

NURTURING CHILDREN

¹ *Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers;*

² *but their delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law they meditate day and night.*

³ *They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper.*

⁴ *The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away.*

⁵ *Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;*

⁶ *for the LORD watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.*

(Psalm 1, NRSV)

Happy Mother's Day. What a great day to celebrate the love that's been shown to us by our mothers and grandmothers, and the love that we try to show our own children and grandchildren. It's a day to open homemade gifts and cards that have been glued by little hands. It's a day to eat a nice meal with family and friends. It's a day to call up our long distance family and tell them that we love them. It's a day to bask in the warm, fuzzy memories of what our mothers did for us. It's a day to feel proud of how cute and wonderful our own children are. Mother's Day is a day for ideals.

Of course, the other 364 days of the year, we can all attest that parenthood is not just a job; it's an adventure.

And like all the other parents here, Colleen and I have our own set of war stories.

We've suffered our share of embarrassment and scorn along the way. There was the time Matthew confronted and chastised a stranger for smoking cigarettes. And then there was the Christmas Eve Pageant a year or two ago. Matthew looked so cute in his sheep costume, right up to the point when he knocked over his friend David Nevins and rolled around the sanctuary floor while the rest of the Children's Choir angelically sang, "Away in a Manger." My poor mother still hasn't fully recovered from that trauma.

I remember in the beginning, thinking that if I could just survive the loss of sleep and constant cries I'd have it made. But no matter what age our kids are: from infants on, we find that parenting our children requires us to tackle a never-ending barrage of decisions, responsibilities, and dilemmas. We all face them. And we all want to do what's right.

When Matthew was 6-months-old, I didn't have to worry about what movies he was going to see. But now I discover that what Colleen and I think is appropriate and what other parents think is appropriate varies. So I have to break it to Matthew, "No honey, just because Johnny is going to see *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* doesn't mean you are."

With every passing year, his options widen and his schedule gets busier. Should he play soccer *and* baseball? Should we enroll him in karate, and Cub Scouts, in addition to his tennis lessons? How old should he be before he learns a musical instrument? What kind of computer skills should he have as a first grader, and should we buy those tapes that teach French on family road trips? It sounds like a satire, but there is all this and more out there for our kids, and some

kids seem to be doing it all. We want our kids to have every advantage, but at some point, it's too much. Our expectations can be set too high, both for our children and ourselves.

What does God expect of us as parents? Are we falling short if we don't volunteer to help lead every activity? Have we missed the mark if we can't get our children to tell us what they did that day in school, let alone have a nice dinner conversation? Surprisingly, the Bible has very little to say about how parents should treat their children. Of course all of the mandates about how people are to treat one another certainly apply. But what specifically does the Bible have to say about parents and children?

The Apostle Paul wrote nearly identical words in his letters to the Ephesians and the Colossians where he said, "Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord" (Ephesians 6:4). The first part of this verse, not provoking our children to anger seems impossible to avoid. Every responsible parent will make their kids mad. When we draw the line and tell our children "no," anger is always a possibility, if not a probability. I believe that the trick lies in how we handle their negativity. Do we return the anger, thereby fueling it? Do we match screams with screams? Do we bring ourselves down to their maturity level and turn the whole scene into one big emotional free for all? Hopefully not. Hopefully, we learn to use our God-given wisdom and reason to creatively deal with the situation at hand.

What of Paul's advice to bring up children in the "discipline and instruction of the Lord?" To me, "the discipline of the Lord" means the type of discipline that would meet with God's approval. It is one thing to be firm, another to be harsh. It is one thing to be consistent, another

to be cruel. The specifics must be figured out in each family, but we know we are on the right track when our discipline reflects God's grace and is rooted in love.

Then Paul mentions the "instruction of the Lord." This phrase encourages us to educate and nurture our children in the faith, to teach them about God. Our church with its wonderful Sunday School and youth program is here to help. And when the love and kindness that are taught at church are lived out in our homes, our children will come to understand what Christianity is all about.

When we raise our children in the church, we do more than teach them Bible stories. We give them a foundation to make wise choices. We teach them the concept of a love with no bounds. And we give them a basis for hope, no matter what happens in their lives. Our schools do a great job teaching our children biology and English. But it is here and in our homes that they learn of the God who loves them infinitely and forever holds them closely. It is here and in our homes that they will learn that what seems like the end of the world isn't, and that when we reach the end of our days it is only the beginning. When we bring our children to church and reflect Christ's way in our homes, I believe we are bringing them up in the instruction of the Lord.

Today's scripture lesson uses the image of a tree to illustrate how our lives can flourish and grow. Of course, all of this is dependent on our roots. To help our children grow and mature as Christians we need roots deeply sunk in the rich earth of God's grace. At some point in life, usually in childhood, the seed of faith is planted in our hearts and begins to grow. Hopefully if the seed of faith is planted in childhood, it will sprout and produce a sapling. This sapling requires the water of learning and the sunshine of God's love to sink its roots and stretch forth its branches. While young,

it produces little fruit, but given time it may offer an abundant harvest. Roots are the tree's lifelines, its source of vital nutrients and water. If something happens to the root system, the tree will die. The same is true of the spiritual life. Roots are the keys to growth.

In chapter 31 of the Book of Proverbs we find a list of virtues that the deeply rooted spiritual life may produce. Although these words were intended to describe a good wife, in my mind they also describe a good parent. The virtues listed include strength, dignity, laughter, wisdom, kindness, and respect for God (31:25-26, 30). Each of these virtues will not only make us better parents, but better people. It takes strength to maintain good values in a world like ours. And no one feels up to the task all of the time. When we don't feel strong enough, we need to remember that we can lean on one another, and we can lean on God. God's abiding Spirit can and will strengthen our resolve to be the best parents we can be.

Sometimes it is good to take a step back and simply give thanks for these precious people God has entrusted to us. With all of their posturing and tough talk, our children are still fragile, formative, and dependent in more ways than they will ever understand. As is often said, someone has to be the adult in the relationship. By nurturing the virtues of kindness, wisdom, laughter and respect in our own lives, we will best teach our children how to be the kind of people God intended them to be.

Obviously the most important gift we can give our children is love. Minister and author, John Killinger, wrote this about the love shown by mothers, a love that nurtures our children and their understanding of God.

*I believe in the love of all mothers,
and its importance in the lives of the children*

they bear.

*It is stronger than steel, softer than down,
and more resilient than a green sapling on the
hillside.*

*It closes wounds, melts disappointments,
and enables the weakest child to stand tall
and straight in the fields of adversity.*

*I believe that this love, even at its best,
is only a shadow of the love of God,
a dark reflection of all that we can expect of
God,*

both in this life and the next.

*And I believe that one of the most beautiful
sights*

*in the world is a mother who lets this greater
love*

flow through her to her child,

*blessing the world with the tenderness of her
touch*

*and the tears of her joy (from his book *Lost in
Wonder, Love and Praise* as quoted in:*

<http://www.christianitytoday.com/holidays/mother/features/ljquote.html>).

As the love of God can transform our lives, our love for our children can transform their lives too. In fact, the love that our children have for us can transform our lives in ways that make all the sleepless nights and worry-filled days worth it. Let us give thanks for the gift of our children, and may we give thanks for everyone who shows them a mother's love. Happy Mother's Day. AMEN.

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PASTORAL PRAYER

Loving God, on this Mother's Day we thank you for the gift of life you have given to us through our mothers. We thank you for the time and love they have given us during our lives. We ask this day that you would bless mothers everywhere with love, patience, understanding, and strength to carry out their special work. Help us to be thankful for our mothers and for those who have been like mothers to us. Assist us that we might pass along the gifts and blessings entrusted to us through them.

We pray for those in our community for whom this Mother's Day is especially painful.

And now, O God, to you be all blessing and glory and honor.
AMEN.

Portions of this prayer were adapted from <http://www.wels.net/sab/listen/md-pray.html>.