

"Things God Teaches Us Through Our Children"

I've preached a number of sermons on parenting – and how God uses believing moms and dads to help shape their children's lives for God. Today, I want to turn that around, and say, *God uses children to teach parents and adults* some important things!

This is one way that children are a gift and blessing from God. In the Old Testament, the ancient Hebrews saw children as a gift from God. My text is Psalm 127: "Children are a gift from the Lord; they are a real blessing" (Psalm 127:3 Good News Bible).

One of the ways children are a blessing to us is that God can use them to teach us! Even if we don't have children of our own, we can learn from kids, can't we! In one church I served I invited parents to answer this question: *"In what way has your child, or another child, taught you something important about life?"* Here are some of the answers I got:

A recurrent theme was: "Slow down and take time to enjoy the little things in life." "It's the little things that mean the most. The bedtime routines, hugs, reading together...it's the time you share and the attitude you have toward life that they will remember."

"Those things a parent or adult think are important...everyday worries, finances, etc., are not important. A 2-minute walk to the mailbox is an exciting discovery of God's amazing creations...dandelions, clover, ants, worms, butterflies. Take the 2-minute walk to the mailbox instead."

A mother of an autistic child wrote: "One of the things he has taught me is to take the time to pay attention to the little details of things. It truly amazes me how, for instance, he loves the beauty of the color purple, *always* stops to smell the flowers, and is truly in love with the sun."

Some other responses: "Time goes very quickly and take time to enjoy." "Take time to play." Another parent answered the question, *"In what way has your child, or another child, taught you something important about life?"* by writing: "Children have an innate ability to show God's love – to strangers, to family, to church. At times, they help me remember the basic need of all – love."

An educator wrote of what children taught her: "Everyone has value and worth. Everyone can learn no matter how tough their exterior." The birth of the first child caused one parent to ask, "What is it really that I believe?" and led this parent to commit their life to Christ and seek a personal relationship with God. A grandmother explained how her granddaughter invited her to church one Sunday. We came and stayed. I also found my way back to God because of her."

One spoke of their grown daughter, an active Christian young woman: "Our daughter...has taught me to let go and let God have His way in our children's lives because they belong to Him"

Before I had asked for these responses from parents, I had preached on this theme in a previous church. "Things God Teaches Us Through Our Children." Over 40 years ago! Our children were young then. Let me give you an abbreviated version of that message!

God teaches us humility through our children! Before Nancy and I had children, I would sometimes imagine what our family would be like if we had kids! It'd be a household with a heavenly aroma! Maybe we'd have a little girl who would sweetly chirp: "Yes, mommy!" Maybe we'd have a boy who'd pipe up obediently to me, "Certainly, daddy. I'll do just as you say!" And, of course, I'd be a calm, cool, wise and totally loving dad – cream of the crop!

Then children came! And you know the rest of the story! It was a sizeable blow to my ego when I quickly discovered my own character limitations as a father. I was (and still am) far from a perfect dad! I could be impatient when the kids didn't do what I wanted them to do. I'd lose my cool and yell when they were fighting and picking on one another.

Then there's that first time as a parent when you see a habit or personality trait you don't like in yourself show up in your children. One parent responded to the question: "I've learned in watching my children that it's like looking in the mirror. They are often a reflection of my attitudes and actions, both good and bad. It's a constant reminder to strive for the God-centered lifestyle that I want my children to reflect." A little boy was making quite a mess at the table as he was eating. His father scolded: "Son, you eat like a pig!" Then not sure his son had ever seen a pig, he added: "You do know what a pig is." The boy said, "Yes, it's a hog's little boy."

Sometimes God uses children to teach us humility by showing us the limitations of our own wisdom. There are so many parenting situations where it's not clear what's best to do: Should you let your son ride his bike that far? Do you keep making your daughter take music lessons when she fusses so much about practicing? Do we punish our child for this, or just let it go.

Being a parent can be a valuable lesson in humility! Elizabeth Achtemeier, in her book *The Committed Marriage*, has a chapter, "Gifts of Extravagant Grace": "Somehow in our relations to our children, we parents are brought face to face with our own terrible limitations – our inability always to love, to keep our tempers, to understand, to enter into another's viewpoint, to convince and guide by reason. We are brought...to confrontation with sinful depths in ourselves that we never knew existed. For a Christian, that can be a very helpful experience, a sign-post on the way to healing and personal wholeness."

Yet, there are parents who can't learn these lessons from their children. They think they're always right. Adults who wouldn't think of admitting to their 8 year-old or teenager that they made a mistake. Or an older parent, still trying to run their adult child's life because they think they know more, and are always right. A young person wrote a letter to author Charlie Shedd, and said this: "My dad thinks he's Jesus Christ, but I think he's Hitler." We might as well admit to our children that we make mistakes and don't know it all – because they can see it plainly for themselves!

Humility is a good thing when it comes to our relationship with children. 1 Peter 5:5 says, "Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility towards one another, for 'God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.'" Poet Andrew Gillies has written this little poem:

"Last night my little boy
Confessed to me
Some childish wrong;
And kneeling at my knee
He prayed with tears:
'Dear God, make me a man
Like Daddy, wise and strong –
I know you can.'"

Then while he slept
I knelt beside his bed,
Confessed my sins,
And prayed with low-bowed head:
'Oh God, make me a child
Like my child here –
Pure, guileless,
Trusting thee with a sincere faith.'"

Beyond humbling us, however, our experience of parenthood *can greatly increase our self-respect and awareness of our own capacity for good and for self-sacrifice*. When children are infants, there are 1001 things we have to do for them: bathing, feeding, changing diapers. Later on, it's wiping runny noses, bandaging knees, picking up toys, answering a gazillion questions, refereeing fights, helping them with their homework and projects, running a taxi service. Once we have children, life is never the same again. It's never quite our own.

The amazing thing is, through it all, we parents grow. We find ourselves capable of doing things we never knew we could do. We can stay up half the night with a sick child and somehow work the next day. We can love our children even when they act obnoxious and are completely undeserving of any affection. We can sacrifice and do without things we want so our children can have things.

Yet again, not everyone chooses to do this, or becomes more mature and unselfish. We've all heard of parents who never can give up doing what *they want* – sad tales of neglected children, left to fend for themselves while parents are off doing their thing.

Others have children, make the sacrifices, but underneath resent having had to do it. These are the parents who in one way or other want to be *repaid* by their children: the elderly mother who thinks her grown children ought to center their lives around her, or the 80 year old father who constantly complains that his kids never do anything for him. (And, yes, there are instances where grown children ought to be spanked because they don't truly appreciate what a dad or mom did for them). But generally speaking, parent's love and sacrifices are not meant to be *repaid*, but *passed forward* to the next generation.

I don't begrudge the sacrifices Nancy and I made for our children. I was moved from a church to

another church when our daughter was starting 10th grade. Rather than yank her out of school to a new school, Nancy stayed back in that area. We lived apart through the week so Karen could continue and finish high school in her school. We did this for 3 years. I don't regret doing that. In fact, I believe in all honesty I would give up my life for our children. If ever the situation occurred where I could spare one of our children's lives by giving up my own, I would do it. *And I know many of you feel the same way. Isn't it amazing how being a parent can stretch our capacity for unselfishness and self-giving love.*

One more thought about how God can teach us important things through our children: ***Our children can teach us to have faith in God for the future.***

When our children were young, I often wondered what kind of a world they'd have to live in when they grew up – the violence and crime, overpopulation, the depletion of natural resources and polluting of the earth, the threat of nuclear war. That was then. It sure isn't any more promising now, is it?

Do you know that in the first century or two after Christ the early church fathers questioned whether we should bring any more children into the world because they believed Jesus would come back soon and the world would end! It has always taken a lot of faith to be a parent, and I doubt that the future has ever looked entirely rosy!

But you know what? The future of the world is in the hands of God. And God's mercy and power and goodness always endure. God is guiding His creation towards a purposeful end.

Listen to the words of Psalm 46:1-2: "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea." Notice: "therefore....we will not fear."

Bill and Gloria Gaither, after the birth of one of their children, had some anxieties about the kind of world that child would grow up in. But in the midst of their uncertainty, they turned again to God and their trust in God. They wrote the words of the popular song, "Because He Lives".

"Because He lives, I can face tomorrow; because He lives, all fear is gone; because I know He hold the future, and life is worth the living, just because He lives." The second verse says, "How sweet to hold a newborn baby, and feel the pride and joy he gives; but greater still the calm assurance, this child can face uncertain days because He lives."

I believe the writer of this Psalm was right: "Children are a gift from the Lord; they are a real blessing" (Psalm 127:3 Good News Bible). Children truly are a gift from God, and they sure can teach us a lot!

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