areas in all of our lives where we can continue to use our imagination and creativity. And it's especially important that we do not try to stop the creativity and spontaneity of others, including children. To be creative is to be in touch with God the ultimate Creator.

The biggest temptation as adults is to become prisoners of a point of view and to be afraid to consider any new idea or try anything different. When we do that we might even find ourselves

trying to stop children from sitting on the lap of Jesus as did those early disciples.

Remember above all, in this story of the children wanting to be brought to Jesus, the children represent the nobodies of this world, people who have been pushed down, pushed aside and pushed out.

Finally, what the story is saying by implication is that rather than trying to stop people, children and 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 front doors. "Come unto me all you that labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest."

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