



“The Spiritual Formation of Children”

Joshua 4:1-7; Acts 16:25-34

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Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost

Mark grew up in a wonderful family of remarkable parents and siblings. Mark’s father, a physician, along with his mother, taught and modeled service to God and the world. Their children followed in their footsteps. Mark was one of the youth pastors at our church. He is presently a professional counselor. His older brother was a missionary in Central America doing community development work among the poorest of the poor.

Mark’s missionary brother was kidnapped by revolutionaries and held for ransom. The government would not bargain with the kidnappers and the family did not have enough for the ransom. Long months passed with no word from the kidnappers. We didn’t know if he was dead or alive.

Our church held the family in our hearts and prayers. A network of churches formed, committed to praying for Mark’s brother and the entire family. More time passed, and not a single word.

After nearly a year, with no explanation offered, he was released unharmed. I’ll never forget the Sunday morning I announced the good news to the congregation. An audible gasp of relief was followed by spontaneous applause. Mark thanked us through tears of joy. Most of us joined him.

The lost brother was welcomed back to the bosom of his family safe and sound. The parents arranged for the family reunion to take place at the family’s weekend lake home. That ancestral gathering place became the site of a remarkable homecoming ritual worth consideration.

Mark’s parents asked each family member to find a large stone on the property and bring it to a family meeting in the back yard. His father instructed them to come one by one and place their stone in a growing pile of stones while offering a prayer of thanksgiving to God.

That pile of stones became a memorial to the safe return of son, brother and uncle. The parents are gone now but the pile of stones still stands, a reminder to those present that day of God’s goodness, a family’s love and a church family’s compassion and intercessory prayer. A new generation has been born since then and that pile of stones is the occasion for telling and retelling a faith story about a family, a church, and God’s grace.

Mark’s parents got their idea of the pile of stones from the Old Testament Lesson for today. After forty long years wandering in the wilderness, the people of Israel were ready to cross over into the land of promise. Moses was gone and young Joshua was the new leader. Only the Jordan River stood between Israel and the Promised Land.

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Joshua gathered the tribal leaders to organize the great crossing. He instructed each of them to pick up a large stone in mid-stream and take it to the other side of the river. On the other side they made a pile of stones as a memorial to that great day: entrance into the Promised Land.

Joshua then told the people that each time their children asked where that big pile of stones came from they were to retell the old story of their people and how God brought them safe into the land. That pile of stones made memory alive for the next generation. It was a symbol of God's presence and power. In a sense, it made the invisible real.

The people of God in every generation need to take every opportunity possible to scatter piles of stones in the lives of their children and families. Family stories are one pile of stones. Family rituals and traditions are another. When those stories are faith stories and the rituals are Christian they take on added power. Bible stories told at home or in church build small and large piles of stones.

Church traditions create memories and piles of stones. Christmas, for example, is part of American culture. In the church we surround that holiday with a season, Advent and all its symbols, events, sights and sounds. We create memories that live for a lifetime and in the process shape the souls of our children – and our own as well.

All such piles of stones make the spiritual visible and the eternal available to the senses. If handled with care, church and family traditions build faith, shape lives, and form character while introducing children to God in forms they can grasp and experience.

The spiritual formation of children takes place in two primary places: congregations and families.

Many, maybe most of you parents bring your children to Plymouth because you want to give them faith, moral development and a religious heritage to shape their lives. Something about parenthood connects us – or reconnects us – to faith and the need to have a spiritual life for ourselves and our children.

Being a parent reminds us of the need to have a spiritual life. Holding a child in your arms is a powerful reminder that a child is an awesome responsibility. Their very life depends on our faithfulness. And the shape of their character, along with their destiny, is in our hands. Most of us realize we're in over our heads, and we want help from God and from a community of faith. And so we bring our children to church to form their souls. We rely on the community of faith to help us figure out parenting and to help us in the difficult responsibilities of family life.

Each time we baptize a child, we vow before God and each other that these children and each family belongs to all of us and we share the responsibility of shaping their souls. We're in this together.

Meanwhile, if we're paying attention, the children with their innate sense of mystery, wonder, and eternity remind of us what really counts in life. Who of us hasn't looked into the face of a child filled with Christmas wonder and wanted to recover some of the mystery and awe too easily lost in the "real" world of adulthood. I'm reminded that this fallen world we adults inhabit and in which we work is not the most real world of all.

In my last church we had a lovely Candlelight Christmas Eve Service. The only light in the church came from two large candelabras up front and candles at end of each pew. It was magical and mysterious for me to see the candlelight reflected in the upturned faces of the faithful on the night of all nights.

One of our young fathers grew up in the church and had vivid memories of that service from childhood. He told me he wanted his children to have the same experience. That Christmas Eve he sat in the front pew with two children. I watched him with great interest.

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I think the wonder in his face was as large as that in the faces of his children. An old ritual from his childhood bore power to evoke the divine still. And he was planting a potent pile of stones in the lives of his children.

I want to assure you that if you brought your children to Plymouth to shape their souls, you came to the right place. We are committed to the spiritual formation of our children and families. At Plymouth Church children are not only valuable but each child is a part of this community and a participant in the life of the larger congregation. They worship with us, learn with us, play with us, eat with us and learn that being with adults is a good and normal experience.

Dr. Ivy Beckwith is a former colleague of mine. She presently is a minister to children in New Canaan, Connecticut. While we worked together, she wrote a book on ministry to children. It's the best book on the subject known to me.

Ivy insisted that children should be equal participants in the whole life of the church, including worship. Six or seven times a year, the children stayed in worship the entire hour. Children were the ushers. Children offered some of the prayers and read the Scripture Lessons. We worked hard at making the entire service accessible to children.

The sermon was a tough assignment. Sermons, by their very nature, are an adult experience filled with ideas and abstractions. Children don't think like us. So, without dumbing things down, I did work at speaking to the children.

One sermon was about our rascally old ancestor, Jacob. I found out later that as I was describing some of Jacob's shady behavior one of our children, who was entertaining himself drawing on the bulletin with crayons, leaned over and whispered to his mother, "Boy, that Jacob's going to be in lot of trouble!" Children do listen – and they can listen. That child, and I trust all our children, knew he was included in the congregation – even the adult parts. We were shaping his life.

This is nothing new. The church at its best always includes and integrates its children into the life of the community. Segregating children off from the larger community is very new – and very misguided.

Acts 16 is one of the memorable stories in the New Testament. Paul and Silas were doing missionary work in the Roman city of Philippi. Their message threatened a merchant who made his money using slave girls to tell fortunes. He got Paul and Silas thrown in jail.

During the night an earthquake rocked the prison and threw the doors wide open. The jailer, who was responsible for the prisoners on pain of death, assumed they'd all escaped into the night. Paul assured him they were all present and accounted for. The jailer was stunned and asked Paul how to become a Christian. Paul told the story of Jesus and salvation and assured him all he had to do was believe the story and he was in. "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved," Paul said.

He did. But notice the next thing that happened was the baptism of his entire household. A Roman household included everyone under that roof, including children and household slaves. The story mentions the entire household three times in case we miss the point.

Families matter to God. Children are an integral part of the kingdom of God. Remember that Jesus included children in his ministry – often to the consternation of his friends and his enemies.

A wise church places families and children at the center of its life where children are valued equals in the life of the community. In fact, if you remember the Lesson of several weeks ago, Jesus strongly suggests that we study our children and imitate their faith, humility, and unself-conscious trust in God, each other and us.

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But not just any church will do. All communities of faith are not equal. A genuinely Christian community bears specific character. And children need special nurturing that is Christian in character and content.

James Fowler (often quoted by Ivy Beckwith) has written extensively on the spiritual development of children. His studies reveal that the proper nurture of children requires:

- Unconditional love;
- Positive reinforcement;
- Realistic discipline;
- A dependable support system.

He also suggests that a nurturing community has specific character:

- Shared experiences,
- Shared goals,
- Group identity, and
- At least three generations (and fewer than 300 people).

I can attest to the formative power of a Christian community. I grew up in eastern Washington State just after World War II. The town was brand new. It was the site of a nuclear plant built during the war. Everyone came from somewhere else, creating an instant town of 30,000 people.

Everything was new, including churches. The members were excited to be pioneers in the new venture of town and faith. Our church met in a school for several years, then built its own church with volunteer help. Saturdays were work days at the church. Everyone came. The men constructed the building. The women supplied food, and we children ran around the work site enjoying ourselves and occasionally lending a helping hand. I also recall a piggy bank in the shape of a church given to all the children. I put a tithe of my allowance into that bank. Each nickel bought a cement block for the church. I was proud of my small but significant contribution to my congregation. When I'm back home and go by the old church, I still feel good about that place and my part in it.

When my parents went to an assisted living facility in that town, several women from the old church were living there. I used to see them in the lobby and the dining hall. After all these years, they still welcomed me – though usually confusing me with my brother Jim – and wanted to tell the old stories of the church back in the good old days.

Ruth Smith was one of the women. She was our neighbor back then and my mom's best friend. Every time I saw her she wanted to tell me some of the old stories about me and my brother. Those old stories are family stories, church stories and, best of all, faith stories. They still live in me and continue their work in my spiritual life.

But the most important part of our children's spiritual formation is our family. To a child, their family is everything. The church has our children, at best, fifty hours a year. You have them the rest of the time. It is a grave mistake to think the church is responsible for the spiritual life of your children. The primary responsibility is parental. The church is your minority partner in the enterprise.

If you want your child to have a spiritual life, you have to have one. If you desire the spiritual formation of your child, you must model spiritual formation. Children have a large and accurate hypocrisy detector strapped to their belts. You cannot fool a child. They know what we are and who we are – no matter what we might profess at church.

The family is the chief storyteller in the life of a child. Tell them family stories, faith stories, church stories and, of course, the biblical stories. They listen and they remember.

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My children have vivid memories of faith, friends and congregations – the good, the bad and the ugly. When I mention the names Rich and Doreen Gunderson, their eyes light up. They remember an older couple who welcomed our family into their home, their lives – and their swimming pool! They took an interest in our children that has never waned. And our children always want to know how Rich and Doreen are doing these days.

On the other hand, I mention the name, Tom, and their faces darken. Tom didn't like children, and children – including his own – didn't like him. He is part of our family's faith story too. We had to protect the children from him. And they continue to tell that story.

The spiritual formation of children is not easy – and perhaps more difficult now than ever. And there are no guarantees in the child-raising business. There are multiple shapers of the soul that want to claim our children. They are ours to protect, nurture and shape.

In a world that measures you and your children by achievements, appearance and so-called success, that divides people by vicious competition into winners and losers, and treats the losers with contempt, there is a place that has a radically different ethos and moral sense. With God there are no inferior or defective persons, including children. God offers grace to all without exception and with no conditions.

The church is privileged to give that same grace to all who participate in our life together. Here we find acceptance without condition, mercy and forgiveness without limits, and families of multiple generations whose lives are being shaped by the call to love God with all our being and to serve God's mission in the world with all our energy. And that, dear people of God, shapes the souls of our children – and us.

That is the challenge. Let's do it!

Amen

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