

Deuteronomy 6:1-9
April 26, 2009

South Plains

Suffer The Little Children

In 1957, *Life* magazine called Sunday School the most wasted hour of the week. Twenty years later, a prominent Christian Educator (John Westerhoff) published a book that frankly admits the challenges facing Sunday School. The title of his book was Will Our Children Have Faith? I wish I could give a resounding, "Yes" to that question about our children's faith, but I cannot. The most hopeful answer I can offer is to point to the persistence of that question over the centuries. Deuteronomy was worried about the same issue; and we can say that some of the children of the Israelites had faith and passed it on to some of the children of the prophets who passed it on to some of the children in Jesus' own time who have passed it on through the generations until some of us have faith.

Some of our children will have faith. What can we do to improve their chances?

Let me take a poll this morning. How many of you can remember a Sunday School teacher or youth leader who was an important person in your younger years? If your raised your hand, you probably cannot remember a single Bible lesson that person taught you. But, you do remember sitting in his class, working on crafts or pictures with her encouragement, perhaps holding hands

as you walked down the hallway. Christian education that leads to faith is never a simple matter of pouring information about God and Jesus into a child's head. It's always about relationships that include a mysterious but potent compound of attitudes and ideas melded together in personality.

Sometimes, by the grace of God, the Sunday morning sermon gets into the mix that shapes a young person's faith. I hope that happens both in the regular time with the children and in the more formal sermon. What I'd like to do in the next few minutes with this sermon is to talk primarily with the adults, but with some children listening and holding us accountable for what I say. Let me say this especially to the older children: I'm going to talk about how adults pass on the faith to their children. I want you children to ask us adults, "Are you doing these things? Is the church telling children about faith in Christ in a way that makes sense?"

We need to start with something I said earlier.

The people in the book of Deuteronomy were just as worried about their children as we are worried about ours. Deuteronomy 6 gives us what Jesus called the first and greatest commandment:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.

And, immediately Deuteronomy adds,

Keep these words that I am commanding You today in your heart. Recite them to

your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. (vv 5-7)

“Deuteronomy is always aimed at the next generation (Miller, *Deuteronomy*, p. 107).” Therefore, it tells people of faith to keep talking about the word of God. On Easter Sunday when our children stood in front of the congregation and told the story of the resurrection, they were reciting the word of God just as scripture tells us. Of course, the picture in Deuteronomy six is not a description of public worship, but a picture of family conversation that would take place for us around the dinner table, driving in the car, getting ready for church.

One of the differences between modern Christianity and modern Judaism is that Christians rely heavily on Sunday School and church to pass their faith on to the next generation. Jews rely more heavily on the family rituals around Passover, Yom Kippur, and bar mitzvah. I don't know that one is better than another, but I suspect that we need both. And, I know that Christians do not always take advantage of family time to teach our faith. In that regard, I speak from personal experience. Deuteronomy says, “Keep talking to the children.”

So, how can we start that conversation in the family without making it into a lecture? One way is with rituals, things we do over and over again as part of our family routine. For example, asking the blessing before a meal is a simple ritual that will spark conversation about

God. Saying a prayer at bedtime is another. They are especially effective rituals if we occasionally slip into the prayer special requests that concern the family. On the Sunday after the tornado in Tennessee, our blessing over Sunday dinner included a request that God would bless our friends Libby and Bill who lost their home.

Scripture notes that when we repeat these little rituals, children will eventually ask a question. Deuteronomy 6:20 says,

When your children ask..., “What is the meaning of the decrees and the statutes and the ordinances that the Lord our God has commanded you?” then you shall say to your children, “We were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt....”

And, that's the cue to tell the story of the exodus, the Ten Commandments and entering into the Promised Land. I cannot imagine a modern family where the children have not waited on some Sunday morning, “Why do we have to go to church?”

That's our cue to reply, “God created this beautiful world; and we go to church to thank God for all the good things given us.” Or, “Jesus came to tell us about God's love; he died for us on the cross. So, we go to church to worship him and learn from him.”

That, of course brings up the easiest way we can talk about our faith with our children: by telling Bible stories. Younger children love stories. Older children will

want to ask questions about those stories, questions that will be raised in Sunday School and worship. I will admit that those questions can be tough to answer. Sometimes we have to confess that we don't have a good answer. Few conversations are as memorable and provocative as those times when parents have to say, "That's a good question and I don't have a good answer."

Rituals, questions and stories are just three of the most obvious tools that parents have for passing on their faith. It's not easy. It can be embarrassing when parents clearly don't know everything. But, when we keep the conversation about God going with children, we are watering the seeds of faith.

Last fall, I brought a scraggly little potted plant to the Sunday School classroom across from my study in the manse. It's called an Eyelash begonia. It needed a window for the winter. Every Tuesday I watered it and occasionally fertilized it under Debby's direction. It became a little ritual I did while I listened for the radiators upstairs to bring heat on Tuesday mornings. We had a similar plant at home, but we didn't have room for both in our bedroom. The begonia at home struggled through the winter. The begonia at the manse grew and blossomed and grew some more until I took it home last Wednesday.

Not everything we do to nurture faith in our children will produce the results we want, just as one plant prospered and the other stayed the same. But, we

can provide the environment and the conditions necessary for growing faith. And, we can be sure that God will bless the effort in God's good time.

Do the rituals.

Provoke the questions.

Tell the stories.

We cannot guarantee that our children will have faith. We can give them what we know about God. And, we can assure them that there's more to God than our words.