

Matthew 7:7-11  
Deuteronomy 6:4-9

St. John's Presbyterian Church  
Devon, Pennsylvania  
Victor M. Wilson, D.Min., Pastor

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## Through the Eyes of a Child

"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." *Deuteronomy 6:6-7*

A former professor of mine once wisely said. "Christians are made, not born." That's the heart of our Scriptures from Deuteronomy and Matthew this morning. Jesus challenging us to give good gifts to our children, Moses reminding us adults, and especially parents, that we are the hinge upon which the lives of our children turn, teaching them how to live toward God and how to live toward each other. That's how the ten commandments are arranged just a few verses before in chapter five, as we discussed last week in our Supper at St. John's study. The first four commandments show us how to be toward God, while the last five tell us how to live toward our neighbor. Everyone is our neighbor. The central hinge is the commandment that children be taught to honor their parents, who are given the highest responsibility to teach the child the way to honor God and honor one's neighbor.

I speak of parents as the hinge because that's how God sees them at the center of the ten commandments. A hinge is more than just a pivot point, a fulcrum. It bears the weight. And when it's balanced on its foundation, the load moves with ease and grace. The other night I watched an episode of Herman Wolk's "Winds of War." In a scene in Hitler's chancellery, an adjutant enters the cavernous room where the Fuhrer is working, whose door must be twenty feet high, yet the door opens as smoothly as a gossamer curtain on a breeze. The hinge is a lovely image of Christian parenting (it's God's, not mine), cultivating in the child how to be balanced toward God and others. Balance is not compromise. To have life in balance is to live on a center. That's likely not to happen if the parent's religious role is abdicated to someone else—a Sunday School teacher, for instance.

Because the parent is *the authority figure* for the child, if what happens in Sunday School is not nurtured beyond Sunday school and youth fellowship, then God is likely to be relegated to the shadows as someone we entertain only briefly and privately on Sundays.

To put the Christian nurture of a child in perspective, imagine bringing our children to a meal at the church once a week, such as our Wednesday night supper, yet only leaving pictures of food around the house for the rest of the week. This is precisely what Jesus means when he says, "Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone. Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake?" (Matthew 7:9-10). Palestinian bread was round and flat, and looked like the hot stones on the desert floor. Do you recall, at his temptation in the wilderness, after many days of intense hunger, the voice of temptation, pandering to Jesus' power, saying, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become bread" (Matthew 4:3). And a common Galilean fish was eel-like, even snake-like. Of course we would not act so cruelly. Yet whenever a baptized child is deprived of the Christian nourishment we promised, the child's resources for engaging a harsh and ruthless world are weakened. Our children need bread for the *soul* and the body.

It's especially instructive that all the material in the Book of Deuteronomy is fashioned into five long sermons to the people (similarly five long discourses from Jesus in Matthew), which Moses delivers right before the people face the harsh realities of the promised land. They would encounter a centuries long moral battle against cultural and religious norms that were wildly opposed to their own beliefs and practices. The Canaanites engaged in widespread ritual prostitution as a fertility cult to incur the favor of the gods of the harvest. Some exposed infants on hillsides by night as appeasement offerings to their gods. The people of Israel, after a decades long quarantine from other human contact in the desert, now face the world again. Likewise,

when Jesus delivers the sermon on the mount, it was his first critical public teaching before he and his disciples begin their ministry in a hostile world.

We face even more perilous times, on the verge of a looming global economic catastrophe, and an environmental crisis which, if not turned around in a dozen years may signal the end of civilization as we know it. Such times summon from everyone the noblest and best response that is in us. Our leadership within our own families is crucial in these times. Jane and I have raised a family. We understand that it can be stressful getting the children to church on Sundays. But then a family is not a democracy, and whenever it so devolves, it's in trouble. And when it is the children who lead their parents to church, there is some soul searching to be done.

In recent generations our baby-boomers tendency, raised in the lap of relative luxury, to capitulate to our children's desires and wants, is very scary. Take, as an admittedly extreme example, China's one-child policy. Because of the severe restrictions on having one child, and the prejudice in favor of boys, China now has a severe imbalance of over indulged boys and a scarcity of eligible young women to marry. Brides who, thereafter, have to cope with their self-absorbed young husbands.

Our sociologists frequently warn of the dangers of over indulgence, especially of the young. We find ourselves in a society in which entitlement has become a near constant, much of which they absorbed from us. Where TV, instant messaging, instant gratification, a constant flow of organized travel, organized sports, tutors, lessons and camps challenge the classroom to compete, lest, God forbid, school become boring! The pervasiveness of choice. Commitment phobia among the 20, 30 and 40-somethings. Diminished moral conscience, as parents rescue delinquent children without meaningful penalties. Meanwhile, over against all these things, the example of Jesus and the teachings of the church encourage personal responsibility, commitment beyond oneself, duty and obligation—those 'old-fashioned' words that nonetheless teach us that getting our heads and hearts beyond ourselves is meaningful, productive, and deeply fulfilling. And, lest we forget, it is *faith*, the great leveler, that gives us in courageous partnership to the providence and wisdom of God.

It is as though, as culture turns its backs on the good path that Jesus laid down, many have capitulated to the capricious gods of culture. The very things that Moses and Jesus warned us against. Yet we adults already know from our heart's experience, that the constant desire for youthfulness and newness is a double-edged gift. Which brings to mind the classical Greek story of Aurora, the goddess of the dawn, who fell in love with Tithonus, a mortal youth. Zeus, the king of the gods, offered her any gift that she might choose for her mortal lover. As a goddess, Aurora naturally chose that Tithonus might live forever; but she had forgotten to ask that he might remain forever young. And so Tithonus grew older and older and older, and could never die, and the gift became a curse. This has all the marks of our culture's hollow prayer.

Now there's another dimension to raising our children in the church, one that's much more implicit, discretely woven into the fabric of our lives like threads in a blanket. It's the rich sediment of life in the fellowship of the church. Perhaps you'll let me give a personal example.

I grew up in St. Mary's Parish Church in Penwortham, an unpretentious village in northwest England. I have a great affection for that nine centuries-old church. I can't remember any of the sermons that old Vicar Schofield preached, which is not to discredit them. Neither do I recall any of the texts, or the lessons in Sunday school in St. Mary's parish hall. Sunday School was held in the afternoons while services were in the morning (called matins) and evening (called evensong). I can't remember anything specific from our many weeks of confirmation classes, which is not to discredit them, either. It's a bit disturbing how much I don't remember.

Yet, its so instructive what I do recall. I remember *the people* and the experience of being among them. I remember my mother's wonderful contralto voice and how I cherished sitting beside her in the pew. I remember my Dad, who didn't attend very often, but when he did, we'd sit back where my friends sat—which scared the Dickens out of them because he was a village constable—on the pew next to the disused organ with a great wooden arm for the bellows. It was just outside the peripheral vision of the two sentinel vergers. On one rare occasion when my Dad attended, they handed him a hymnbook (they used to collect and hand them out by the narthex at every service), and of all possible books my Dad got the one with a not too flattering drawing inside the back cover (he had, shall we say, prominent ears) with a caption that read, "My Dad, VW."

In Sunday School we sat in six or so circles in a big hall, graduating each year to the next circle. I do remember one teacher. I can't recall her name or, specifically, what she taught. But I remember the feeling of being loved, and of being happy just to be there. I remember hot pot suppers on cold winter's nights. How each

family would bring the same dish, a sort of casserole of potatoes, carrots, onions and lamb cooked slowly in an earthenware pot then, for last half hour with the lid removed, until the top layer of thin sliced potatoes turned deliciously crisp and golden. And, oh the smell of it! How we all sat at long tables and ate each other's offerings with heaps of pickled red cabbage and great steaming pots of tea. And afterward we'd play family games in the big fellowship hall. Then we'd walk the mile home in the crisp night air, chewing deliciously over the evening.

I remember the immense pride of being the flag bearer for my church's scout troop on Remembrance Day (like America's Memorial Day), and how we marched with a real band to the cenotaph on Penwortham Hill to honor the war dead of two world wars. And how everyone, the whole nation, it seemed, wore blood red poppies in their lapel. Every year the same names would take on a growing familiarity, and a deepening sense of awe and indebtedness would sink into the soul, as I dipped the Union Jack in their honor.

Church! What a benevolent and grace filled thing it became in my young maturing soul. Now, I cannot imagine my formation apart from it. Nor can I think, with any pride or confidence, of raising a generation apart from it.

“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.” Amen