

Growing Resilient Children

Deuteronomy 6:4-9; Mark 12:28-34

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Children will never have faith unless there is a community of faith for them to live in and be influenced by.

- John Westerhoff, *Will Our Children Have Faith?*

[*Photo on screen:* In December, 1940, at the height of the London Blitz, (the bombing of London by the Luftwaffe early in World War II), photographer Herbert Mason was on the roof of his newspaper's building and took this famous photograph of St. Paul's Cathedral. The Sir Christopher Wren dome rises into the light out of the surrounding black smoke. The photograph is usually called "St. Paul's Survives." It became a photograph that gave encouragement and hope in the midst of despair. I want to talk about that this morning as we dedicate Hazel Rose Christopher and her family and we rededicate ourselves to raising children who will stand like St. Paul's Cathedral.]

Here's a story to keep in mind while the photograph is before us. During medieval days, it seems that two stonemasons were helping build a cathedral. A passerby asked them what they were doing.

The first stonemason said, "I'm just chiseling and chipping away on this block of stone until payday on Friday."

The second stonemason responded, "I'm building a cathedral that will not be finished until long after I'm gone, and which will last for generations" (see Alistair

McIntosh, *Hell and High Water: Climate Change, Hope, and the Human Condition*, p. 102-103).

Raising children, raising Christians of all ages, and being the church as we look at a challenging future, it might be helpful to keep both of these stonemason's comments in mind. Our vocation, our calling, our commitment involves lots of chiseling and chipping – the detailed work of showing up, praying for them (and for each other), paying attention, listening, learning, volunteering, teaching, guiding, becoming involved, and all of the other day-to-day mundane things needed to raise children and shape them into the people God.

Episcopal educator in the Diocese of Chicago, Vicki Garvey says, “According to Genesis, we were each created in the image and likeness of God. The ultimate goal of all Christian Formation is to assist people of all ages to realize and act on who they were created to be: the living and utterly unique images of God in this world.”

Quickly notice two things: first, what we're doing is formation, not simply education. Education is usually conceived as giving information. We do that here in church (and everyone of us need more education about our faith, our faith's history, and about the Bible). But more than education, we are committed to formation. The Apostle Paul said, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds...” (Rom. 12:2). Formation is training how we see, how we behave, and how we feel so we will be more like Jesus Christ.

Remember, we're all being formed by something, especially our children. Consumerism is constantly forming our children to be ravenous consumers who

never have enough. Technology, especially cell phones, wire our children's (and our) brains determining how we think, relate or not relate, and see each other and the world. We're all formed by something – it can be life-giving or death-dealing, the Way of Jesus Christ or the way of domination and diminishment.

Second, this is a communal task. We do this together. It's what we do together as the body of Christ. All of us together, in formal ways like worship and Sunday School but often in informal ways of conversation, interaction, and modeling behavior will be the way Hazel, and all of our children and youth will grow up into followers of Jesus and be the unique images of God in this world.

The Christian life is caught more than it's taught. And children catch it from you and me. Theologian Walter Brueggemann says, "If you ask almost any adult about the impact of church school on his or her growth, he or she will not tell you about books or curriculum or Bible stories or anything like that. The central memory is of the teacher, learning is meeting." This is true of Sunday School, but it is also true of worship, and all the other aspects of being in church. It is about meeting – relationships, community. So when Pastor Sarah calls on you to help with the children, or we have an intergenerational event, or we're just sitting around at a potluck or around one of Steve Chism's bonfires, remember this is not simply about you. This is about *us*. This is about us raising and being the community for our children. This is about meeting.

This also means that we remember the second stonemason's comment, too. If the first stonemason was focused upon the daily chiseling and chipping on a block of stone, the second was mindful that the task is bigger than any of us. We are part of something that started long before we came along, and we hope

something that will be here long after we're gone, something that will last. In being the church, in raising children, and preparing for the future, we are building cathedrals that will stand and withstand.

Which brings us to our Scripture readings this morning. The Deuteronomy reading is about the commandments of God that we are to keep, and that we are to teach our children. This commandment is called the "Shema Yisrael" which is the first two words used in our reading: "Hear O Israel" or "Listen! O Israel." Jews are to recite this prayer every day: "Hear O Israel, The Lord our God is Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep them these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise..." (Deuteronomy 6:4-9).

Studies show that the most important influence in faith becoming real in a child's life is if the faith is real at home. Do parents talk comfortably and naturally about God, church, and faith or not? If faith is real and natural at home, it is highly likely that it will be real and natural in a child's life and as they grow into adulthood. Deuteronomy tells us to recite and talk about God and Jesus and the Bible and church at home, so our children see God as a real part of our daily lives.

In our Mark reading, Jesus is asked by the religious authorities, "Which commandment is the greatest?" and Jesus responds with the Shema, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your

strength.” Then Jesus adds a verse from Leviticus 19:18, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:28-32).

Our calling is to raise our children who will grow up loving God, and loving their neighbors as themselves.

Some years ago, while attending an Alliance of Baptists meeting somewhere, I was in the car with three highly respected and esteemed pastors who served very fine congregations. They started talking about conversations with youth from their churches who had recently gone off to college. These young people were raised in the loving congregational care of good churches but when they went off to college, elite universities for many of them, these young Christians were shocked at the greed and meanness, the ruthlessness and the bigotry they encountered among other students. These youth from these churches were not prepared for how hard it was out there.

We must train-up and grow tough young Christians. On one hand there is this shocking Fundamentalism that is xenophobic, bigoted, judgmental, and prone to violence. On the other hand, the secular reaction does not look promising. Over time the secular world will not care for the different nuances of religious affiliation. We'll all be tarred with the same broad brush.

Add to all that climate change, refugees and the fear and anger people are feeling toward others who are perceived to be different, guns, racism, hunger, poverty, injustice, and on and on. We need to be tough and resilient and we need tough and resilient children.

We are facing a world, to use Martin Luther King's prophetic words, where the choices are increasingly chaos or community. We need followers of Jesus who know how to have conversations and build relationships and nurture community rather than people who only know how to live in their technological and political bubbles, each packing their own personal arsenal. We need young Christian adults who can show there is another way to death and destruction and diminishment, who can witness with their very lives that God is the God of love and that means loving God and loving their neighbors as well as loving themselves.

Back to our photograph: when the black smoke billows, will the church, will the cathedral of our children's lives rise in the light? If so, it will be largely because of you, like stonemasons chiseling and chipping, shaping, loving, helping, spending time with, teaching, praying with, day-by-day, while always remembering the bigger picture – God is at work.

Heinrich Heine, the 19th century German poet, commented on what it took to build the great cathedrals, "People in those old times had convictions; we moderns only have opinions. And it needs more than a mere opinion to erect a Gothic cathedral."

In the movie *The Big Lebowski*, the Dude responds to a bully by saying, "Well... that's just... like, your opinion, man." In today's world and the world that we're facing, with bullying religion, bullying power and money, bullying politics, and a bullying culture, we need conviction – the conviction that Jesus Christ is Lord and we are to be people who love God, and love our neighbor as ourselves.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.