

BABY STEPS

⁶*Train up children in the way they should go, and when they are old they will not depart from it.*

(Proverbs 22:6)

Hear this reading from the Third Epistle of Jimmy written to a couple about to enter the Wilderness of Parenthood.

Dear Jennifer and Chase,

Congratulations! On behalf of our church family, congratulations on the impending birth of your child, Julian Graham Peeples. Being your friend, your minister, and a guy who's invested almost six years in the adventure of parenthood, I feel compelled to offer you a few pointers. Get used to this by the way. I've found that nothing draws more unsolicited advice than holding an infant in your arms.

By this point you have probably amassed quite a collection of parenting books, from Dr. Spock to Dr. Phil. My only advice on parenting books is this—look to them for options and opinions, not for that always elusive perfect solution. You've probably noticed by now that one book says let the child cry himself to sleep and the other says to hold him whenever he whimpers. One book says let the child know who's boss while the other says be your child's best friend. Don't let these contradictions frazzle you. Your child, your mind, and your heart will guide your way.

Fortunately, parenting is a gradual process. We don't have to make every parenting decision at once. Julian will arrive a little bundle of love with relatively simple needs. Loud needs yes, seemingly endless needs yes, but overall, simple needs. When Baby Julian enters your family, you'll be learning right alongside him. Like every other parent, you'll learn how to parent in baby steps, steps that will grow with the growing needs of your child.

I've seen both of you interact enough with my own son, Matthew, to know that Julian will be blessed to call you Mom and Dad. But remember this: No matter how well you do your job, no matter how loving, or patient, or well read you are, your kids will not be perfect. Genetics, personality, and predisposition play too big a role for you to assume complete control. So if you haven't already, I'm asking you to surrender that illusion of the ideal child right here, right now. Believe me, you'll be happier for it. After all, the story of imperfect children is fully documented, going all the way back to Adam and Eve. Recall that after putting Adam and Eve in the Garden the first thing God said to them was, "*Don't...*"

"Don't what?" Adam replied.

"Don't eat the forbidden fruit." God said.

"Forbidden fruit? We got forbidden fruit? Hey, Eve...we got Forbidden Fruit!"

"No way!"

"Yes WAY!"

"Don't eat that fruit!" said God.

"Why?"

"Because I'm your Creator and I said so!" said God, wondering why the compulsion to keep creating persisted after perfecting elephants and antelopes.

A few minutes later God could not believe it when the kids were seen chomping away on the apples...

"Didn't I tell you not to eat that fruit?" God asked.

"Uh huh," Adam replied.

"Then why did you?"

"I dunno," Eve answered.

"She started it!" Adam said.

"Did Not!"

"DID so!"

"DID NOT!!!"

Having had it with the two of them, God's punishment was that Adam and Eve should have children of their own. Thus the pattern was set and it has never changed.

But there is a reassurance in this story. If you persistently and lovingly try to give your children wisdom and they don't take it, don't be hard on yourself. If God had trouble handling children, what makes you think it will be a piece of cake for you?

(adapted from www.lifestorywriting.com/godlyhmr.htm)

Unfortunately Adam and Eve didn't obey God's rules or abide by God's advice. Some things never change. Most of us here probably remember giving our own parents the same treatment when we were kids. Ogden Nash was right when he said, "Parents were invented to make children happy, by giving them something to ignore" (*Simpson's Contemporary Quotations*, compiled by James B. Simpson, New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1988). The good news is that even when children seem like they're ignoring us, they're usually soaking in more than we expect. It was true with me, and I'm counting on it being true with my own son as well.

Growing up, my least favorite bit of parenting advice came from the Bible's Book of Proverbs, which says, "Spare the rod and spoil the child" (Proverbs 13:24). Of course, this is intended to be read as a warning to parents of what can happen when they're overly permissive. But I always tried to convince my parents to read it as a set of instructions, to see it as God's voice literally commanding them to spare the rod *and* spoil the child. Much to my disappointment, they never bought that argument, and felt free to apply appropriate, consistent discipline, although it never involved the use of rods!

I would never suggest hitting a child, but I think we can all agree that parents only sow seeds of discontent when they choose to spoil their children. Having said that, you will notice that the Bible seems to offer grandparents a loophole in this department. As far as I know, there is no proverb forbidding grandparents from spoiling their grandchildren, and from my experience, most take full advantage of this. If only Adam and Eve had had grandparents, they could have gone over to their house and feasted on apples to their heart's content.

My own favorite verse on parenting comes from the 22nd chapter of Proverbs. It tells us to “Train up children in the way they should go.” You’ll notice I’m skipping the last part that says, “and when they are old they will not depart from it.” That’s a nice thought, but it doesn’t always work out that way. The point of the verse is to remind us that it’s our responsibility and our joy to teach our children the way they should go. We’re reminded that even though we can’t control what our children do, we do control our response to them. Training our children in the way they should go is about so much more than all the Baby Einstein products being marketed today. Training up children in the way they should go means teaching your children to love God, love others, and love themselves.

From the day he is born you will teach your child. When he cries out in hunger and you feed him, when he cries out in pain and you comfort him, he will learn that you’re there to take care of him. He’ll learn trust and he’ll learn security. Your behavior will train him in the way he should go. Your behavior will teach him about leading a life of love.

As with most things in life, we can’t go wrong when we ground our parenting in love. Most of us associate this next scripture passage with weddings, but it just as easily applies to parenting, because it is all about committing ourselves to love. When we decide to parent, as when we decide to marry, we fully commit ourselves to love. In I Corinthians 13 the Apostle Paul wrote, *If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ²And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. ³If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.* From a parenting perspective, we may have read all the right books and learned all the right buzz words, but if we don’t have the simplest, yet most profound and necessary element, love, we can’t teach our children the way they should go.

Paul continues by describing this necessary love. *⁴Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant ⁵or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. ⁷It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*

Naturally you’ll have days that test your endurance, days that will remind you of the bumper sticker that says, “Insanity is hereditary—you get it from your children.” But on the whole, you will have many more days when Julian will fill you with wonder, warmth, and deep, deep joy.

Parenthood brings alive the saying of Jesus, “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35b). As parents we give food, clothing, shelter, and clean diapers. We surrender sleep and we sacrifice free time. And yet what we receive in return is so much more—the blessings of more love, more joy, and more delight than we ever dreamed possible. We also receive more depth. When a child enters our family, life

takes on a new dimension, a depth not previously known. Depth, due to someone's reliance on us, depth due to our feelings of responsibility, depth in our capacity to love, depth in the connection we now feel to the future, and depth due to witnessing the mystery of life itself.

Jen and Chase, please know how proud we are of the way you opened yourselves and your home to Julian—congratulations and best wishes. You're going to be wonderful parents, and we all look forward to Julian's happy arrival. As you take your first steps toward parenting, may you step out in faith, joy, and love. And may you remember that we your church family will accompany you every step of the way.

Love,

Jimmy

Here ends the reading of this epistle. AMEN.

Written by Rev. Jimmy Only
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The Congregational Church of Manhasset, New York (UCC)

PASTORAL PRAYER

Eternal God, who sent Jesus in the form of a baby to live among us, we thank you this day for the gift of children. We praise you for their sense of wonder, their sweet smiles, their genuine affection, and their boundless energy. Help us make our church a place where children feel welcomed and appreciated. May we always nurture, cherish, and love these wonderful little people. We pray especially today for Jennifer and Chase as they are about to become parents. We ask that all would go well with the delivery and the adoption. Calm their fears and fill them with excitement about this wonderful new adventure.

And now to you, O God, be all majesty, glory, and honor, through Jesus we pray.
AMEN.