Children can be a real challenge at times, can’t they? Let’s face it, parents, your goal for your children might not always be what they become. You want the best for your children; you want them to grow up strong, capable, and independent. The result, on the other hand, is that you might end up with children who are independent, perhaps *strong-willed*, and capable of all kinds of surprises. Yet as a loving parent, you accept this as you nurture your children. You want their lives to be filled with joy and happiness. You’d like to shield them from every possible manner of hurt, or problem, or injury—but you know that shielding your children from all harm is really not what’s best for them. While we’re being honest with ourselves, parents want their children to love them, too.

Let’s repeat the paragraph that I just said, but as I repeat it, I’m going to change a couple words. I’ve always wanted to try something like this, so let’s see how it turns out…

*People* can be a real challenge at times, can’t they? Let’s face it, *God*, your goal for your people might not always be what they become. You want the best for your people; you want them to grow up strong, capable, and independent. The result, on the other hand, is that you might end up with people who are independent, perhaps *strong-willed*, and capable of all kinds of surprises. Yet as a loving God, you accept this as you nurture your people. You want their lives to be filled with joy and happiness. You’d like to shield them from every possible manner of hurt, or problem, or injury—but you know that shielding your people
from all harm is really not what’s best for them. While we’re being honest with ourselves, God wants to be loved by all people, too.

If your children have ever made you cry, imagine how God feels about all of us, about you. But wait—if your children have ever brought you joy, imagine how God feels about you, each one of you.

This weekend, we observe Children’s Sabbath, which is an all-faiths effort sponsored by the Children’s Defense Fund to celebrate children as sacred gifts from God. This is an opportunity for people of faith to renew and live out their moral responsibility to care for, protect, and advocate for all children.

On this Children’s Sabbath, my message is to celebrate the faith of children. I want to share with you some stories and experiences that will illustrate the faith of children. I hope you have experienced similar expressions of faith in children you know, here at Hope and elsewhere.

I have another purpose as well. My sermon title is A Special Ingredient and by the end of my message, I hope you will have identified that special ingredient. For I truly believe that the special ingredient is essential today if we want to be able to celebrate the faith of the children of the next generation.

We know from Mark’s gospel that children were special to Jesus. When people brought their children to him, his disciples tried to turn them away. The scripture tells us that when Jesus saw his disciples doing this, he became indignant. I don’t use the word indignant very often, but I’m pretty sure it means Jesus was angry at his disciples for turning the children away.

Then he laid the truth on the disciples: “Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.”

Let’s think about some of the characteristics of children that Jesus would like to see more of in his disciples and in us. Let’s start with humility. I have a story to share with you from a previous congregation.

On Palm Sunday 1996, the worship service hadn’t been underway long when the fire alarm sounded. A special anthem was just about to be presented by the combined children’s choir and adult choir. The children had entered the sanctuary with palm branches, but they had just gotten down front and were not
singing with the adults yet. When the shrill buzzing began, everyone and
everything just stopped, and the children pressed their hands over their ears to
block out the sound. I hoped this was just another failure in the building’s cranky
alarm system.

One of the Elders spoke clearly from the doorway to the Narthex, instructing
everyone to calmly leave the building in an orderly manner. As we stood outside
the building, we heard sirens and watched fire engines roar up the driveway and
stop. Fire fighters ran into the church building.

The alarms finally stopped, and, after a few more minutes, everyone was
asked to come back into the sanctuary. But we didn’t immediately return to
worship; people were talking loudly and standing in the aisles. I don’t remember
what the delay was, but the room didn’t feel like a “sanctuary” to me.

The choir members had regrouped down front, but many in the congregation
were still talking. The pianist began playing a gentle song, probably to try to get
the congregation to settle down. Then another sound could be heard. It was quiet
at first, but as the people realized what was happening, one by one, they became
silent. The quiet sound gained strength: the young children were singing along with
the piano. Soon, the only sounds in the sanctuary were from the voices of the
children and from the piano. The adults were all spellbound.

It wasn’t the special Palm Sunday anthem. The children recognized the song
that the pianist had been playing; they knew the words and without prompting from
their director, they started singing along: “Spirit... Spirit of gentleness, blow
through the wilderness, calling and free...”

Through the humble, simple voices of the children, the Holy Spirit restored
peace, and the room became a sanctuary once again.

Let’s think about another characteristic of children and their faith that Jesus
would like to see in us. Let’s think about trust.

Those of you who have cared for children, isn’t it a bit scary to realize how
much those children look up to you and trust you? On the other hand, a child’s
faith is a beautiful illustration of faith in action.
Malala Yousafzai is the youngest-ever Nobel Prize recipient. She has become quite well-known for her activism and advocacy for female education in Pakistan. Her family ran a chain of schools in northwest Pakistan, but the Taliban had banned girls from attending school.

In early 2009, when she was eleven, she wrote a blog for the BBC detailing her life under Taliban occupation, and her views supporting education for girls. Her outspokenness ran counter to religious law, which denied education to girls and forced them to marry at an early age.

You remember what happened next, in October 2012, a Taliban gunman boarded her school bus, asked for Malala by name, and shot her. She survived and was taken to England for medical care.

The assassination attempt sparked an international outpouring of support for her. The United Nations launched a UN petition using the slogan “I am Malala” demanding that all children worldwide be in school by the end of 2015. In July 2013, she spoke at the United Nations, calling for worldwide access to education. Among many other awards, just nine days ago, Malala Yousafzai was announced as the co-recipient of the 2014 Nobel Peace Prize for her struggle against the suppression of children and for the right of all children to attend school.

Malala trusted that her message was the right message, that good-thinking people would support her, and that no matter what the outcome, she was doing something holy. I have no doubt that she never expected to speak before the United Nations or be selected for the Nobel Peace Prize. Her life is a powerful illustration of what can happen when someone trusts in God and follows the Spirit’s prodding to take on a challenge.

We could go on at length, discussing many other characteristics of children of faith. Let’s look at one more characteristic that I think Jesus loved in children: joy.

This story took place right here, in this sanctuary. I started attending Hope in September 2013 and joined in early December, so last Christmas was my first at Hope UCC. I didn’t know many of you and I was still learning your names, so Christmas Eve was a bit different for me simply because I was new here.
The service was lovely; it included all of the aspects of the holy birth: the newborn baby, the shepherds watching over their flocks by night, and the heavenly chorus of angels. But what I remember best and what really touched my heart on Christmas Eve was a conversation that I had with a young member of this congregation. Before the service, Chloe beckoned me over and showed me what she was making with rubber bands. She talked about school and about books she had been reading. She really enjoyed a biography of Abraham Lincoln.

Those of you who know Chloe understand that her talking with me is completely in character for her. But for me, a new member here, Chloe shared with me something special: without even knowing it, she made sure my Christmas Eve—my first at Hope—was filled with joy and wonder. If Christmas is about anything, it is about joy and wonder.

Where did these children learn to have such faith, trust, humility, and joy? The source can be found in the special ingredient, and my message to you today is that God wants you to be a vessel that is overflowing with the special ingredient.

Let’s start looking for the special ingredient. Our second scripture this morning told the story of Jesus feeding the 5000 with five loaves and two fish. Who brought the five loaves and two fish? A little boy brought them.

The well-known story is a rich source of many themes, and I’ve heard many sermons over the years illustrate many different aspects of the story. But I don’t recall ever hearing a sermon mention this: who made the food and packed it in the basket for the little boy? The scripture is silent on this.

I think it was his mom or maybe his grandmother. Someone who loved that little boy made sure he took something to eat, with enough to share. I can confidently say “something to share” because that is what the boy did: he shared his food. Somebody taught him to be the kind of person who shares—and made it easy for him to do that by packing a little extra.

Please allow me to tell you another story from my own experience.

In the early 1990s, I directed the Youth Choir at O’Fallon United Church of Christ in southern Illinois. I have no formal training in vocal singing; the only
music education I have had, was learning to play the saxophone in middle school and high school. So there was little that I could teach them musically.

But in 1993, during rehearsals for Palm Sunday, God arranged things so that the teenagers in the Youth Choir all felt the touch of the Holy Spirit. Some of you will recall that the movie “Sister Act” came out in 1992 and it was a very popular movie, especially among choir members of all ages. The Youth Choir members wanted to learn to sing “I Will Follow Him” as it was sung during the movie.

“I Will Follow Him” was the final big song in the movie. It was essentially a spiritual version—almost—of the popular song by the same name. The movie’s version of the song begins very reverently, very sweetly: “I will follow him, follow him wherever he may go…”

Then there is a huge pregnant pause, and the pianist launches into the pop version of the song “I love him, I love him, I love him, and where he goes I’ll follow…”

My Youth Choir could sing the quiet, reverent part with ease. The faster, pop music part of the song—which was about two-thirds of the song—proved to be quite challenging for them. It wasn’t the words; it was the energy that was called for, the enthusiasm they needed to put into the music after the tempo accelerated.

The youth knew the song very well, but they weren’t putting their heart into it. There was no joy or exuberance.

I mentioned earlier that the song was for Palm Sunday, right? Our intention was to illustrate the triumphant entry into Jerusalem. The Youth Choir wanted to sing like the people who had been waving palm branches and singing loud hosannas to the Messiah. The teens were going to hide palm branches behind their backs as they sang the slow, reverent part of “I Will Follow Him” and would then wave their palm branches as the song transitioned into the faster, pop music part. That was our plan, anyway.

The rehearsal before Palm Sunday wasn’t going very well, and they knew it. They knew what the problem was, as well: they were concerned that they would make a fool of themselves on Palm Sunday. Either they would sing the song poorly, and the whole point about the triumphant entry would be lost, or they
would sing the song with exuberance but the congregation wouldn’t get the link to Palm Sunday. In a word, they were scared.

Here’s the part where the Holy Spirit led them, through me. I asked them if I could pray on their behalf, to ask God to enable them to sing with exuberance and without fear on Palm Sunday. I told them very clearly that they all needed to agree that they wanted me to pray to remove their fear, because if I prayed, their fears would be gone and they would sing as well as in the movie, and perhaps even better because it would be live and on Palm Sunday.

They talked about it for a few moments. One of them asked if I was serious. I responded that I had felt the touch of the Holy Spirit, and if we honestly asked to have our fear removed, it would be gone. With the Holy Spirit guiding us, we would not be able to sing the song meekly or poorly on Palm Sunday.

To this day, I still get goose bumps remembering what happened. They agreed that they didn’t like being afraid of ruining the song, especially on Palm Sunday, and they agreed that they didn’t want to be afraid of making fools of themselves. They decided to let themselves be led by the Holy Spirit.

When I prayed, I simply followed the Spirit’s urging. I said to God that we agreed to put ourselves in the Spirit’s hands, and that we would sing in whatever manner the Spirit led us on Palm Sunday. I specifically asked that our fears be taken from us.

On Palm Sunday, choir warm up was completely free of concern. Completely. I don’t want to stretch out the story; they sang beautifully. You could have heard a pin drop in the sanctuary during that pregnant pause between the slow part of the song and the fast part. The congregation was thinking: are they going to sing the fast part? The youth choir members, on the other hand, were thinking: we are going to sing the fast part. They sang with such joy and exuberance that when they finished, the congregation burst into applause, which is unheard-of in many Midwestern congregations…

Stephen R. Covey wrote “Love (the feeling) is a result of love (the verb)”. Doing something in love and faith for a child is a very special ingredient in your relationship to the child.
I’d like to close with an excerpt from a recent Carolyn Hax column. After Carolyn responded to a question about the value of hand-made gifts, another reader shared the following story that demonstrates the special ingredient we’ve been talking about.

Here’s what the reader shared:

“Some time ago, I decided to teach myself to crochet. One of my first projects was a blanket for my then-5-year-old daughter. The blanket is, well, odd. The stitches are wonky sizes, the colors don’t quite match, the size is weird, and it took FOREVER with my limited skills to finish.

“This daughter is turning 16 in a few days. Recently, we had a big blowout fight about … I don’t even remember. I finally ended the argument by saying I was going for a walk and we could both just cool down. When I got back, she was sitting with a mug of cocoa, wrapped up in that blanket. She said to me, ‘When we fight, I like curling up in this blanket and thinking about whatever we’re fighting about and what we can do to get past it. This blanket … you MADE it for me. So whenever we fight, I have something to curl up in to remind me that no matter what, you love me enough that you MADE this. And it’ll be okay, and you will always love me.’”

When we put our love and faith into action for our children, for all children, it is a very special ingredient.

Jesus said: “Whatever you did for one of the least of these, you did for me.” (Matthew 25:40)

He also said, “Whoever welcomes one of these children in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me, welcomes not me but the one who sent me.” (Mark 9:37)

I think Jesus was telling us that loving children … is loving God.

John Piper, preacher and author, wrote: “Receiving a child into your arms in the name of Jesus is a way to receive Jesus, and receiving Jesus is a way to receive God. Therefore how we deal with children is a signal of our fellowship with God. Something is deeply amiss in the soul that does not descend—or is it really ascend—to love and hold a child.”
Therefore, it may be good to call to mind the ways Jesus related to children. Ponder these and let them stir in you the longings of Christ. What could be more significant than receiving Christ and receiving God the Creator in him? Amazingly, Jesus says one way we may do this is through our ministry to children.

Our love and faith in action—your love and your faith, in action, speaks to our children. We saw it yesterday morning when a number of us traveled to Winchester to glean in an apple orchard. How many of you took children along with you? There were other children, and youth groups as well, gleaning food from the orchard, and they were experiencing the love and faith of adults in action, just as some of you did yesterday when your children saw you put your love and faith into action.

Is there a better ingredient for us as people of faith? It isn’t what we say or feel about children; it’s what we do with children to demonstrate our love and faith. That’s why I consider what you do for children to be a very special ingredient indeed.

Let us love not with words or speech but with actions and in truth. (1 John 3:18)

Amen.