

Sunday May 14th, 2023

Mother's Day

1 Peter 1:17-23

"Mom's Greatest Gift."

I suspect that most of us have had the following experience or at least witnessed something like it at some point in our lives. A man was doing his grocery shopping at the local supermarket and happened to be in the vicinity of a woman whose three-year-old daughter was in the front basket of the cart. As they passed the cookie section, the little girl asked frequently, and insistently, for cookies and her mom repeatedly said "no".

Immediately, the little girl began to whine and fuss, and the mother said quietly, "now Ellen, we just have half the aisles left to go through; don't be upset. It won't be long." The man passed the mother and daughter again in the candy aisle. Grocery shopping with young children is like navigating a mine field. No matter which aisle you are in there is something you can run across to set a child off.

Anyway, as you can probably guess, the little girl, surrounded by chocolates and all manner of sweets began shouting for candy. When she was told she couldn't have any, she began to cry, her face turning red, and her lips formed into a pout. The mother said, "There, there, Ellen, don't cry. Only two more aisles to go, and then we'll be checking out."

The man happened to be behind the pair at the checkout, where the little girl began to demand some gum and burst into a terrible tantrum upon discovering there would be no gum purchased today. The exasperated mother, quietly and patiently said, "Ellen, we'll be through this checkout stand in five minutes, and then you can go home and have a nice nap."

The man, who observed all this, followed them out to the parking lot and stopped the woman to compliment her. "I couldn't help noticing how patient you were with little Ellen." The woman looked at him with bewilderment. "I'm Ellen" said the mother, "My little girl's name is Tammy." Anyone, parent or not, who has tried to navigate a grocery store with a toddler, knows the struggle it can be to maintain your patience and sanity as you race past sugary treats.

Parenthood can have many blessings and joys, but it can also be fraught with difficulties. Perhaps we can appreciate Bruce Lansky who said, "Parenthood is a lot easier to get into than out of." Every Mother's Day and Father's Day I get somewhat nostalgic, as I remember moments when I was a little tyke and when my two kids were little tykes, growing and exploring the world around them.

I am very conscious of the fact that they have grown up so very quickly, and before Laura and I knew it, they were off on their own, making their own life story. Comparing my experience as a parent with friends and family, I am also aware, that there is a wide variety in parenting styles, influenced by many things. Culture, religious faith, economic circumstances, family structure, our own experiences as a child, education, and even where we reside can all influence our parenting.

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Whatever the influences, however, we have, I believe, for the most part, sought to help our children grow into productive and solid citizens of this society. In fact, we recognize the importance of good parenting, because parents often get the blame when their child does something terribly wrong. If a kid does vandalism, or steals something, or commits violence, we often say, "Where are the parents? How could they raise such a child?"

I guess, one way to look at it is that all of us who are parents have left our children many gifts over the years. Some are tangible gifts like material goods, but others are intangible things like: values, work ethic, traditions, manners and so on. Parenting is an incredible responsibility, for from the moment our little one enters this world, and draws their first breath, our work has begun. Sadly, and I may be preaching to the choir here, our responsibilities have been taken far too lightly by some parents.

Despite this though, and there are some very sad exceptions to the observation I am about to make, but generally we are very good to our children. Yes, we make mistakes, but for the most part, we endeavor to care for our offspring. In general terms, we: feed them, clothe them, seek out the best educational opportunities, seek for them medical care, and even strive to grant recreational opportunities and experiences.

We want our children to not just physically live but thrive and enjoy the good things of life. Am I not right about this? What is very odd, however, is that as conscientious and committed as we are to raising our children, there is one aspect of life that far too many parents are neglectful in their parenting. I am of course talking about the spiritual needs of a child. It is mindboggling to me how such an important aspect of parenting can be so undervalued.

The Apostle Peter is very blunt in his assessment of the situation before all of us. He tells us that God has no favourites when he judges, and we are to live in reverent fear of him, meaning having a deep respect. Peter also reminds us of the high cost to ransom us. He writes, "For you know that God paid a ransom to save you from the empty life you inherited from your ancestors...He paid for you with the precious lifeblood of Christ, the sinless, spotless Lamb of God." (vs.18-19)

What caught my attention in thinking about being a parent, and considering this being Mother's Day, is that phrase "Save you from an empty life". I fear that we, as a society, are raising a whole generation of people living empty lives. This is not to say that our children and our youth are not leading busy lives, because they are. They have all kinds of activities and technology to fill up their time. But busy does not equal fulfilled.

I am not anti-technology. I can see the attraction and value of social media, and the immediate ways we can connect to each other, but are we any more fulfilled as people just because we can instant message or "twitter" someone? Can I tentatively suggest that all this effort to be wired into the world, is maybe covering up the void that resides in our souls? I am convinced, more than ever, of the truth of "Chaos theory"; a theory I first heard about oddly enough, in the movie Jurassic Park. Chaos theory states that "nature abhors a vacuum".

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Regardless of what eastern mysticism believes, you cannot empty yourself totally. Something will always seek to reside in your heart. The question is always, what resides in your heart?

I am really baffled by the ridiculous notion that some parents put forth, that they will let their children find their own way in spiritual matters. It is incredible that any intelligent person could think such a thing, but they do. I hear often, "Well, I'm going to let my Suzy or Johnny decide for themselves when they are old enough." I remind you that when children are growing up, they are vulnerable, and easily influenced.

Nature abhors a vacuum, so if you do not influence your children, someone, or something else will. If we truly believe in the importance of having faith in God through Christ Jesus, how can we sit on our hands when it comes to training and leading our children to God? Do we not see what is at stake? Peter writes, "And remember that the heavenly Father to whom you pray has no favourites when he judges."

Try looking at it this way. Imagine for a moment, that as a parent, I decided that when Josh or Rachel, were young children, I refused to teach them the necessary caution in crossing a road. Let's say I decided that they didn't need to know the rule, "look all ways before crossing." Let's say I just let them experiment and see if they can figure it out. Maybe a bus will hit them, but maybe they will have a close call and learn from it.

If that was my child rearing philosophy, you might call me cruel or reckless. You might even want to call Children's Aid. Frankly, I don't blame you. So, if we are so careful in teaching our children about how to cross a street, why are we so cavalier in teaching them the most important lesson of life; that God loves them, and died for them and to be saved they must believe in him and follow him.

Redemption is God's plan for all people. Redemption was why Jesus came, died on the cross and rose from the dead. Redemption is the most important thing in the universe for all of us to receive. Yet, we must make sure people; especially our children get the message. A message taught not just with our words, although that's important, but through our lives lived out before them.

However, as the old proverb states, "You can lead a horse to water, but you cannot make it drink". You can lead your children to Christ, but they must accept him on their own accord. As our mother's gave us physical birth, Christ by his sacrifice grants us our second spiritual birth. But we must want this for ourselves. Only God can fill the emptiness in our lives, and my faith cannot fill the emptiness in someone else.

But let me remind you again that it may not be faith in Christ that fills the vacuum, but something will. As Jesus said, "Where your heart is, there your treasure will be as well." Evidence of where our hearts are, will be evident to anyone who examines our lives, including our children. The one sure sign of authentic faith, Peter tells us, is "sincere love" for each other. Claiming to have faith, and having it, are two different things.

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You and I know, from experience, that claiming something is true is not the same as it being true. Authenticity is something people try to pretend all the time. I wonder if anyone here has ever heard the incredible story of "Sober Sue". Well, if you happen to be a theatre buff, and historian, you just might have heard of her.

In 1908, the manager of the Hammerstein's Victoria Theatre on Broadway, marched a woman on stage, during intermission, and offered \$1,000 (a great deal of money at the time) to anyone in the audience who could make the woman-laugh. Many of us have played a similar game where we try to get someone to laugh as a contest. Trying jokes, funny faces etc., to try and get a smile.

When no one in the audience succeeded in getting Sober Sue to even crack a smile, the manager up the ante, by inviting New York's top comedians to try. Over the next several weeks, just about every headlining comedian in New York performed their best material in front of Sober Sue, hoping to benefit from the publicity that they were the first to make her laugh. Everyone failed to make Sue laugh, but Sober Sue became one of Broadway's top theatre attractions.

However, it wasn't until after she left town that Sober Sue's secret finally leaked out. Her facial muscles were paralyzed-she couldn't have laughed even if she wanted to. The Victorian theatre had cooked up the "contest" to trick New York's most famous- and most expensive-comedians into performing their routines for free. (Uncle John's Monumental Bathroom Reader, pg. 29)

Being authentic in our faith is not something we can pretend. Doing Christian activities does not give assurance of authentic faith. As the late Keith Green used to say, "Going to church doesn't make you a Christian any more than going to McDonalds makes you a hamburger." What is filling the heart of our children? Do we even know? Maybe we need to examine first, what is filling our hearts.

So, as a parent let us ask some good questions. I may have taught my child to ride a bike, but have I taught them how to pray? I may have helped my child learn to read but have they learned to apply that skill to scripture? I may have helped my child learn to do their banking, but have I taught them to be generous to the causes of Christ? I may have given my child an iPod, cell phone, game cube, internet connection, driving lessons, or any manner of material blessing, but have I given them love.

I mean to say, given our children, the kind of authentic love that teaches them, to love others. Have we given our children the kind of authentic love which can only originate from the only source of true love, namely God in Christ. Have you come to trust God enough, as Peter suggests, letting his purpose, and his love, direct your children; or is your agenda what is at work in their lives.

Is God filling the vacuum in your children's hearts or are you allowing something else to creep in? This past week has seen our whole society in turmoil over one of the hardest questions to answer.

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Many of us have engaged in a titanic struggle over what to get Mom for Mother's Day. What would she like? Would she like flowers, a nice card, some sweets, or a piece of clothing or in the case of my mother, maybe something for her garden? (A garter snake perhaps) Let me suggest a bold departure from the traditional approach to Mother's Day. In addition to figuring out how to honour our mothers today, maybe we should turn the question around.

Perhaps today, we should challenge the parents among us, to ask what they have given their child that has some eternal significance. Have I taught them to believe in something beyond themselves? Have I prepared them for the greatest challenge they will ever experience, namely the return of Christ and the impending accounting before God?

No greater act of true love can ever equal a parent's effort to point their child to the one and only source of life, hope, and eternal salvation, namely God in Christ. So, mom and dad, what are you pointing to for your children?