In the book of Isaiah, chapter 11, the prophet casts a vision about the peaceful kingdom—a vision of shalom—that contains these words:

The wolf shall live with the lamb,  
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,  
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,  
and a little child shall lead them.

These words were quoted by Martin Luther King in his eulogy for the four little girls who were killed by the bomb that rocked the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama on September 15, 1963—Addie Mae Collins (14), Cynthia Diane Wesley (14), Carole Robertson (14), and Carol Denise McNair (11). In that sermon, King quoted from Isaiah 11 and then said, "May the death of these little children lead our whole Southland from the low road of inhumanity to the high road of peace and beloved community."

As I traveled through the Deep South with my fellow pilgrims from our church this week, those from Mayfield and from the community, I was profoundly moved by the stories of the children of the movement whose courage, sacrifice, and deaths were the catalyst of tremendous change in our nation’s history.

I cannot possibly do justice to all their stories in a short testimony, but at every civil rights institute, museum, or interpretive center from Atlanta, Selma, Montgomery, Birmingham, Memphis, it was the stories of children who moved and humbled me.

I saw the beaten face of 14-year-old Emmitt Till, whose murder by white supremacists in Mississippi in 1955, was so brutal and horrific it gave birth to organizations and spawned movements all over the country, inspiring everyone from Martin Luther King to Rosa Parks.

I saw the brave young black children like 6-year-old Ruby Bridges who faced racial slurs and sneers of white crowds while being the first to integrate the New Orleans Public Schools.

I saw that months before Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a Montgomery bus, there was a 15-year-old named Claudette Colvin who was a member of the NAACP youth council who gave up her seat and an 18-year-old named Mary Louise Smith refused to give up her seat. Both of them were forcibly removed and arrested by the police.

I saw that it was school children who left their class on a Tuesday, walked out of their schools, climbed out of windows and knocked down fences to march in the streets of Birmingham.

I saw that it was college freshmen from North Carolina A&T who trained and sat down at the counter of Woolworths in Greensboro who inspired the formation of "Snick" the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee that led hundreds of brave college students from all over the country—white, black, Jew, Christian, and many other backgrounds to board buses as Freedom Riders to
forcibly integrate the South. They were attacked, beaten, and bombed, but they continued to board buses and come south until the government intervened and things began to change.

On Mother’s Day, May 14th 1961, the KKK cooked up a trap for Freedom Riders in Anniston, Alabama. They bombed the bus with smoke and waited for the Riders to try and exit and beat them with pipes and clubs—they came out of the bus shouting horrible things as they attacked. Would anyone help the Freedom Riders? Not the police but at 12-year-old white girl named Janie Forsyth McKinney, a 7th grader living in Anniston whose Father worked closely with the KKK. She rushed out of her house with water and love to help the Freedom Riders. Later the Klan had a meeting to decide if Janie should die for helping the Freedom Riders, but they decided she was too young to kill and said she was just “a weak-minded, mentally deficient child.” Well, if that is what it means to be weak-minded and mentally deficient—then God I pray, give me a weak-mind and a mental deficiency—let me be weak-minded, let us all be weak-minded and mentally deficient like Janie Forsyth McKinney—a 12-year-old white girl who had more courage than a million soldiers.

As I have thought about the children whose stories are essential to understanding the Civil Rights Movement, I realized something that I never would have understood if I hadn’t gone on this pilgrimage. The Civil Rights Movement wasn’t just about overturning Jim Crow or even really about Justice and Freedom as abstract concepts. It was about the children—it was always about the children of the black community and the black church—it was about securing a better, a brighter, and more hopeful, just, future for their children. It was about building a new world for all children. It was about freedom not just for themselves but for their children and their children’s children, which is why the children whose lives were taken and the children who bravely stood against white supremacy inspired the movement in such a powerful a way.

Seeing through the eyes of black parents and pastors fighting for the freedom of their children, I was more deeply connected to the movement. My own awakening to racial injustice— my awakening to my own privilege and whiteness was sparked by the birth my daughter Lucy. Adopting and trying to discern how to raise a black child in America has changed my life. Helping her love her blackness, to know her history, and to appreciate the culture she came from has been a tremendous task and it has forced me to wrestle with and discover my own history. It opened my eyes for me to see myself, my responsibility and my role in the movement for black lives. Working for racial justice is not an abstract concept for me—it is personal—it is about my own daughter— one of the people that I love the most in the world, but it is also about the sons and daughters of our brothers and sisters at Mayfield who I love, and for all the children in the city of Charlotte and beyond who I must learn how to love as my neighbors.

I realize it shouldn’t require having a black child to make racism personal for us or to realize the work of racial justice is critical for all our children. As Robert Putnam argues in his book Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis, we will never get out of the mess we are in until we truly believe that all kids are not just God’s children, but our children regardless of race.

This is the reason why we partnered with Mayfield Memorial Baptist Church—for the sake of our children and our children’s children. This is the reason why we are doing projects like Freedom School, which began during the Civil Rights Movement in the poor towns of Mississippi, for the sake of our children and our children’s children. This is the reason why we have spent an entire year focusing on awakening to racial injustice—so that we can understand our history better and work together to build a new and better world for the sake of our children and our children’s children.

Make no mistake, this is not just for “their” children or for “black” children, but for the salvation, liberation, and deliverance of all children—especially our.
As Dr. King said in his “I Have a Dream” speech on the National Mall,

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream that one day, down in Alabama, with its vicious racists, with its governor having his lips dripping with the words of “interposition” and “nullification” -- one day right there in Alabama little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers. I have a dream today.

The work to build a new and better world for our children continues to be as relevant today as ever. Children are still dying in our world from violence injustice. Just this week the senseless bombing at a concert in Manchester, England resulted in the deaths of children as young as 8 years old. Just this week, a boat carrying hundreds of refugees fleeing from the violence of Civil War in Libya capsized off the coast drowning 31 people, and most of those who died were toddlers.

If this does not shake you to your core as a human being, then nothing will! But don’t let it just shake you, let it move you as well. Hear their cries of those who are suffering and drowning. Let their bravery, sacrifice, and death inspire you to do something—to live differently—to love more faithfully. As King said, "May the death of these little children lead our whole world from the low road of inhumanity to the high road of peace and beloved community."

The Deep South Pilgrimage provided me with great hope for the future as I saw black hands and white hands holding each other, carrying each other, walking with each other, and singing with each other with one voice this week, I know in a deeper way that the Spirit is moving in and among us and that we are not alone. I now know their children are my children and our children are their children and my child is their child. They told me so.

I now know that even though we are afflicted in every way, we are not crushed; we are perplexed, but we are not driven to despair; some among us are persecuted, but they are not forsaken; some are struck down, but they are not destroyed; because we are always carrying in our bodies the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in the world. I now know that peace will come and when it does—a little child shall lead us. I know that we are walking on this journey together hand in hand as the children of God for the sake of all our children. And so, in the words of the great spiritual I pray that God will help us to keep on walking together as we sing:

Walk together children...Don't you get weary.
Walk together children...Don't you get weary.
Oh, walk together children...Don't you get weary.
There's a great camp meeting in the Promised Land!

Amen.