



PARENTS - BEING AND HAVING

2 Corinthians 5:9 - Father's Day

Pastor Phil Schroeder Pentecost 4, 17 June 2018 Nativity Lutheran Church - Week 7/18

Jesus today describes something that is very familiar and very near (Mark 4:26-34). Little seeds get planted, and what develops is a field of corn or beans or a garden of flowers or vegetables. Isn't it wonderful? Don't you love seeing it happen each year? The growth of a seed is beyond all our science and technology - we cannot manufacture seeds that grow, we can only harvest them. Jesus points us to the wonder - a tiny mustard seed, or pine nut, becomes a great shrub, or pine tree, with large branches and birds build nests in it. And he says the kingdom of God is like that. Now be careful - "kingdom of God" doesn't mean "die and go to heaven," "kingdom of God" means "live and let God be your king, let God have God's way with you." That kingdom of God grows like a seed, Jesus says - small beginnings, greater ends. Come to think of it: Jesus is the small beginning, Jesus is the mustard seed, or pine nut, of the kingdom of God, and today we chirping birds gather again at our nest in the shade of one of the branches of the great shrub/tree that is Jesus' church. We are his planting, we are his people, we eat his meal...we want him to be our king, now.

Now here is something very like it. A little seed gets planted, and what develops is...a son or a daughter - small beginnings, greater ends. The growth of a child is beyond all our science and technology - we don't manufacture eggs and sperm, we only harvest them. But isn't it wonderful...the way families grow? Sometimes it doesn't work, and then we're sad, because children are such a great gift. But we're not completely stymied even then because there are other children who can use our care and our parenting.

We think about parenting today. Today is Father's Day. Mother's Day was last month. Let's be fair and talk about both today, fathers and mothers.

A father was about to go out for a few groceries once, and his four-year-old, who would usually say, Daddy, will you bring me a surprise, this time said, Daddy, will you bring me something that will last forever? She was only four years old, but already she was looking for something that didn't just get used up. Father thought about this while he was in the store, he noticed that there was no Forever

Shelf, only produce and canned goods and the like. But to his great surprise and joy he did find something that would fill the bill and last, well, almost forever, at least a long time. What he took home to his little girl was himself...and his renewed thrill at being her father.

What does it mean to be a father, a mother? One thing the Bible says it means is to teach a child how to live. "Train up children in the way they should go" is the way the Book of Proverbs puts it (22:6). A town in Arkansas some years ago tried to make it a law for parents to do that - I don't know whether the law has survived or not. Parents in this town had to take responsibility for their children's behavior. If their children broke the law, the parents could be put in a public stockade. And if the parents simply couldn't control their children, they could sign papers saying that, and then the court would rule on what to do with those children. But the parents had to pay \$100 or do twenty hours of community service, and they had to display a sign in their window and a bumper sticker on their car that said, My children are not my responsibility, they are yours.

That probably sounds like cruel and unusual punishment to some parents, but the Bible at least does make it the responsibility of parents to teach their children to be good and do good. Children do not just randomly turn out to be good or bad, and the idea that children should be left free to choose their own values is not giving your children freedom but depriving them of parenting. Parents cannot control everything a child does, that's true, but parents do have a responsibility before God and society for how their children are raised. And children appreciate good parenting, do you believe it, even though it's part of being a child, it seems, to make it look as if you hate strict rules and discipline? A study of some fifth- and sixth-graders produced some surprising results. The ones who had been reared with careful discipline generally possessed high self-esteem and were high achievers, academically and socially. And they were happier than those who had been reared by overly-permissive parents.

Kenny Wheeler was a gang counselor in Los Angeles. He grew up and went to school surrounded by gangs, but he was saved by his parents and one teacher. He skipped school one day, the teacher immediately called his home, and his parents went looking for him until they found him. Today he says: "The other guys laughed for a week - but now some of them are junkies or in jail. It was worth the week that they humiliated and teased me (not to have turned out as they did)."

Children need to know where the boundaries are. They need parents who love them enough to hang tough sometimes - not with physical punishment arising out of anger and impatience but with a neat, God-inspired combination of firmness and gentleness. "Train up children in the way they should go, and when they are old, they will not depart from it. Teach children how they should live, and they will remember it all their life" - that isn't always true, but it is largely true.

Another thing it means to be a father or a mother is to teach your children trust and confidence. Sam Levenson used to tell the funny story of the boy who was going to camp and his parents were signing all the necessary papers for his admission when his younger brother looked up with tears in his eyes and asked, Why are we selling Robert? Well, just so Robert knew he wasn't being sold. The first thing small children need is security, a stable place where they know they belong. "Home," someone said, "is where when you go there they have to take you in." Parents work hard to give their children attention and encouragement and safety. They don't aim to scare or frighten their children - they aim to provide a place to come home to when the world becomes scary or frightening for them. It takes a lot of time and energy to do this - that's why parents get tired - but it is important for children to learn trust and confidence.

Mickey Mantle's story is an interesting one. He was deeply influenced by his father - it was his father who made a baseball player out of him. His father got him a baseball cap when he was still in the cradle and a baseball uniform when he was five. And that's when he began teaching him to switch-hit, too. Every day after work his left-handed father would pitch tennis balls to his son while he batted right-handed, and his right-handed Grandpa would throw to him while he batted left-handed. Mantle grew up to be one of the best switch-hitters in baseball. He says: Dad hammered baseball into me for recreation, but he did more than that - he taught me confidence.

Trust and confidence are primary functions of the home. It's interesting that the most popular name for God in the language of Jesus, who wants us to trust God's everlasting goodness and to pray to him...the most popular name is Father. Fathers,

and mothers too, have God's own reputation to uphold to their children.

And that's yet another thing it means to be a father or a mother - to teach your children to know God. I am so glad for parents who teach their children to pray, and I'm glad for our younger families who make it a point to have their children in church and Sunday School every week. I know it is no small effort - we did it years ago for our three children. There is statistical evidence that such parents will not be sorry. Attendance at church and Sunday School can make a big difference in a child's life - even if they don't understand everything that's going on, they absorb a sense of worship, a sense of fellowship, and a sense of commitment to something beyond their own selfish interests, and so these things will not be strange to them, as they are to many, when they have grown up.

There is an old story about the great English poet, Samuel Taylor Coleridge. He was talking once with a man who simply did not believe in giving his children religious instruction. His theory was that a child's mind should not be prejudiced in any direction - children should be free to make up their own minds about religious matters (it seems to be a popular idea still today). Coleridge did not argue with his visitor, but after a while he took him to see his garden. The visitor looked at it and could not restrain himself: "Why, this is not a garden," he said. "There is nothing here but weeds!" "Well, you see," answered Coleridge, "I did not wish to infringe on the liberty of the garden in any way. I wanted to give the garden a chance to express itself and to choose for itself what it would produce." A garden, as you know, requires careful work, and so do children - it is neither love nor freedom simply to let happen whatever will. I like the definition of freedom that says: "Freedom isn't the right to do what you please, it's the ability to become what you should." That's the freedom parents want to give their children, the ability to become what they can and what they should. A garden needs a lot of care to become a garden, and so does a child.

Which brings us back to where we started - planting seed. The aim of fathers and mothers is to plant seeds, to plant good seeds in the garden of their children - seeds of goodness and health, seeds of joy and celebration, seeds of discipline and ambition, seeds of commitment and faithfulness...or to go with St. Paul's list in Galatians 5, seeds of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. The aim of parents is to plant seeds...and do some weeding, too. These seeds look so tiny when we plant them - we wonder whether this could ever make a difference in anyone's life. But we quickly discover that everything makes a difference, even if not always right away.

A Baptist preacher once learned that the hard way. His two boys found a stray dog and brought it home - it was coal-black and had three very distinctive white hairs in its tail. One day they saw a notice in the newspaper of a lost dog that fit exactly the description of this stray down to the three white hairs. So the preacher and his two sons carefully pulled out the three white hairs. When

the owner came looking for his lost dog, it was obvious the dog recognized him. But the minister protested because the three hairs were missing, and finally the real owner was forced to leave without his dog because he couldn't prove by those three hairs that it was his. The preacher later wrote about the incident, and he said: "I kept the dog, but I lost my boys." His boys later became well known as Frank and Jesse James.

We have been talking about the aim of fathers and mothers today. Jesus talks about how little seeds become great trees/shrubs, and we have been talking about how little seeds fathers and mothers plant grow to become the beautiful garden of their children and their children's children. I hope this has been one way of saying what St. Paul says in one line of today's lesson (2 Corinthians 5:9): So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please the Lord. At home or away...today especially at home. The aim of fathers and mothers is to please the Lord with their children.

It's a wonderful thing to have parents, and it's a wonderful thing to be a parent. Today we celebrate all that before God, who calls himself our Father and often describes himself as our Mother.