

Listening to the Kids 10/24/2010

Greg Boyd

[Introductory clip, music plays]

Beginning to experience the love to a greater degree, as we enter into the life Christ demonstrates that's full, unhindered, and simply free; transform your fractured, chaotic life into something more...something, undivided.

Undivided: Making Space for Love

["Listening to the Kids" clip, orchestral music plays in background]

"Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life." Proverbs 4:23

"Jesus said to them, 'Let the little children come...'" Mark 10:14

[Voiced poem "The Children", by Terri Churchill]

The children.

I've been neglecting all the children inside me.

This one wants to play, and this one is hungry.

And this one is angry.

And *this* one is coloring all over the wall in red magic marker the words,

"I am here."

I try to ignore their round, unwashed faces.

I stay busy, and keep shushing them.

But their cries grow louder.

Their arms, stretched out towards me.

This one has a note crumpled inside a chubby fist.

He says it's from Jesus but I'm afraid to read it.
What will He think about this noisy mess in me?
I get even busier, humming a loud tune to drown out the children's songs.
Plugging my ears I try to forget about that note as the children all cry at once.
Finally, that little boy nudges me hard enough to get my attention.
And he smiles as I smooth out the paper and read the words,
"Let the children come."
I gather the children, and begin to listen to them all,
one by one
tucking them into their downy beds to dream children's dreams
folded in heaven's arms.
Silence."

Some of you, I'm sure, have seen the 1990's movie "The Kid". It stars Bruce Willis. It's about a man named Russell, a very *driven* man named Russell, who encounters his eight-year-old self just before his 40th birthday. He doesn't know how this eight-year-old self came into his life but he's certainly not happy that he's there. In fact, he despises this little boy as someone who is fat, and socially awkward and stupid. He also doesn't know why this eight-year-old has shown up into his life, but a wise therapist friend suggests to him that maybe he's there to teach him something. We pick up the story here as Russell's girlfriend has just discerned that the little boy staying with Russell is in fact a younger version of himself. Let's watch the clip.

[Clip of movie "The Kid" begins]

[Eight-year-old version of Russell, "Rusty", is sitting in the living room watching TV while Russell and his girlfriend, Amy, look on]

[Amy is chewing her nails]

Russell: Stop biting.

Amy: Leave me alone. I'm advertising terror and bewilderment.

Rusty: Holy smokes. Ninety nine channels and there's nothing on.

Amy: How...can this be?

Russell: I have *no* idea.

[Rusty starts scratching under his shirt]

Russell: Look at him! So...embarrassing.

Amy: You're not embarrassing. You're adorable...*then* [pointing to Rusty]. You're adorable *then*.

[Now Rusty begins to pick his nose]

Russell: Stop picking! [Sighs] Look at that haircut. I look like Herman's Hermits. And I speak like I got a mouthful of spit [imitating having a mouthful of spit].

Amy: Of course you do.

Russell: Doesn't the fact that I am a pathetic dweeb make you despise me?!

Amy: No! Why? Do *you* despise you?

Russell: When I look at him all I see are awful memories, memories I have been spending most of my life trying to forget.

Amy: I'm sorry.

[Cut to evening, Russell is talking on the phone]

Russell: Hi Janet, it's me. Sorry to call so late.

Janet: It's OK, Russ. I think I'll recover.

Russell: I just want you to cancel all my appointments tomorrow and move them to Friday.

Janet: Anything else?

Russell: Nah, that's it. [Watching Rusty sleeping]

Janet: OK, you got it.

Russell: No, wait. There is something else. I want you to find out why the full moon looks orange sometimes when it rises.

Janet: OK, sure.

Russell: Thanks Janet. Good night.

[Russell walks over and sits by the sleeping Rusty]

Russell: Hey kid. [Louder] Rusty. [Rusty wakes up and looks at him] Hi.

Rusty: [whispers] Hi.

Russell: Want to help me with something? I think it might get you back to your time.

Rusty: Sure.

Russell: Good.

[Cut to Russell and Rusty sitting at the dining room table]

Rusty: Anything about me?

Russell: Yeah, anything that'll take me back.

Rusty: Hmm...you know how I like to find caterpillars and put them in jars and feed them and watch them make cocoons?

Russell: No.

Rusty: And then one day they break out and it's *really* cool!

Russell: Hmm...not a clue. But keep going, tell me some more stuff.

Rusty: Remember last summer at Dalcy's birthday party when I got parmesan cheese stuck up my nose?

[Cut to later in the night, Russell and Rusty are playing cards]

Rusty: Got any 6's?

Russell: No, go fish. Got any 4's?

Rusty: Negative. Go fish. Got any 7's?

Russell: Tell me some more about dad.

Rusty: Sometimes he lets me help him work on the car, but if I do something wrong he yells at me. Sometimes he buys me ice cream afterwards, but still, I don't like messing up. Like last

week, I lost a screw. I was afraid to tell him. I found it later on in my pocket. Look, I still have it! I'm afraid to give it back to him. [Pause] Got any 9's?

Russell: [Quietly] No.

[Cut to Russell and Rusty walking on the street during the day]

Rusty: My homeroom teacher last year was fat Mrs. Kenkelman. She was SO much better than Mr. Lupus. He had that purple bump on his face.

Russell: I don't remember the "bump guy". What grade was that?

Rusty: How come you're asking me all this stuff?

Russell: Because I'm forgetting something; I'm forgetting this *one* event that meant something to me and if I can remember that one thing, maybe I can get you home.

Rusty: Are you *sure* it's not the purple bump?

Russell: It's not the bump, kid. [Laughing lightly]

So why did the eight-year-old Rusty show up in the adult Russell's life? Russell finally learns that there was, in fact, something he needed to learn. He needed to remember something, he needed to learn something. There was a deep wound in the adult Russell's life that had always been there but needed to have healed. In the course of that Russell had to learn why he'd become such a narcissistic, self-absorbed jerk. He had to learn how he'd become, why he'd become, an obsessive workaholic and a perfectionist; why he always had to appear so strong and invincible. He had to learn how he got that twitch in his eye whenever he gets animated, this nervous twitch. There was someone he had to learn how to embrace and someone he had to learn how to forgive.

I think, like Terri's poem, that movie is a poignant metaphor for the reality of our inner world. Inside every one of us there's a world of thoughts and memories, a world of needs and dreams, regrets, hopes, worries and cravings. And every one of them clamors for attention like a little child; the children of our inner world. "This one wants to play, and this one is hungry. And this one is angry, and this one is coloring all over the wall in red magic marker the words, 'I am here'." Now, unfortunately, we have been conditioned to neglect these children, to ignore them, to pretend like they're not even there. Part of our culture is a conditioning to give far more importance to the *outer* world than our *inner* world. What's important is what people can see, what we get recognition for, what we get kudos for, what helps our status in society. And so we tend to have our attention and energy poured toward the outer world and neglect

the inner world. We dismiss those nudges, those promptings, that inner voice, those inner aches and pains because no one else sees them and no one else feels them and so it gets registered in our cultural conditioning as something that must be relatively unimportant. Plus, it takes time. It takes time, even hard work to learn how to listen to that inner world. It takes time, as Russell learned. He had to clear his schedule to just hang out with that child. And that's time we could spend on "more productive things" like earning money, and paying bills, and shopping, and watching television. Not only that but I think, like Russell, sometimes we don't want to *hear* what those children inside have to say to us. In fact maybe, like Russell, some of us *loathe* one of the children inside of us. Some of us are afraid of what some of those children might bring. On some level we know that if we are to pay attention to what this child has to say, if we're gonna follow the ache in our heart down the rabbit trail, well it just might unleash something that will turn our world upside down and we're afraid of that. Yet the reality is that every one of these kids on the inside, every one of the voices in the inner world, they come with a crumpled note in their hand, and that hand says, "Let the children come." It's so important that we *do* let them come. The reality is that we will never acquire an undivided kingdom heart and move towards a holistic kingdom life unless we take time to listen to our heart.

Some Christians, I think, think it's God's job just to sort of magically transform us. It's God's job to come in and take away what needs to be taken away and install what needs to be installed and so a lot of Christians are waiting for God to show up and give them an undivided kingdom heart. They're waiting for God to show up and supernaturally take away their lust, or take away their gambling addiction, or take away their greed, or take away whatever other thing in their life shouldn't be there. There are others who dismiss this whole idea of being a disciple of the inner world, this disciple of your heart; they dismiss that as "psychobabble". And they would say, "Well you just gotta trust God and God's gonna do it all." But see God doesn't operate that way! It doesn't work that way. You know it's true, importantly true, that without the Holy Spirit operating in our life we could never make *any* progress in becoming more Christ like. God dwells within us and He's always moving us in that direction. But it's also true that we, as disciples of Jesus, have a very important role to play in that transformation process. God, the Holy Spirit, empowers us to take every thought captive to Jesus Christ but it's our job to respond to that empowerment by actually doing it. It doesn't happen magically by itself. And if we don't respond to God's continual empowerment through the Holy Spirit in our life, we don't become disciples of our inner world it can't help but undermine the transformation process that God wants us to go through. We won't acquire an undivided kingdom heart and acquire holistic kingdom lives unless we're willing to listen to what the children in our hearts are trying to teach us.

Their unattended crying voices clutter our soul. Their clamoring creates this perpetual sense of uneasiness if we don't attend to it. And they pull us in different directions; we become fragmented. The voices within us, they're like little children that are tugging at our sleeves and they'll pull us one way or another and if we don't attend to them we are internally divided. We are, like James says in the book of James, we're "double-minded". You may sincerely want to be a person who's undivided in your passion for God and your love for others but you'll invariably find yourself fragmented with other priorities jumping in unless you take the time to listen to what's going on in your heart. You may sincerely want to be free, free of your bondages, free of your thought patterns, free of your bitterness and hatred. You may sincerely want to be conformed to the image of Christ but you'll always find yourself getting derailed by forces and influences that you don't even understand until we pay attention to what's going on in our heart. You can aspire to be a united, whole, kingdom person but there'll always be a gulf between what scripture says is true about you and how you experience yourself as being. There'll always be that gulf unless we take the time to become a disciple of our own heart, a disciple of the inner world. We'll always be fragmented.

"this one wants to play and

this one is hungry and

this one is angry and

this one is coloring all over the all in red magic marker the words

'I am here'"

Take a look at the verse that we started off with, Proverbs 4:23

"Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life."

"Above all." That means that this is our first and primary responsibility, to guard our heart. Now the Hebrew word there does not simply mean "protect against an enemy" but it has the connotation of cultivating something, nurturing something, taking care of something. To guard your heart includes listening to those children inside. And the reason it's so important is because the heart is the wellspring of life. Everything we're about flows out of our heart. The quality of our kingdom life is determined not by the fortunate or unfortunate circumstances we happen to find ourselves in. It's determined by the quality of our heart. The peace of our life will never outrun the peace of our inner soul. The unity of our life will never outrun the unity of our soul. The wholeness and beauty of our life can never outrun the wholeness and beauty of our heart. It's our first and primary responsibility because it influences everything; our primary obligation. We have a lot of obligations to the outer world, for sure, and they're important.

But what has to trump all of them is the obligation, the responsibility, the kingdom call that we have to guard our heart; to attend to our heart, to cultivate our heart, to listen to our heart. We have obligations to our families, to love and nurture our spouses and families and friends, but as important as those are even more important is the obligation, the commitment we have to nurture our own heart. We have obligations to our employer, our church, our neighbors, the poor and many other things but our first and foremost, our most fundamental responsibility is to cultivate, nurture and guard our own heart; to listen to those children. We have an important responsibility to proclaim the Good News of God's love to the entire world, but our first responsibility is to proclaim and bring the Good News of God's love to the children—to the inner children. The truth is our lives will only reflect the Good News of God's love to the extent that the kids in our inner world are, as Terri so beautifully put it, "tucked in their downy beds and allowed to dream children's dreams as they sleep in heaven's arms." But to do this we have to regularly clear our schedules and make time just to listen.

As happened with Russell in the movie, sometimes if we're open to it we'll find that a child sort of just barges into our life to get our attention. In fact, I've had this happen to me one time. I've shared this experience several times before at Woodland Hills Church but it illustrates the point so well that I think it bears repeating. At the age of thirty three, something similar to what happened with Russell happened to me. We had hired a babysitter to come over so my wife and I could go out on a date and it was around Christmas time and this was a babysitter that I knew as a student at Bethel and had told her about our family. When she came over, she came over with Christmas presents. Unfortunately, she forgot that we have three children and she only brought two presents. So she announced that she has Christmas presents and she gave a Christmas present to my oldest daughter and then my younger daughter but there was none for Nathan, who was four at the time. And Nathan, hearing that there were Christmas presents was jumping up and down and flapping his arms like he always did. When I realized that she didn't have a Christmas present him something happened inside of me. There was this deep emotion, anger mixed with grief, that just sort of came up; it shocked me. It was way out of proportion to the circumstances but I asked her, "Where's Nathan's present?" and she said, "I'm sorry! I forgot that you had a son." And so, though I was fighting back a lot of emotion, I turned to Nathan and I did what any good Christian parent would do, I lied. [Laughs] I said, "She has a present for you, it's in the bedroom." Actually it wasn't a lie because there was a present that she was going to give him in the bedroom. And so I took her in our bedroom and got out of our closet some of the toys that we had already bought for Christmas and gave her this really nice truck. And I said, "I'm giving this to you, so now you can give it to him and so it's coming from you." And so she went out and gave him that present and Christmas was saved and he was ecstatic.

But I was really puzzled by that emotion. That's the way the kids inside talk to us, they just show up and they give nudges, you feel something different. Sometimes it's a reoccurring thought pattern or it's a wellspring of—maybe it's anxiety or maybe it's sorrow, but there's something there. And so the next day I was praying about this, "Lord, what is that about? 'Cleaning the schedule to listen to the children', what is that about?" And as I was in prayer I all of a sudden went back to a scene. It was a memory that I don't remember every remembering. It happened when I was around three years old and so for thirty years I don't remember ever thinking about this. But I had this scene and it was a scene of my grandmother coming through the front door. My mom had died about ten months earlier and my grandmother was in charge of taking care of us. And so she came through the front door and she announces she has Christmas presents. And so the four of us kids—we all gather around and I'm jumping up and down flapping my arms just like Nathan did, and she gives this beautiful doll to my oldest sister and another doll to my younger sister and a tugboat to my brother. And I'm just so excited I'm about ready to pop and I look into the bag and there's nothing there. And my older sister says, "Grandma, doesn't Gregggy get a present?", and I look up and my grandmother and she's got this scowly, angry, angry look on her face and she goes, "No! Gregggy doesn't get a present because Gregggy's a bad boy and bad boys don't get Christmas presents." And as I'm viewing this scene in prayer, it just kind of is there, I just begin to bawl. I know that memories can sometimes be false and so I went and checked out with my older sister, who was eleven at this time, whether this actually happened or not; or was it just something I was dreaming up. In fact, it did happen, not exactly as I remembered it, but this is the way my three-year-old brain registered it. And as we're going through this scene I just begin to cry.

As I look back on my life I can see how *that* child was coloring on the walls with red magic markers with the words, "I am here" and "I am *bad*" and how he was present for thirty years doing that, trying to get my attention. This forgotten toddler was always pulling on my sleeve to live out the message "I am bad". There was always -a pull, unconsciously, I didn't know about it, but a pull to being mischievous. I always felt uneasy unless I was getting in some trouble, unless I was breaking some rule. Even as a child in Catholic school I remember on the one hand I really wanted to be good, I wanted to go to heaven. I prayed a lot. I really sought God in so far as I could understand Him; there's that side of me. But invariably I found myself always being bad and incurring the wrath of the nuns. The little Gregggy was writing on the walls with red markers, "I am bad."

When I got older and surrendered my life to Christ I learned that I was a child of God and I learned that I'm holy and blameless, that that is really my true nature. And I sincerely longed to live the life that was pleasing to Abba Father. But my ability to live that out was compromised because this little child was clamoring for attention. As an adult I knew and believed the Good News of God's love but there was a little kid inside of me was still living in

the lie that he was bad. And as I've shared before at Woodland Hills Church, I invited Jesus into that memory and He brought tremendous healing. This is one of the ways that our conversations with the children can go. Initially, for a certain amount of time, Jesus would just be part of this memory and I'd just go there in prayer and He would weep for this child, for the innocence that was stolen from him on that day. And just seeing Him weep and experiencing Him weep as I wept already began to reverse the lie; that this is a child who was worth Jesus crying over. And then there came a time when Jesus just brought about a total healing by revising that memory. God doesn't change the past but he changes the *meaning* of the past by giving us representations of what He would have done in that circumstance. And so there was one time, in a time of prayer, where I went back and saw that episode again and it played out just as it always had: my grandmother comes in and announces she has Christmas presents. And she gives the doll to my older sister, a doll to my younger sister, a tugboat to my brother. I'm jumping up and down frantic with excitement. I look in the bag and now something different happens. There's nothing there and my sister says, "Doesn't Gregggy get a present?" And I look up, but now I see not the face of an angry grandmother, I see the radiant, joyful, loving face of Jesus. I'll never forget those eyes of love; the first thing that caught my attention as I look up, eyes of love. And Jesus reached over and kind of muffles up my hair and he says, "Of course Gregggy gets a present, because Gregggy is a *good* boy." And then I looked down in the bag there's this big airplane there, this red airplane. And I remember that red airplane. There was one Christmas where that was the main thing I wanted, this particular red airplane and for some reason I didn't get it. I remember that I was disappointed, but now I get my red airplane. Jesus heals all the wounds. I could finally, now, tuck little Gregggy into his "downy bed to dream children's dreams folded in heaven's arms." It's so important that we nurture our heart. It's so important that we make our inner world our highest priority. It's so important that we regularly clear the schedule to listen to our heart. It's vital that we give those clamoring children the attention they need.

Now, they speak in a million different voices and each one is unique and each of us is unique. Sometimes they can speak, as it happened with me, with a memory that all of a sudden comes back. Or it could be a memory that keeps on reoccurring. Pay attention to that. But most often they speak or at least we hear them (because we've gotten good at neglecting them)—so we often just hear them as gentle nudges. Or it could be a tinge of sorrow that is sort of gnawing at our heart or it could be a sense of weariness or anxiety in our spirit. Or it could be a picture that just seems to pop up randomly now and then. It could be a lot of different things, in fact the truth is that everything that goes on in our inner world is there for a reason and therefore is like one of these children who deserves attention, who needs attention. We need to listen to our heart. I encourage us to spend time listening asking the Holy Spirit to bring to the surface what needs to be brought to the surface; inviting the children to teach us.

It's not a process that can be rushed. Russell had to hang out for a long while with this boy before he began to really learn what the boy was there to teach him. It can't be rushed.

And I want to say whenever you discern something in your heart that maybe is scary, or maybe ugly, whenever you see a child that maybe you've always run away from, a message that you loathe and you've spent your life trying to forget; I encourage us to not judge that child. Don't spank the child, don't get mad at the child, and don't get frustrated with the child. No, the child is your friend and there's something there to be learned. I encourage us to remind ourselves of God's love and to not fear whatever we're going to find there. Often we avoid that because the accuser has gotten in there and brought about shame. Trust in God's love and let the children come. And then when you learn what you need to learn, you and Jesus can then tuck the child in his downy bed to dream children's dreams, resting peacefully in heaven's arms. God bless you and God bless your children.

[Terry Churchill comes to the stage]

Greg asked me if I'd come today and lead you in a meditation and I agreed to that although I am a raging introvert and I really prefer being that disembodied voice up there reading you poetry [Laughter]. So if you don't mind, I'm just going to pretend like there are ten of you out there and we're just in this nice, cozy little prayer chapel and you can imagine that too if you want. There are a few things I want to say before we begin. First of all, the focus this week in the material is on clearing out some of your internal clutter and that is for the purposes of being more available to really love God more freely, to love yourself, to love others. But that's a process and it takes some time so there's no magical exercise or meditation or action that's going to do that for you. So the meditation we're going to do here tonight is just a way to help you to begin and there's nothing magical about it. We just want to help you to begin to be a better listener to your heart so you can be more responsive to those little notes that your soul sends you. Second, Greg talked a lot on this video about childhood wounds that might be taking up some space in your heart, but I want to say that's not the only kind of soul clutter that you might bump up against. It can be worries, or un-forgiveness, or anger, or busyness, really anything that you kind of tend to stuff, or push aside, or avoid. So just be open to whatever you find rather than what you think you're *supposed* to find. OK? And the last thing is just a couple of tips. I'm going to ask you to close your eyes during this exercise and some people find that to be helpful so you can concentrate better but if you're uncomfortable with that you don't have to close your eyes. And I don't want you to worry if your mind wanders a little, or if you get distracted by some noises around you; that's all normal, that's not a problem. When you notice that your minds kind of gone off track just gently return it to the meditation. So with those things in mind let's begin.

Close your eyes, if that's comfortable for you, and imagine that you're sitting at a large, round table that is low enough for a child to sit at; those tables that you see in preschools, maybe. And I want you to invite Jesus to sit at this table next to you. He loves you so much and He wants to be at this table with you. On the floor next to you there's a large cloth sack with your name on it that contains everything that's been taking up space in your heart and mind. When you're ready, pick up the bag and dump the contents out so that it's all on the table in front of you. And now, safe in God's love for you, in His infinite patience, just notice what's there. You might see objects that represent the various things taking up space in your heart. You might experience a series of thoughts or memories or hear sounds or voices that represent your soul clutter. Or you might just experience a feeling rising up in you with no images at all. It doesn't really matter; just notice what comes up for you as you dump everything out there. Remember not to judge whatever you find. Notice if there's anything that seems to need some loving attention. Remain open to any feelings that might come up, or any nudges from the Lord. And now, listen for God's heart for you. And when you're ready, I want you to place that bag in Jesus' lap and begin clearing the table together. Thank God that you belong to Him and that He's glad to share your burdens. And as we close I'm just going to pray the prayer from this week in your Undivided book.

Lord, sometimes it hurts to just show up. Sometimes it's painful to just be here. Help us to stay anyway and to listen for your voice and receive the notes you slip into our hands. Come with the visions and dreams and whispers that accompany souls turned towards you. We're here. Amen.

At this time I'd like to invite the prayer team to come forward. If this meditation stirred something in you or if you have anything at all you'd like prayer for you can come on up ahead and get that prayer. God bless you all and have a good week.