

Sunday May 12th, 2024

Mother's Day

1 John 4:7-21

"Fear Has No Place in the Home"

In a story many mothers can relate to; a mother came home from shopping and found her freshly baked pie dug out crudely from the center. A gooey spoon lay in the sink, and crumbs were scattered over the kitchen counter and floor. She called her son to the kitchen, "Peter," she said sternly, "you promised me you wouldn't touch that pie before dinner." Peter hung his head. "And I promised I'd spank you if you did," she continued.

Peter brightened. "Well now that I've broken my promise," he offered, "It is okay with me if you break yours, too!" Ah, the joys of childhood. Breaking rules and experiencing the creative correction of our parents. In my day that included: a swat to the bottom (sometimes with a wooden spoon or hairbrush), a time out, time in my room (and remember this is before rooms were complete with computers and other electronic gadgets), grounding, or being sent to my room without supper.

In some families the threat, "Wait until your father gets home", was enough to evoke terror. And yet even with the threat of punishment, we still tried to push the limits of our parents' tolerance. I don't know if my mother was exceptionally smarter than the average mother, but I never seemed to be able to pull the wool over her eyes. She could see right through my lies, but I have never been a very skilled liar. Take for example the "magazine incident" when I was about nine years old.

It all began with one of the older boys in our neighbourhood who happened to live next door, securing a copy of a, now I know this is shocking but it happened, securing a copy of a *Playboy*. The older boy and his friends had hidden it away under a tree stump near the Catholic school where he attended. The older boy's younger brother, who was my age, started bragging to the neighbourhood boys about this so called "hidden treasure".

We of course didn't believe him; so, to show off, he led a contingent of local boys, including my brother and me, to the secret stash. He then proceeded to show off the contraband, referring to what he described as the "good parts" of the magazine. Our tour guide was getting so much attention from this tattered, water-stained magazine, that I grew jealous of his claim to fame, so I hatched a plan.

The next day I road back on my own, and stole the magazine, bringing it home and hiding it in the woodpile behind our house. Honestly, I really didn't care about the magazine per se; I just wanted to possess something the neighbour kid had. I bragged about my theft to Ian my brother but warned him to tell no one and I had also told him that if mom found the magazine, that he was to say it was the boy next door who put it in the woodpile, and we had never seen it before. It was a plausible lie, since the neighbour boy was known for very bad behaviour.

So, Ian said just that to mother. I think mom was on to us though, because with Ian sitting there, she began to leaf through it to gauge Ian's reaction, and without thinking Ian spouted off all the page numbers where the "extra special bits" were found.

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Well not only did I lose the magazine, but I endured the wrath of the boy next door, and let's just say I had trouble sitting on a chair for a little while when mom got through with me.

I was thinking about my childhood, and children in general this week as Mother's Day approached, and I asked myself a question. Why do we learn to lie? What value is there in learning how to deceive other people? I mean, we learn to do this at a very young age. A two-year-old learns somehow to deny doing something that the evidence clearly indicates they did. In and of itself this is clear evidence of the fall of humankind, and the presence of sin in our world, but why do we lie?

There must be some motivation, or some perceived benefit. Let me suggest that the reason is quite simple; lying is motivated by fear. In fact, a great deal of sinful behaviour is motivated by fear. When we are small children, we lie because we fear our parents' punishment. We lie in school to avoid punishment by a teacher or principle. We lie, therefore, to avoid the unpleasant consequences of our actions.

In fact, let us be honest with ourselves in recognizing that as: parents, teachers, or other authority figures, we depend on the fear of consequences. We hope that the ever-present threat of a spanking, grounding, detention, or removal of privileges will be enough to motivate the people in our charge to avoid bad behavior. Governments do the same thing but on a grander scale, threatening fines, and jail time for those who violate laws. As a society we depend on these threats and even demand harsher punishments.

We call them deterrents, and during the cold war we had nuclear deterrents, where the threat of nuclear retaliation kept the other side from firing their missiles. Fear is a great motivator. It generally works very effectively at keeping people on the straight and narrow. Fear encourages socially acceptable behavior and can even promote unexpected behavior like the wearing of masks or avoiding pork products to avoid the swine flu.

The problem with fear as a motivator is that rarely does the one promoting fear receive much affection from the one living in fear. Even if we deserve our punishment, we will not likely feel very positive towards the one punishing us. A case in point is the anger a child feels when deservedly punished for doing something wrong. Even if they know they are guilty, they still might shout in anger that they hate their parents.

Good parents know that the greater good of disciplining their child outweighs any temporary ill feelings the child directs at the parent. The use of fear as a motivator though is a two-edged sword. It seems to work effectively at discouraging bad behavior, but over time it almost certainly destroys relationships. No one wants to be close to someone who promotes fear in them.

Just look at little children who hide behind mom or dad when some stranger approaches, they avoid the unfamiliar because it breeds fear. I think that this attempt to control behaviour with fear has created a whole society now consumed with fear.

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This week, especially, we have seen ample evidence of how fearful we've become, despite assurances from experts. We fear pandemics, we fear economic recessions, we fear random violence, doctors and dentists. We fear governments, neighbours, strangers, groups of young people, dark places, authority figures, and we even fear the very people we should never have to fear.

And who are these people we should never have to fear? Why our families, of course. Life has enough challenges, and enough terrors, that we need one place where we feel secure. John writes about the nature and the power of love. He defines God as being love, and states that we love because God first loved us. Love is the very essence of a life in Christ, and when we live in Christ our love grows more perfect.

Then we have what I consider one of the greatest verses in scripture, "Such love has no fear, because perfect love expels all fear. If we are afraid, it is for fear of judgment, and this shows that his love has not been perfected in us." In a family, or in our homes, there is no place for fear. Yes, there is plenty to cause us anxiety, like the present state of our economy, but inside our sanctuary of family, love and not fear must reign.

Our children, even if they are adults, will struggle to cope with life if all they have ever known is fear. If a child does not know the assurance of perfect love from their parents, then how can we expect them to believe that God is love? Perfect love in a home benefits everybody, by creating a confidence to face whatever the world throws at us, because we know that at least at home we are loved.

I ran across a wonderful true story years ago, in which two men were discussing the one man's son. The young man had become the ideal model for the prodigal son. He drank too much, used recreational drugs, womanized and rarely, if ever, tried to get a job or look after himself. The one man said to the father of the wayward boy, "If he were my son, I would throw him out on his ear."

The father paused and then responded, "If he were your son, I'd throw him out too, but he is my son." The rule of perfect love, however, is to be in full operation the moment our child is born and enters our home. As our children grow, we respond to their anxieties about life with patience and confidence. That goes for make believe anxieties like the monsters under the bed, to real ones like the bully next door.

Over the years, as our children grow and develop independence, the fears they will face will grow in intensity and although we do not fight all their battles, we can give them a place of: refuge, advice, and yes even support to face those fears because we surround our loved ones with perfect love. As one wise person once said, "Home is the place where they have to take you in."

So, maybe we need to think about what "perfect love" is. As we have examined before there is a great deal of confusion about what true love is. Love often gets wrapped up in discussions about feelings and sentimental expressions in cards and songs. 1 John 4:10 reads, "This is real love."

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It is not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins.” A statement about the very heart of the gospel message but think for a moment about the implications of this kind of love in our families. If we are to emulate the kind of love God in Christ showed, then we need to put ourselves in God's shoes, so to speak.

Let me take some liberties with what John wrote, “This is real love. It is not that our children loved us, but that we loved our children and gave ourselves completely to the care and betterment of our children, regardless of any love returned to us.” It may be hard for us to hear sometimes, but our children are not in our lives for our betterment. They are not with us to stroke our egos, or fulfill us, or provide for us in our old age, stop our biological clock, provide a legacy, or any other reasons that we can come up with.

Our children are not a possession and will at some point, if they are to be healthy adults, find their God given path in life. A path that may very well lead them out of our lives, or to far corners of the earth. Our children may indeed love us, and that is wonderful, but in our parent-child relationship the onus is entirely, 100% on us to love. Our children will learn to love because we first loved them.

We under value in our society the importance of raising our children, and I believe it all has to do with perspective. Tony Campolo tells the story of his wife being asked by a female sociology professor, “And what is it that you do, my dear?” Mrs. Campolo's response is wonderful.

I am socializing two Homo sapiens into the dominant values of the Judeo-Christian tradition in order that they might be the instruments for the transformation of the social order into the kind of eschatological utopia that God willed from the beginning of creation!”

Then Mrs. Campolo asked politely and sweetly, “And what is it you do?” The woman answered humbly, “I...I...teach sociology.” It is time for us to see the task of raising children as a high and holy task. A task designed for the benefit of our children first and foremost, and for society, but not for our sake or the sake of our self-fulfillment. And maybe that is why fear is present in our families instead of perfect love.

We make decisions, and take actions, not based on the best interests of our children, but based on our fears about: our own needs, or how things look to our friends and neighbours, or to try and calm our anxieties about what is going on in the world. If we truly love our families, there should be no fear in our homes. The confidence of Christ that ushers in perfect love can make us safe and secure from all alarm.

John sums this up beautifully in chapter 5 when he writes,
Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is a child of God. And everyone who loves the Father loves his children, too. We know we love God's children if we love God and obey his commandments. Loving God means keeping his commandments, and really, that isn't difficult.

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For every child of God defeats this evil world by trusting Christ to give the victory. And the ones who win this battle against the world are the ones who believe that Jesus is the Son of God. (5:1-5)

I am sure that most, if not all mothers and fathers want their children to be victors in this world, and to be confident and well-adjusted adults. And to know what true love is and be able to offer such love to their spouses and their own children. The world can be a scary place, but perfect love casts out all fear, and the one place all of us should experience such love in our families.

If you do not know freedom from fear in your home, then maybe it is time to reconnect to Christ, and let his love flow into you and perfect you as a spouse, a parent, a grandparent or as a caring friend.