

Better Parents – Better People: The Deal with the Oxygen Mask

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February 9, 2020

I Timothy 4:11-16 – Proverbs 4:23

These are the things you must insist on and teach. Let no one despise your youth, but set the believers an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity. Until I arrive, give attention to the public reading of scripture, to exhorting, to teaching. Do not neglect the gift that is in you, which was given to you through prophecy with the laying on of hands by the council of elders. Put these things into practice, devote yourself to them, so that all may see your progress. Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; continue in these things, for in doing this you will save both yourself and your hearers. 1 Timothy 4:11-16 (NRSV)

Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life... Proverbs 4:23 (NRSV)

Join with me in prayer. *Gracious God open us up. Open our eyes that we might see and our ears that we might hear your word in the midst of these words and open our hearts, God, that we might feel, and our compassion might be renewed. And then, O Lord, open our hands that we might serve. Amen.*

My wife Dee and I were 22 when our first child was born - Katherine. We were too young. Yes, let me just say that. But we were too young to know that we were too young. That's the way that is.

We resolved, we believed we wanted to do it right. We were going to do it well, and we were going to do the things that the books taught you to do and the childbirth trainers and all that stuff. We weren't going to use any of those disposable diapers. Our children needed to be wrapped in soft cotton and that would be a good thing for them. With our first child - and maybe even our second I think we used those. You know, you have to wash those out in the toilet before you put them in the diaper pail. I got before I was done that, I could eat a sandwich with one hand and wash out the diaper with the other. You just get used to it. As a parent after a while you

just get used to the things that come out of your children's bodies. It was just one of those things that you're going to do.

You know, our children have managed to live this long, as the kids got older, we're now grandparents, we learned some new things. We used to let them sleep on their stomach, but now they have to sleep on their back. We were supposed to give them sugar water and now you don't give them sugar water. Don't give them any water at all.

I'd say that babies can have water, but we're told, No, Dad, they can't have water.

Then we ended up with five daughters. I really do have a heart when I talk with people who have fertility issues and want to be parents so much. We just didn't have that experience. It was like I'd walk past her in the hall and then there's another child! So we have five daughters.

Here's what happens when you have children. It's a glorious and wonderful time. But it's overwhelming and hard work. And you play in your mind, "This is supposed to be the best time of my life! I'm supposed to love this!" And it's hard, hard work.

I'll tell you as a grandparent now I want to redeem the mistakes I made as a parent and realize that it's not too late, that I can still heal wounds that may have come to pass. And I want to be a greater grandparent than I was a parent.

Here's what's even more significant. Well, maybe not more, but I look around me and there are hundreds of children, hundreds that come through the doors of this church. They're stepping into a community that we hope and want very much to shape them in faith. Our philosophy here has a number of key components. One of them is that parents will be the primary faith teacher. In other words we don't really look for what you call dry cleaning spiritual development where you drop off your kids and come back and pick them up clean. Parents are the primary faith teachers, but the second piece to it is kind of the converse, that all of the research shows that if children do have a relationships with all sorts of adults, all sorts of people of all sorts of generations, grandparent age people, parent age people, young people, young adults, students, teenagers, children who have relationships across that spectrum as they grow in faith will have mentors at all ages and people who step into their lives. I look at my own life and think about the teachers and the parents and my friends' parents, and coaches and the Sunday school teachers and the youth counselors. These made such an impact on me, who helped to shape me in the faith.

The reason I'm telling you this is that this is a sermon about parenting, but it's a sermon about all of us. We can impact the lives of other people particularly younger people. And what kind of legacy will we leave? Because here's what I'll tell you - it's not whether you will leave a legacy. All of us will have an impact on the lives of others - the issue is what kind of impact will that be. What kind will we leave?

We just baptized these babies and I said to you, "This is your new child, and this is your new mothers and fathers and sisters and brothers in the faith." And when we say that technically - in fact I had an associate pastor not that long ago - it wasn't anyone who's here now - he told me that I really should be saying, "Just brothers and sisters. God's Father and they're not our fathers in the Christian family." Okay, that's the theology and that's great, but practically and pragmatically we all need to step into the role together to be that village that shapes a child. We all have a responsibility for every child that comes through these doors.

What I want us to hear today and in the next two weeks is not just how to be good parents, but how to be good spiritual mothers and fathers to the children that walk through these doors.

There are three lessons I want us to get out of this passage we have here. Again, this passage wasn't written for parents. It was written to a church leader, a preacher, Timothy, about how he could shape the people he was working with. There are three things I want you to see in this and this is the first one: "Pay attention to yourself." The most important thing is not to pay attention to your children and what they're doing but to pay attention to yourself. The focus is on the teacher, not the student. He says in verse fourteen: "Do not neglect the gift that is in you." Or in verse sixteen "Pay close attention to yourself and you will save both yourself and your hearers."

This is that deal with the oxygen mask. You know what I'm talking about. When you're flying on a plane and the flight attendant says, "If the oxygen mask drops from above you first put it on yourself and then put it on the children or others you're responsible for." So we can't help anyone else if we don't take care of ourselves. The first thing we must do is nurture our own relationship with Christ, our own emotional and spiritual health.

A number of years ago a woman here at St. Luke's passed away. Her husband had passed away a number of years before that and she had two daughters. She was estranged from one of her daughters and so the only people who came to plan her service was the other daughter and the other daughter's husband. As we were talking in the room it was one of those moments where you could feel something in the air, like something going on that I don't know about. There's a

tension in the room of some sort. Finally, the lady just said, "You need to know that my mom was a raging alcoholic for most of her life. That's why she's estranged from my sister. She'd been sober for twelve years, but that relationship hadn't healed." Then she said something that really moved me. "I only wish my mom had gotten well earlier. It would have made so much difference." Then she went on to say that her mom worked hard at being a parent and was a Brownie mom, took them to church and all of those sorts of things. The picture was that she invested so much in her children, but her own struggles were just overwhelming.

We won't have anything to give anybody else if we don't take care of our own hearts. That's what the Proverbs passage says: "Keep your heart with all vigilance for from it flow the springs of life." If we're going to have springs of life to flow into our children and to other children who are in this church, we have to guard our own hearts and lives.

I have a friend who was an athletic trainer and he says that the trainer holds one of the most important positions on a professional football team. He went on to say that the professional athlete's mindset is achieve, achieve, achieve, win, win, win. Work harder, work harder, work out longer, hit harder, all of those things. And what happens is they get hurt, and, he said, part of the job as a trainer is to tell them, "Don't work out so much. Take a day off here and a day off here and work out an hour instead of four hours. Make sure you're sleeping 10 hours a night. All of these things that mean you're taking care of yourself. Because if you're hurt, sitting on the bench, then you're of no value."

As a pastor I want to tell you, "Take care of yourself." I look at this congregation of high achieving people. "Go, Go, Go!" "I'm going to be a better parent, a better parent..." And I want to say to take care of yourself. That's the first thing,

When I exercise, I listen to music and a Cat Stevens' song is one of my favorites. I know that shows my age but it's the way it is. The song goes this way, "I buy the nicest things from the supermarket store, vitamin land and marzipan and I know just what they're all for, I've organized my useless life in a way I've never done before. I even go to the dentist now! I've got no time for silly chitter-chatter. I'm on my way. And while my blood's still warm and my mind doesn't matter, I'm hoping to stay." Then the punch line - "For I've got a thing about seeing my grandson grow old."

I've got a thing about seeing my grandchildren grow old. And I want to take care of myself, because if I'm dead I'm of no value. I can't invest in them, or shape them, or love on them, or form them. I'm going to take care of myself. Pay attention to yourself.

Here's the second thing. "Set the believers an example in speech and conduct and love and faith and purity." Then in verse 15: "Put these things into practice, devote yourself to them."

Set an example. Lead by example. I know that seems so obvious and simple, but remember the saying, "Don't worry that your children aren't listening to you, worry that they are watching you."

This whole sermon series really grew out of a conversation I had with my mother 15 or 20 years ago. She was living in Destin, Florida. My kids were small, and we didn't have a lot of money. By the way, that's a really good place for Grandma to live - grandparents, move to Destin if you're going to move! We'd go every summer and that week in Destin with Momma D. was our vacation. She would rent us a condo on the beach. She usually lived in a little tiny house; dinner was at 6 o'clock every night. Then one time she's sitting on the back porch, sipping her cocktail, watching what's going on, the craziness in our family. We were running around making sure our kids were doing this and that, and all of that. Wanting them to have the perfect vacation and all of those sorts of things.

And she said, "Tom, you and Dee work way too hard at being parents." Now I wasn't sure if that was a compliment or an insult. I wasn't sure what she meant, but then she went on to say, "Don't you know that good parenting is just an outgrowth of good living?"

And that's stuck with me, that our primary responsible, this taking care of yourself leads to setting an example for our children by living well. That they're going to catch way more watching us than they do listening to us.

There's a woman named Dranfile, who she lived in Albania many years ago. She was a peasant woman and she was called Rose, and though she and her husband didn't have much they would always invite anybody who was hungry in their village to come and be with them. So the people would come when they were hungry, and they knew at Rose's house they were always welcome at the table. She had daughters and the daughters would ask, "Who are these people?" And Rose would answer, "They're just some of our relatives," so these girls and women grew up thinking that they had this huge extended family that just dropped by all the time.

Then Rose's husband died, and she continued this. Then one of her daughters, who was named Agnes, decided to become a nun, and that was Mother Teresa. She claimed that she is who she is because she grew up watching her mother care for the poor.

I wonder what our children grow up watching us do, believing what matters.

I think it's awesome for example if you bring your children to Vacation Bible School and to Sunday school. I believe it's awesome that you bring your high school or middle school student to be a part of our Wednesday night Small Groups. But I would submit to you that what might be more impactful on their life is for you to go to a Small Group or to a Sunday school class. Or to be connected in some way in community so they see that and say, "Man, that must matter."

I think it's awesome for us to give third graders a wonderful Bible with their name on it and say, "Read that Bible!" But it would be more impactful if they watched us do so. I must tell you that that's one of the things I feel oddly. Oddly is that the shoemaker's children have no shoes. That I didn't talk much to my kids about faith at home. It was what I did here at the church, and I hoped at home they sucked some in by osmosis. But looking back I ask myself, "Hmmm I think I could have done that better."

Now let me just say that this isn't just for parents on how we set an example for our children. It's for all of us as a church. There is a man named Steven Garber who wrote a book called *Fabric of Faithfulness* that came out in 1998. The subtitle is *Weaving Together Belief and Behavior*. And it's a little bit like our Sticky Faith project, and it's about why so many young people grow up in the church and then they go off to college and leave the church and never come back. Why does that happen? The research he's done is that when students reach late high school and the beginning of their university time, they begin to become aware of the gap between belief and behavior. They see the church talking one way but behaving a different way, talking about love and openness but being closed. Talking about forgiveness but not practicing it. So they think, "I'm going to go somewhere where they don't focus on just talking but focus on doing something." So they join Cross Fit or Soul Cycle where the focus is on "Let's do something!"

All of us have to understand that our life example helps to shape young people around us. All of ours. Maybe especially older people who can say, "I've been doing this all my life. I've been living and loving like Jesus all my life."

Here's the third thing. In verse 15 it says, "So that all may see your progress." So the focus is on progress not on perfection. Wow - we just put so much pressure on young parents and things like how they're supposed to make organic baby food, and they've got to make sure their kids learn a second language. After all they're three now ... And that they have to go to the right school and be on the right ball team and they don't want to be left behind because when they get to high school they won't have started playing T-ball at age 4, and if not, how will they ever be good on the team and get a scholarship.... And all of that piles on! Or they're to make sure they don't have too much screen time! All of this is important, but there's so much pressure.

I was at Academy not too long ago looking for a pair of shoes. It was the time when all the kids were trying on soccer cleats, all of the parents were bringing their kids to get their fall cleats for soccer. There was one lady who had 2 kids, maybe six and four, and the six-year-old was trying on cleats. But he was screaming he didn't want the cleats and the four-year-old was going nuts and had too much sugar that morning or something. Mom was trying to gather them up and being very logical and nice to them. Then the four-year-old knocked into me and almost knocked me over. The mom was so apologetic, saying, "Oh, I'm so sorry... come back here and say you're sorry to this man..." I just told her, "It's fine, it's fine!" I thought to myself, "I'm going to pray for her because she's trying. She's trying so hard." And I'll tell you that I don't know any parents who aren't trying. No one says, "I give up, I'm not trying."

We try and it's just like sometimes as long as you're trying, you're doing the best you can. On some Sundays you might look up at me preaching and you think, "Well, he's trying. He's giving it whirl. He's doing the best he can...I'm not sure I'm getting this this week but he's trying, I'll give him that."

I do think that what happens is at some point we have to understand that it is in that falling short that others can see our progress. We're not called on to be perfect, we're called on to grow. I can look back at my parenting and see mistakes I made, and think, "Oh, my goodness! I can do better than that now. I can grow, I can become."

My wife once got a Mother's Day from my daughter. It says, "Mom, you're been a success - I'm not a pole dancer!" That was my favorite one. It's not high bar, really, no disrespect to the pole dancers among us. At some point we have to realize we do the best we can.

We're going to talk in two weeks about boundaries and how our children are not us, so they're not dogs to be trained. They're people and they'll have their own lives.

Anne Lamott wrote a book about parenting and she said, "One of the worst things about being a parent for me is the self discovery. The being face to face with one's secret insanity and brokenness and rage."

Maybe you as a person have said, "Gosh, I'm finding dark places in my heart of anger that I didn't even know were there."

Pastor Abby Odio reflects on that same feeling but resolves it. She writes, "There is this wild and counter cultural notion we see all throughout Scripture everywhere you turn that invites us to embrace and not escape our weakness. That we name and not run from our pain. And the beauty of this invitation is that God like a good parent meets us here. Our own inadequacies as parents when we invite God into those spaces actually becomes some of our greatest parenting strengths."

When we realize that we can't do it alone, when parenting drives us to our knees, that's when we can invite God in. And who knows what God will do to grow us, to use us, broken as we are?

So, my friends, take care of yourselves. Set an example for the children around us and just do your best and let God fill in the gaps.

Gracious and loving God, we confess that we fall short. That we don't do everything the way we're supposed to. We don't take care of ourselves. We don't set that example. We try too hard to be just perfect parents. So forgive us, God, but use us as we see fit that we might be your instruments to shape the people you have put around us, given us responsibility for. We pray in the name of Christ, Amen.