

"Beyond Parental Love"
Luke 2:39-40
Rev. David K. Wood, Ph.D.
Deer Creek United Presbyterian Church/Pleasant Unity United Presbyterian Church
January 9, 2022

My wife Rose has often expressed how glad she is she was born in the period she was. Like myself, she grew up as a member of the “baby boomer” generation, that is, that era of Americans who were born and came of age in the aftermath of the Second World War. Rose likes to reminisce and say how life seemed so much simpler back in the 1950’s and 60’s and how neither she nor any of her eight other brothers and sisters ever had to face as many difficult challenges or the heavy pressures that kids CURRENTLY do. She once confessed to me that were she forty years younger, she didn’t know whether she’d even WANT to have kids in this day and age.

Actually, I find Rose is not ALONE in her opinion as for various reasons--economic as well as sociological--we find people are now getting married MUCH LATER than their parents did and having fewer children to boot. It’s been said that the children of today will be the first generation of Americans to experience a lower standard of living than we did as their parents, a situation that has only been exacerbated by the present pandemic sweeping “from sea to shining sea.” No way about it, children today are in crisis, and that’s not MY opinion as it is the judgment of many leading child psychologists. They point out that due to this pandemic, many schools have still not returned to normal, resulting in much of the joy and camaraderie that signifies a happy, productive school culture to disappear. The children find themselves falling further behind in their studies and have yet to catch up. Severe mental health problems are on an upsurge, aggravated by the isolation and disruption caused by it. Meanwhile, suicide attempts—with suicide now being the second leading cause of death among children and adolescents--have RISEN along with an increase in gun violence direct at or committed by young people. To be honest, when I hear such statistics, I can’t help but feel that Rose just may be on to something! Certainly, if being a YOUNG PERSON in this world has become much more precarious and difficult, then the same MUST be said concerning the role of PARENTING, as well.

My mother used to say to my brother and me that when we were born, Dr. Spock aside, there were no classes being offered on how to raise children, that much child-rearing was essentially a process of trial and error and one could only HOPE that when all was said and done, their children would turn out all right in the end. Now many decades later, I find I couldn’t DISAGREE with her MORE. I can’t help but look back over my OWN years of growing up along with my many years of experience in the church and think that being a good mother and a good father must ALWAYS involve SO MUCH MORE than trusting in sheer luck. Rather than a crap shoot as my mother thought, I think most of us would agree that responsible parenting involves being INTENTIONAL about inculcating specific values and developing certain disciplines and cultivating high expectations within one’s children with a healthy dose of love thrown into the mix. If this is done well, our progeny or offspring just might have a better chance of emerging from adolescence much stronger, more self-assured, and better equipped to confront whatever challenges life will hand them in their future.

This was ESPECIALLY made evident to me by Dr. Robert Coles, Professor of Child Psychology at Harvard University. For over half a century, Robert Coles has told us more about the diverse and complex world of children than any other person. The winner of the Pulitzer Prize in 1973 for his two volume series *Children of Crisis* as well as a Presidential Medal of Freedom honoree, Coles has authored more than eighty books and 1300 articles, nearly all of them concerned with the moral and spiritual sensibilities of children. Thirty-five years ago, he came out with *The Moral Life of Children* followed by *The Spiritual Life of Children* four years later. In them, he was able to show how young people are surprisingly deep thinking and that they are capable of pondering such complex moral questions as who God is and the nature of life and death. Rather than fragile creatures, children have surprising psychological strength. Nothing convinced him more of this than his work with black children who integrated Southern schools in the early 1960's.

His entire understanding of child psychology was changed for good after meeting little six-year old Ruby Bridges, one of the black children helping to racially integrate the New Orleans school system. Every morning and evening for months on end, this young black child had to brave heckling mobs who hurled the most vicious threats and curses at her. Accompanied to and from school each day by Federal marshals, she attended school all by herself for a good part of a year because the rest of the students and their families--all white--boycotted her presence. Her parents, both poor and unemployed, were themselves the victims of harassment and constant threats.

Still, Ruby and her parents never gave up. Many were astounded how such a small, helpless, underprivileged black child could continue under such terrible pressures. Coles was convinced that though she appeared strong on the outside, INWARDLY she was filled with deep fears, that she was repressing all of her anxiety. But then something happened to change his opinion. As Dr. Coles tells it:

"I was standing in the classroom, looking out the window, and I saw Ruby coming down the street, with the federal marshals on both sides of her. The crowd was there, shouting, as usual. A woman spat at Ruby but missed; Ruby smiled at her. A man shook his fist at her; Ruby smiled at him. Then she walked up the stairs, and she stopped and turned and smiled one more time! She told him she prays for those people, the ones in that mob, every night before she goes to sleep!"

Ruby prayed: for HERSELF, that she would be strong and unafraid; and also for her ENEMIES, that God would forgive them. "Jesus prayed that on the cross," she told Coles; "Forgive them, because they don't know what they're doing." When Coles asked her why she prayed for her enemies, she replied, "I go to church every Sunday, and we're told to pray for everyone, even the bad people, and so I do." When asked why she did not seem afraid, she again told the child psychologist:

"They'll keep coming and saying the bad words, but my momma says they'll get tired after a while and then they'll stop coming. They'll stay home. The minister came to our house and he said the same thing, and not to worry, and I don't. The minister said God is watching and He won't forget, because He never does. The minister says if I forgive the people, and smile at them and pray for them, God will keep a good eye on everything and He'll be our protection."

Coles asked Ruby if she thought the minister was on the right track and she responded:

"Oh, yes. I'm sure God knows what's happening. He's got a lot to worry about; but there is bad trouble here, and He can't help but notice. He may not rush to do anything, not right away. But there will come a day, like you hear in church."

For Coles, the depth of love he saw in young Ruby Bridges could be found in very few individuals- a level of compassion attained only by people like Jesus and Gandhi. He had never expected to find it demonstrated day after day by a six-year old girl from a poor, black, unemployed, underprivileged family. This extraordinary faith and compassion was not something she was born with but rather the result of the two greatest influences in her life. The first was the security and love given to her by her PARENTS- the first and most primary relationship one can experience.

This point was driven home to me many years ago while leading a Bible study in my first pastorate on the Book of Genesis. In the study were ten women and we were talking about the Christian doctrine of Original Sin. I explained to them how the same seeds of jealousy, pride, and selfishness that characterize so much adult behavior are also present in the life of EVERY little child, that they can hate and lie and be just as devious as easily as any of them could. Boy was I surprised to see how this simple assertion drew horrified gasps from all of those women, each of whom had been a mother in her own right. "Not MY child!" exclaimed one. "Nor MINE!" said another. For the next twenty minutes, I had to listen to them expound on the sinless virtues of beautiful babies and hear how my theology was all screwed up because I had never been a parent myself. In the end, recognizing how out-numbered I was, I threw up my hands and said, "All right, you win" in order to finally get through the lesson. But THAT had been the REAL lesson for me that morning- seeing how these mothers' love for their children had more influence on their theology than that of their own college-educated, seminary-trained pastor.

But EVEN MORE than parental love, Ruby possessed the security and love of GOD in her life, a love that had been instilled there by her parents and deepened by her minister and church family. Undeniably, her family's constant love and support gave her the courage to courageously walk down that street and hold her head up high before those screaming, hysterical crowds. But it was GOD'S LOVE in her heart that enabled her to have pity upon her enemies and pray for them, even as Christ did.

Similarly, when we look at the faith and compassion, the character and values demonstrated by Jesus, we find that his life TOO was shaped and molded by others. Like Ruby Bridges, Jesus TOO was the product of a devout and caring home where he experienced, not only his PARENT'S love, but had instilled a trust and love for GOD, a faith that continued to deepen through the nurture and support he received from his synagogue family.

From the scriptures, we know that Mary, his mother, was a woman of deep faith and humility. We can assume that Joseph, Jesus' father, was a wise and compassionate man who, in addition to teaching the carpentry business to him, also taught him the most basic principles upon which to build his life- honesty and integrity, industry and courage. Together, both parents filled their son's life along with the rest of his brothers and sisters with faith, hope, and love; they instructed him in the Law and the Prophets; they initiated him into the worship life of the synagogue and participated in the high Jewish festivals. Joseph and Mary played an integral role

in the growth and development of Jesus every bit as significant as Ruby Bridges' parents and church family were to HER.

As parents, WE become the greatest influence in the lives of our children. Rudyard Kipling once said, "Give me the first six years of a child's life; you can have the rest." Napoleon was once asked, "When does the education of a child begin?" He answered, "Twenty years before its birth- in the education of its mother." God has invested tremendous authority and responsibility in us as parents and caretakers over our children's lives.

However, as important as it is, providing love and security for our children in the home is not simply enough. As essential and important as parental love is, the Christian's hope must be that God will use our love for our children and grandchildren, as imperfect as it may be, to prepare them to receive an even GREATER love- the love of GOD. THAT must be the goal of every parent-child relationship.

The church has an essential role to play in our children's lives if we want to see developed in them a strong sense of values and moral commitment. For every wedding I perform, we first conduct a minimum of three pre-marital counseling sessions together for the purpose of impressing upon them how important it is to make Christ and his church a part of their relationship and family. With Christ in their lives, aided and supported by the church, not only will their own love be STRENGTHENED but they will also find those RESOURCES needed to shape the values and direction of their children's lives which hopefully will never leave them.

Yesterday, I met with a couple who want to have their son baptized. I reminded them that it is not the child's faith that is on display in that sacrament as it is still unformed. Rather, it is the PARENT'S faith that stands in the place of that child's- a faith that becomes evident in and through their resolve to raise their child in the nurture and admonition of Christ and his church. Caring for and teaching our children for the purpose of helping them to become disciples of Jesus Christ are the most basic functions of parenthood and it is the greatest inheritance any mother and father could ever bequeath their little one.

In my first church, I had an elder who never missed worship herself but never thought of bringing any of her three small children with her. I asked her about this one day and she replied that her belief was that every child ought to be able to decide for him or herself whether he or she would like to attend church, that she was a libertarian in this matter and had no right to impose her own faith and values on them. Aware of her great love of gardening, I said to her, "Just knowing how particular you are about your garden, would you ever just stop weeding and feeding and pruning the bushes around it because you felt they should be as natural as possible, that both flowers and weeds had a right to flourish side-by-side without being tended to and cared for by you, your garden's caretaker?" Her response was "Of course not. The weeds would eventually take over and what they didn't kill, the rabbits would eat. In time, there wouldn't be much of a garden left to tend to." "Well," I said, "isn't it the same regarding your CHILDREN? The fact is that if you're not constantly tending to and caring for their moral and spiritual growth, then all kinds of weeds will creep in and eventually destroy whatever is good and positive and true about their lives. God has set you up to serve as the gardener to their hearts and souls and what BETTER influence for them to have in their lives than Christ himself along with the

presence of his grace and love.” From that point on, she made a point of bringing her three sons to church and Sunday School every week!

My friends, I'd like to conclude my message this morning by saying that judging by the age of this as well as most other congregations, I know that the majority of you have ALREADY had your families and are by now enjoying life as proud grandparents. However, that doesn't EXCUSE YOU from bearing parental responsibility. Though your child-rearing days are now long behind you, you're still never too old to serve as a PARENT or GRANDPARENT to someone, even if that child is NOT your own. After all, when we baptize infants here, don't we promise to act as their God-parents, pledging to model Christ's life before them and to love them as though they WERE our own? Thus, regardless of how old any of us may be or whether we may have had children or not, we are STILL responsible for being a moral and spiritual aid and role-model to these young ones WHEREVER we may encounter them. As one old preacher liked to put it, our example may be the only gospel our children ever hear! And yet, as important as parental love is, it must be the goal of EVERY parent-child relationship that God will use our love to prepare these children to receive quite ANOTHER love, a more PERFECT and ENDURING bond- the love of GOD in their lives. Let us pray...

Gracious God, you who are our Divine Mother AS MUCH as our Heavenly Father, thank you for your constant care and attention which never flags, never ends. Help teach us how to become better mothers and better fathers to those young ones you entrust to us that in the end they might experience your same love and care and become faithful disciples as well. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.