

“MAKE SURE YOU GET THE FIRST BUTTON RIGHT”

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An aide of Polish astronomer Copernicus said, if we don't get the first button on our shirt buttoned right, then nothing can turn out well. He was describing something more than dressing. He meant models of understanding we call paradigms.

For example, imagine computing our recent solar eclipse based on a model of our solar system where we put the earth, not the sun, at the center. Astronomers attempted just that for 13 centuries using complex epicycles of Greek astronomer Ptolemy. But as telescopes improved, observing the actual movements of heavenly bodies, that old paradigm couldn't cope. They had to postulate increasingly arcane epicycles upon epicycles to explain sun and planets interacting. Finally, Galileo picked up where Copernicus left off, put the sun at the center of things-- then bingo-bango--formulas and calculations suddenly grew so elegantly simple.

It's true, if we don't get the first button on our shirt buttoned right, then nothing works out well. If our grasp of key relationships is off at the core, it feels wrong. Today as Christians I want us to apply that to our families. After all, it's Christine Geeding's first launch of the church year with us. We welcome our new DCE as a rallying point for families. Not to mention, as I sense the shape of our home lives, with children back in school, we're calmed and comforted. Isn't it something how over the summer, in constant contact with children, it can be wonderful, but not always. After a while it can feel like, this isn't working so well. When does school start? So let's refine what family is, how we're meant to relate. Otherwise we set ourselves up for grief. We feel like failures as parents without understanding why.

The Rev. Matt Fitzgerald of St. Paul's UCC in Chicago reminded me of some essential comments of Karl Barth putting in perspective how God and family relate.

We begin with parents sitting here today. Let's pause to notice how difficult it is to parent. I'm hard-pressed to imagine anything more humbling. Knowing when to comfort one child in trouble; and when to hold accountable another child who is making trouble; instantly within the moment, each child with such different temperaments--how can any one parent excel making such calibrations on the fly?

But to get in deeper touch with how impossible parenting is, let's recall our childhoods, and our parents parenting us. That has a way of bringing things full circle, doesn't it? Remember how hard it was as they affirmed and disciplined our lives?

Let's face it, we all enter the world longing for perfect love from our parents. And our parents invariably fall short, just like we do with our own children. That is true of every mother and father here today. We expect perfect parents but we all get broken parents. And living with those expectations as parents is a crushing load. We learn this with decades of experience, recognizing how stressful parenting is. That is when we finally cut our parents a break, invisible to us as sarcastic teens.

Parenting well is difficult. It's sheer impossibility breaks us down and ruins some. We attempt to make our children's lives beautiful, so we buy into the impossibility. But let's recognize the inherent limits imposed upon any and every parent. Could your father make you healthy? My father sat up with me all night as this hemophiliac nearly died of a tonsillectomy. He was beside himself with powerlessness.

Ask yourself, did your mother have the power to make you happy? My mom gave me every advantage, every opportunity to learn and grow. And I would complain that I was bored. Of course, I am certain that has never happened in your home.

Like Copernicus and Galileo with astronomy, Karl Barth helps us with family. He aligns the constellation of family into a more true, realistic and godly perspective. He says, "The only thing a parent can give a child is opportunity." That is the true standard for parents to be judged. Of course, safety and security, yes, as much as you can. But ask yourself: have you given your children every opportunity they deserve? Apply that standard. It's much more realistic than Disney movies where everyone sentimentally falls into each other's arms after 90 minutes or situation-comedies where conflict easily resolves itself in a half-hour. And lingering, bitter resentment never carries over to a next episode. It just unrealistically disappears.

Think about it. You might look a little like your father, but you're not made in your father's image. You are made in *God's* image. You might resemble your mother, but you are not made in her image. You are made in *God's* image. As soon as we lose track of that we begin to get in trouble and dig ourselves into deep holes.

Karl Barth adds, yes, parents do have "a Godward aspect." They tower over us with power to shape us. But long before you had an earthly parent, you had a Heavenly One. God is your original parent who knew you in your mother's womb, to quote Jeremiah, before your earthly parents saw you. Then and always, God is the only one equal to fully loving your children. We can only approximate that.

So much trouble arises as we imagine we should be capable of this divine love. Matt Fitzgerald goes so far as to say parents who want to assume this posture of perfect love are not only setting themselves up for failure and sadness. They also risk obscuring God by assuming a place for their young where only God belongs.

Again, Barth says, "Parents are more like our elder siblings than our Father in heaven." Many don't learn this until our children grow into their Twenties. If you're

a parent, lay down the impossible burden you put on yourself. You are not God. If you're a child, look to God with your colossal expectations, not to your parents.

Every time I baptize a child, I go over this with parents. Some parents cry as I explain God that knows and loves their infants before birth, *in utero*. Babies belong to God as his beloved more profoundly than to us. Caring for newborns amazes my Dr. Cecile Windels. She shakes her head with wonder, and usually exclaims, they just came from God. I can tell they were with God. Mum's tum is secondary.

We earthly parents are only temporary stewards of their young lives. Don't blink or they'll be asking for the car keys. After we parents are long gone, God abides as the perfect Father and Mother rolled into one; what tried to be, but fell short of.

In a pre-baptismal meeting, I tell parents their children are finally God's not theirs. If God claims them to dig wells in Africa or teach nutrition in the south Bronx, they must let them go. Otherwise, I won't baptize them. The willingness to trust God as their ultimate loving parent, to let them be all God's, is key to getting this right. That's what baptism means, putting God's invisible but indelible claim upon them.

But it's hard to relinquish our too-tense grasp upon their young lives, isn't it? So now you see how essential it is to bring your children to Church School, so it isn't up to you parents alone to get all this right, raising your children within a vacuum.

Yet as we succeed in this it frees our children. They can live out God's purposes for them rather than feeling hemmed in as we live too vicariously through them. Surrendering our young to God is a key dilemma that also deepens parents' faith. Thriving in right relationship, parents are freed with a realistic charge to live up to: providing them opportunity while pointing the way toward the true and living God.

With this paradigm for parenting, which radically differs from what popular culture says about parenting, something mysteriously wonderful happens. You meet the Father you've been pining for your whole life while looking in wrong places. You meet the Mother both you and your mother were crying for, unable to locate. Parents and children, children and parents, it fits and works within greater designs.

Now we can grasp the command to honor father and mother. If you won't do so, maybe you're setting them up to be gods they can never be. Now we can grasp our epistle. "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are." Yes, children of God, first, last, always!

All I can say is, before you send them off to school, or dress them for church, make sure that you get the first button right. Otherwise, nothing can turn out well.

It's striking, even miraculous, how when the massive bodies around which our lives orbit—earth to sun, children to God—find their rightful place, we all thrive. Amen.