

“Meeting God in the Stages of Life: Childhood”

A mother named Linda Rossetti was wearing a brightly striped sweater she had gotten as a gift, and was pleased that it seemed to make her look slim and trim. Her 6 year old son saw her wearing it this particular day and said, “That’s a pretty sweater, Mommy. You look like Wheel of Fortune.” “Thank you, sweetheart,” Linda replied, “but I think you mean that I look like Vanna White.” “No, Mom,” he said. “I mean you look like the wheel.”

Having a little one around makes life interesting, doesn’t it! Changing dirty diapers. Hearing them pout and whine. Having to lock yourself in the bathroom to have a moment of peace. Having them grow up to the point where they can insult you without them even knowing it. But there are good things, too!

Today I am beginning a series of messages called “Meeting God in the Stages of Life.” On our life journey, we go through stages. Each stage holds its opportunities and challenges. We will look at some of the developmental tasks that should be accomplished if we are to move through that stage in a healthy way. We will check out some of the issues we face, and how faith in God can make a difference. Today, we start with the first stage of life: ***Childhood***.

The very first developmental task of an infant is to bond with the mother and father, in order to develop basic trust. Infants need to experience and feel that they are welcome and safe in the world. Parents need to provide a consistent, warm, loving and predictable emotional environment for their baby. Bonding takes place when a mother (or father or caregiver) responds to the needs of the child for closeness, for being held, for food, and for changing.

For new parents, the sheer amount of time and energy these little ones require can come as a shock! I still remember the time our daughter Karin had their first baby. Nancy and I went down to South Carolina to help. I peeked in on Karin trying to give the newborn a bath, and the baby was fussing, and Karin seemed totally flustered and beside herself. Well, she survived, and when they had their second child it was easier, and by the time their third child was born it almost seemed like a piece of cake!

But the time after giving birth can be a rough time (especially for the mother). Sometimes after the birth there is a period of depression, a sense of isolation. The whole experience can put stress on the husband-wife relationship.

It’s so important during a child’s first months that the child receive great amounts of love – expressed in warm physical closeness and stimulation. Some years ago a psychiatrist named Rene Spitz reported on an extensive amount of research done in a home that housed infants deserted by their parents. The 91 infants there had excellent food and care, yet 27 died in the first year of their life, and another 21 were severely impaired mentally. Although the food and care was excellent, each nurse had 10 children to supervise, so that each infant had only “one-tenth of a mother.” Dr. Spitz said those who died “suffered a gradual breakdown under the stress, begin-ning with the loss of appetite and sleeplessness, and ending with the inability to with-stand even minor ailments. Love-starved, they were crippled in the battle for life.”

This example highlights how crucial it is in the first few months to give children loving, physical contact and stimulation, to help them feel safe and welcome in the world. It is so important to respond to them, smile at them, hold them, hug them, and spend time with them. This is not always easy to job, if parents have a job outside the home, or there are other children to care for.

Our Scripture text today is Mark 10:13-16. Mark relates this, “People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, ‘Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.’ And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.” People brought children to Jesus, so He might *touch them*. When the disciples got upset and wanted to turn them away, Jesus welcomed them! *He took them in His arms, laid His hands on them, and blessed them.*

I know, touching children is a “touchy” thing today! Child abuse issues. *And isn't that sad.* That the bad behaviors of a few spoil it for the rest. Just some comments about this matter: 1. Hurtful, abusive, molesting touch is *never OK*. 2. Gentle, caring, safe touch is important, and should be done wherever possible unless there are legal restrictions against it. 3. Jesus was sinless, and His touch was always one that was unselfish, caring and safe.

Children need to feel safe and welcome...but...***something begins to happen, particularly about the ages of 1-3 years!*** Children start to speak, and they learn that wonderful word “no”. (You may swear that this was the first word your child learned, followed by “da-da” or “ma-ma”).

What's happening? The toddler (18 months- 3 yrs.) is going through the separation stage. In *early infancy*, a child is merged with its mother. It has no sense of being a separate self apart from its mother (in fact, if the mother is breast feeding her baby, the mother is actually inside the child). As toddlers continue to develop they start to see themselves as separate beings. One tangible expression of that is word “no”!

It's so important for parents to understand this: A child's “no” is *not* an indication of that child's sinful nature exerting itself, or that the child is bad. It's a child's first attempts to discover itself as a separate entity. It's something God designed to happen! So already, parents need to learn to pull back a bit, to encourage their child to begin to separate. Let the child explore. Don't do everything for the child. Actually, this pulling back should begin the last half of a child's first year!

Our job is to encourage children to begin to separate from us and develop their own personalities, but at the same time to set boundaries on what they can do and what they shouldn't do. Now obviously you don't let an 18 month old take over and run the show, or give in to everything the child wants! Parents at times need to say “no”: “I'm not allowing you to do this.”

Setting boundaries is part of the whole process of disciplining our children. Ephesians 6:4 says, “Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and

instruction of the Lord.” The purpose of discipline is *not to punish*, but to *teach*. The word “discipline” comes from the same root word as “disciple” which means a student, or one who learns.

Here are a few pointers as far as setting boundaries. For *younger children*, it’s important to physically stop children from doing certain things while at the same time telling them “no”. You can’t reason with a 2 year old! For example, if a toddler is choking a dog, the little tyke doesn’t need a wordy explanation of why it’s not good to choke animals. Rather, what can be done is to say something like, “Dog’s are not for choking” – then take the child’s hand from the poor dog’s neck, and redirect the child’s attention to something acceptable. For very small children, parent’s *actions* are more effective than *words*. Also, it is better to deal with a child’s unacceptable behavior without overreacting. Getting all hyperventilated over something usually makes things worse. It’s better to respond in a more detached, calm and firm manner.

Then too, children should be permitted to have all kinds of *feelings and wishes*, but destructive *behaviors* should not be permitted. It’s important to make a distinction between *wishes* and *actions*. Someone has said, “Most discipline problems consist of two parts: angry *feelings and angry acts*. Each part has to be handled differently. Feelings have to be identified and expressed; acts may have to be limited and redirected.”

One interesting thing about disciplining toddlers is this: a 2 year old, e.g., doesn’t comprehend right and wrong. Parents may be at the “ought” and “should” stage, but when a 2 year old hears a parent say, “No”, what the child hears is, “You don’t have the ability to do this.” So, it’s better to say, “I know you *can*, but I won’t *let* you...”.

Setting boundaries, making clear to children what they are permitted to do and what they are not allowed to do, is an essential part of our *loving them*, and helping them grow up in a safe and healthy atmosphere.

As children continue to grow and mature, some other developmental tasks come into play.

Body skills, motor skills are developing. The child is moving away from magical thinking to rational thinking. Words and language are more reliable. Is important as a child grows for parents to *model* what it is to be a man or a woman: fathers model to sons what it means to be a man; mothers model for daughters what it is to be a woman.

Some of the same dynamics that we have already described for the first three years continue as a child progresses into the grade school years. Children need love that is warm and constant, so that bonding will continue. Kids need to bond with both moms and dads. Parents need to slowly pull back and allow their children to develop their own sense of who they are as a unique person, and gain confidence in their own abilities. And parents also need to continue to set realistic and fair boundaries on behaviors, even up through the teenage years.

Luke 2:40 describes Jesus as a boy: “The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.” Don’t we want all our children to grow like that: physically,

mentally, and spiritually?

I said that in this series of messages we will look at the various stages of life, and some of the developmental tasks of each stage, and *how our faith can help us*. ***When we are talking about the childhood stage, it's the faith of parents (or adults) in that child's life that is so critical.*** If children are to grow into emotionally healthy adults and mature spiritually, so much depends on what they see in their parents (or parenting ones).

Realistically, some of us fail as parents in this area. If we are older now, we might be thinking back to how we parented our children, and are feeling some guilt that we didn't spend enough time with them, or failed in some other way. None of us is (or were) perfect parents. There is forgiveness. Perhaps it is not too late to try to build a better relationship with our son or daughter. If we still have children who are young, we can vow with God's help to be a better mom or dad.

Then too, perhaps we didn't get the love we needed when we were young (or at least it feels like we didn't get it). Our basic emotional needs were not met in the earliest years of infancy, or childhood. If this is the case, this has a way of leaving its mark on us as adults. There may be a "wounded child" inside of us. John Bradshaw is a therapist and author who has done extensive work on the "inner child". He says, "When a child's development is arrested, when feelings are repressed, especially feelings of anger and hurt, a person grows up to be an adult with an angry, hurt child inside of him (or her). This child (inside) will spontaneously contaminate the person's adult behavior." Some of the results of having a wounded child inside us can be: undisciplined behaviors, addictions, difficulty with intimacy and relationships, shame or low self-esteem, depression, trust issues, boundary problems.

By the way, this often influences and shapes our feelings about God. It is very hard, if a child is denied steady, dependable love, to *feel* God's love, or to trust God. In his book, *Home Coming*, Bradshaw tells stories of how people can be changed through Inner Child Workshops, where people are encouraged to get in touch with their wounded child, get back in touch with those painful feelings, and allow themselves to be loved by others surrounding them. For instance, he writes about a group at one of his seminars, where the participants are sitting on the floor with their arms around each other. An elegant woman in her seventies was reading a letter that her wounded inner child had just written to her mother: "Mother, you were too busy with your charity work. You never had time to tell me you loved me. You paid attention to me only when I was sick or when I was playing the piano and making *you* proud. You only let me have the feelings that pleased you. I only mattered when I pleased you. You never loved me *for myself*. I was so alone...". "Her voice cracked and she began to cry. The wall of control that she had carefully maintained for 70 years began to fall with her tears. A teenage girl embraced her. A young man told her it was OK to cry."

In that same workshop, Bradshaw tells how toward the end of the experience, the mood had changed to one of peace and joy. A bank president who had been openly resistant at the start of the workshop told Bradshaw that he had cried for the first time in 40 years. As a child, he had

been beaten by his father, and vowed never to be vulnerable or show his feelings. Now he talked about learning to take care of the lonely boy inside him. His face softened, and he looked younger.

Is there a wounded child inside you that never found acceptance, or love? If so, maybe you need to get in touch with that child inside, and the pain, hurt and shame it carries. I want you to know there is a Jesus who way back then welcomed you into the world, and can make that child inside you feel wanted and valued.

I want to close my message today by having us listen to a song. It's a lullaby called "Welcome Home." The gentle, gracious words and tone of this song can represent the parent, holding that newborn baby, and whispering, "Welcome home – you've arrived, and we're so happy to have you here where you belong!" It can be the parent looking into the eyes and heart of a grade school child and saying, "I'm so glad you're a part of our family. I love you." It's the song God sings to that little wounded child in some of us, telling us that He's so glad He created us, and we're valued beyond measure!

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