

What's a Parent to Do?

Psalm 78:1-8; Judges 2:6-10

Danny Massie

First Presbyterian Church

Greensboro, North Carolina

June 23, 2019

Since I arrived among you on the first Sunday of Advent a goodly number of parents among us have privately shared with me a concern, a regret, a dilemma having to do with their children. This common concern both surprises and saddens them and they speak of it in hushed tones, out of embarrassment I suppose. But they certainly have much company who share their concerns and wonder how, if at all, they can address the issue.

Rabbi Michael Gold in an online article (entitled, "What Do I Owe My Adult Children") tells a story of a group of women sitting in a pediatrician's office complaining about their children. "My infant gets up several times a night and will not stop crying," says one. Another chimes in, "My two year old is driving me crazy with temper tantrums."

"Oh, just wait until they turn nine and then start talking back."

"No, wait until they are teenagers and start rebelling against two things — everything you say and everything you do."

Finally, a gray-haired woman listening to all the complaints speaks up, "You think you have problems? Wait until they turn forty-three!"

Having three children ourselves now in their forties, I can identify with her at times. Regardless of their age, our children never get so old that they are beyond our felt need to express our opinions or give our advice, whether it is sought or appreciated. And as parents we never get so old that we fail to have concerns about our children's lives and decisions.

And yet, once our children are out of our homes and ostensibly on their own our concerns may remain but our capacity to effect change or exert influence diminishes. We can neither live nor die for them, though we wish we could. And certainly, cannot make life's decisions and choices for them, though we wish we could. And yet, this is as it should be and as God has intended as well. Eventually each of us will stand alone before God to give an accounting of the choices and decisions we alone have made as both parents and children. We will not be saved on the basis of a loved one's faith or condemned because of their disobedience. We can neither believe nor obey for another person, even our own children, as much as we might wish that this were so.

So, preacher, tell us what this parental concern or regret is and can I assume you are referring to older parents with grown children? That is a correct assumption but since all parents hope to be older one day it surely applies to all parents. Now that concern expressed to me on countless occasions is the

disturbing fact that children once reared in the faith and in the church by conscientious and devoted parents seem to have left the faith and abandoned the church.

In recent weeks I have shared some of the all too familiar facts about the steeply declining membership of Christian churches throughout this land and the diminishing role of religion in public life. I mentioned last week that of the 83 million millennials in America only 15% have any kind of a connection to a church or synagogue. Now is not the time to explore the reasons but the reality cannot be denied and the angst and regret of countless older and faithful parents is a growing concern. And rightly so.

The passage from Judges this morning reminds us that the presence or absence of the knowledge of God can certainly be a generational thing. After Joshua and his generation passes away we are told that “another generation grew up after them, who did not know the Lord or the work that he had done for Israel.” This is reminiscent of the trouble the Hebrews had in Egypt after this passing of Joseph. We read in Exodus 5 that a New King (Pharaoh) came to the throne who did not know about Joseph. Indeed, the church, like Israel of old, is always one generation away from extinction. The story of God’s gracious and redemptive work must be told and re-told by each succeeding generation, if the church is to survive, much less thrive. And if that fails to happen the fate of the church will be the same as the fate of Israel at the close of the book of Judges where we read in the final verse, *“All the people did what was right in their own eyes.” (21-25)*

The 78th Psalm read today is a summons to God’s people to teach the story of God’s saving deeds to each succeeding generation. But the question for today is how we do so when our children are no longer young and impressionable but rather older, independent, and set in their ways?

Some of us older parents are riddled with guilt because we remember the passage from Proverbs 22:5: *“Train up a child in the way he should go and when he is old he will not depart from it.”* And yet, we felt that we did train up our children correctly but in spite of that they have departed from God’s way. Does that mean we have failed? I think not! That proverb may work as a general rule but there are countless exceptions. Godly people emerge from Godless homes and the opposite occurs as well.

So, the question arises: Are we now powerless to exert any influence upon our grown children? Certainly not! While we cannot and should not attempt to manage our children’s spirituality or dictate their lifestyles or values, we are not without influence or even responsibility, however diminished it may be. We can’t do everything, but we can do something, and what we can do we should do.

With this in mind let me offer some advice, or better yet counsel.

I am not fond of “How to” sermons because life and faith are too complex for simplistic answers and automatic solutions to various problems. What works in one situation may fail miserably in another, especially when it comes to relational matters like parenting, or marriage or family

disputes. Furthermore, “How to” sermons imply that we have the power or the ability to effect change in another person and that leaves the Lord God out of the picture. Only the Holy Spirit can effect change and commitment in the human heart. But all of that notwithstanding, there are some strategies or practices that I would invite older parents to consider as they try to bear witness to and influence their adult children who seem immune to the faith and estranged from the church.

1. The first thing we can and should do is to pray, to make our children a central focus of our life at prayer. After all we pray about the things that matter most to us, do we not? We especially pray about those matters which seem beyond our capacity to control. The temptation, of course, is to argue or insist on certain things in dealing with our children. But I do not know of a single soul who has ever argued into or, more specifically, badgered into the Kingdom of God. Yet many people have been prayed into it. In listening to people share their testimonies or faith journeys, over the years, I am struck by how often people mention a parent or grandparent or friend who prayed without ceasing for their spiritual awakening. That person may have not been the one who brought the individual to faith, but their prayers were certainly instrumental. St. Augustine’s mother, Monica, is a symbol of hope for concerned parents today. She prayed for thirty years for a rebellious and profligate son but with no visible results. In time, it was St. Ambrose whose witness brought about Augustine’s conversion, but Monica’s prayers were certainly a critical part of the process, as Augustine confessed in his writings.
2. The discipline of prayer leads me to my second point. To pray about your children is a visible and present reminder to you that you are not alone in your quest for your children’s vital relationship with the Lord. When they were baptized, you should know that God himself has a vested interest in them as do God’s people who promised to nurture and pray for your children. Those of us who pray ought to be in the best position to remember who is in charge when it comes to salvation. Our God has a vested interest in the spiritual welfare of all of his children, including yours. Your children were God’s first and, in the end,, they will be his as well. So, we do what we can, and we trust the results to our Heavenly Father. He loves them even more than we! I can tell you personally in the wake of the recent death of our son that no thought or conviction has given me more comfort than this.
3. Thirdly, I encourage older parents to maintain a loving relationship with their children at all costs. What your child chooses to do with his or her life may frustrate, confuse or disappoint you. It may even anger you. But your love must never be contingent upon their compliance. It must remain unconditional, even sacrificial, if it is to reflect God’s agape love for us. You may do more, but you should never do less than loving your child and expressing that love through words and deeds. Like the loving and forgiving father in parable of the Prodigal Son, we are to embrace and receive our children without first requiring their repentance or the fulfillment of their religious or family obligations. Love is the primary obligation of any mother or father regardless of age...love unconditional and love incarnate.

4. Fourth, I would encourage you to continue throughout your life to model and mentor the Christian faith, as best you can, whether your children are following in your footsteps or not. They will certainly observe and remember what you do far more than what you say. So, continue whether you are in their home or they are in yours, to worship regularly and gladly, to pray frequently, to give generously and to serve willingly. They may seem dismissive of what you say and do, but I assure you that they are looking and listening, and one never knows when the example of your witness will suddenly prove transformational in their lives. So be consistent in your own practice of the faith.

Just recently I read an interesting account of James Boswell, the famous 18th century biographer of Dr. Samuel Johnson. But Boswell was a great thinker and a great person of substance in his own right. After his death one of Boswell's students decided to attempt a biography of Boswell's own life. He recalled how Boswell had often alluded to one particular day in his life that proved transformational. He had simply gone fishing with his father, a judge in Edinburgh, Scotland. He could quote verbatim things his father had said as they sat on the bank fishing. The writer found the journals kept by Boswell's father and read through them until he found an entry for the day the judge and his son had gone fishing. Surprisingly the entry read: "Gone fishing with my son; a day wasted." That first struck me as a sad commentary from the father. But on the other hand, it does illustrate how a child can be profoundly influenced by a loved one's words or example, which may have seemed insignificant at the time.

My own grandmother who lived with us when I was young was a great influence in my life. I never recall her speaking about her faith, unfortunately, but frequently in the afternoons when I walked past her bedroom I saw her sitting in her rocker and reading her Bible. And I knew instinctively that there was a direct correlation between her reading of the scriptures and the life of love and sacrifice that she was modeling.

5. Continue to share with your children, honestly, faithfully and intimately who you are, what you believe and value, what you hope for, what you appreciate and cherish. Sometimes as parents we never do this, and fathers may struggle with this matter even more so than mothers, as a rule. We are often embarrassed to talk about ourselves or to reveal our deepest longings and convictions. But our children want and need to see beyond the surface and to know who and what we truly are in our heart of hearts. If you find this recommendation awkward or uncomfortable, let me suggest something to you. While I think of myself as a rather open person with our four children, I was surprised several years ago at Christmas when one of our daughters gave me a little book entitled, All About Me. It is noting more than eighty-three pages filled with questions and multiple choices about who I am, and it provides a biographical and emotional overview of my life. It asks some rather intimate and frankly embarrassing questions about my experiences in life, about my family of origin, about my hopes and dreams, about my morals and memories, my emotions and fears, my beliefs and behaviors. My gift to her the following Christmas was a

return of the book filled out as best I could. This intimate sharing of your real self is the gift that no one else can give to your child and they will read it, treasure it, and learn from it long after your demise.

6. In conclusion, there is one more decision you can make which will likely influence your child and may well be the final witness you offer to him or to her.

This will not appeal to some of you. You may regard it as coercive even, or even manipulative, but I see it as neither. I see it as a critical and essential aspect of your own discipleship and your own faithful stewardship. I encourage you to draft your will and structure your estate so that it truly reflects your faith, your values, your deepest convictions and your life's commitments. This is the last legacy and the final witness you will give to your children and to those causes and institutions to which you were committed. Let your family know in advance what your intentions are and what your wishes are.

Most Christians die without a will, or at least without a will that they have written down. The state will draft one for you if you fail to do so. Many of us will never be worth more money than we are when we die, and yet so many Christians give no thought what-so-ever to how those resources God has entrusted to them will be left or managed beyond their life. They give no direction to how their accumulated resources that God has provided will serve the passions and purposes that have marked their days.

You see, we always know who and what a person truly loves by looking at where they invest their money and time. You give your money to the things you love. If you disagree, take it up with Jesus. He was the one who said, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." Will your estate bear witness to your family and friends as to who you are and what you have ultimately believed and valued? Will it be your best, as well as your last witness to those who come after you? One thing you must consider is whether all of your children or grandchildren can be trusted to be good stewards of your accumulated blessings from God. Have they given evidence to this fact already? Can they be trusted as stewards to faithfully manage what you have accumulated with God's help? Make no mistake about it: we give to what and to whom we love, and we cannot help doing so. And how we give is an expression of discipline and discipleship.

So then, if you are troubled by adult children who seem to have little if any spiritual depth: Pray for them daily. Accept that you are not solely responsible for their spiritual welfare, since God and the church have an investment in them as well. Love them unconditionally. Continue to model and mentor the faith before them. Share yourself openly and honestly with them. And leave your estate so that it bears witness to what you have believed and taught and exemplified throughout your days. For this too may well be a critical aspect of the legacy of your faith and your life.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.