

“WILL OUR CHILDREN HAVE FAITH?”

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As a seminary intern at FCC, Branford, my advisor, the Rev. Roger Manners, was not a touchy-feely kind of guy. He was even stern in preparing us to minister. Yet I recall once how he became downright misty speaking of his own children, who were by then grown and working. He was proud of them, yes, but that was beside the point. Something was missing in their lives. Something that bothered him very much. “Make sure, Dale, when you have children, to tell them in no uncertain terms how much your faith in God means to you.” What Roger didn’t have to say was he had not. He thought he could assume it and they would still get it. What he thought was obvious, they had completely missed.

We have much to learn in the mainline church about passing on our faith to new generations. So why do our young so easily get over living out our faith within the church? Catholics never get over being Roman Catholic. Just ask one. Why do our young so easily leave behind the faith we affirm? Ever notice how some parents say, “We never talk about our faith. We don’t need to. We *practice* it.” This much is clear. If that was enough at one time--and I am not certain it ever was--then it clearly is not enough today.

We live in an era when so much less can be taken for granted. Christianity’s run as the unofficial religion of America has ended some decades ago. Today’s world no longer supports and promotes Christian things like it had for years. Today it no longer suffices merely to breathe the air or drink the water in America to become a Christian. As Roger said, as parents having faith isn’t enough. Unless we radiate faith, it’s invisible. Don’t overlook or assume it. Our faith is the only true fully encompassing foundation for living. But whatever does “foundation for living” mean? Let me see if I can warm it up for you.

Last January, when I presided at the marriage of my daughter to a naval aviator, I asked them what message they wanted me to bring to the congregants celebrating with them. Wells, my son-in-law, flies 8-10 hours per day over Syria and Iraq during his six month deployment. Both Lise and Wells knew this was coming before they wed, and that it would test them. People were worried. The toughness of starting their marriage this way was the elephant in the room no one felt they could mention. So Lise asked me to reassure those gathered. What was the message? We know this will be very tough. But we have the lasting foundation of our faith to make us stronger than temporary tough times.

Isn’t this why we bring our children to church? To give them the foundation of God in Christ as inevitable tough times befall them somewhere in a distant future? How many of you want this for your own children? It was at the top of my list for my two daughters. But how does something as beautiful and strong as this get put in place for our young?

I want to tell you about the National Study on Youth and Religion. It is all about the impact of parents’ faith on their children. They found that “of parents who report faith is

extremely important in their lives, 67% of their teens report that faith is extremely or very important in their lives.” And the opposite is also true. Parents for whom faith is somewhat or not at all important will end up with teens who feel pretty much the same way.

This study teaches: *we will get from our children what we are ourselves*. Of course, we know that about most things, but somehow assume it is different in the spiritual life. The single most essential social influence on the religious or spiritual lives of adolescents—more than Church School, Children’s Choirs, Confirmation, Church School Teachers—is the *parents*. Researchers Smith and Denton conclude, “The best way to get most youth involved in and serious about their faith communities is to get their parents more involved and serious about their faith communities.” Not every parent realizes their influence in matters of spirit, like every other aspect of childrearing, exceeds the church. So I am not just blowing smoke when I say that everything we do here amounts to CE.

Of course, they could’ve saved a lot of money on this detailed longitudinal study if they had known Clarence Jordan. Jordan was a peanut farmer, a skilled interpreter of the Greek New Testament, and a seminary professor. But then the Baptists turned him out because of his bold stance creating an interracial community in Georgia back in the 1940s. Jordan was also the mentor to Millard Fuller in founding Habitat for Humanity.

Jordan, in his usual colloquial manner, was known to say, “You can’t raise live chicks under dead hens.” If the faith of the parental generation isn’t vital and living then don’t expect vital and living faith from sons and daughters. Dropping children off at church or even delivering them here for the church to handle the whole spiritual shebang so they won’t get pregnant or take drugs simply doesn’t work. This is what Jesus was getting at in Matthew as he thanked God for revealing things to children hidden from their parents.

My preaching professor taught me you can be too simple, insulting people’s intelligence. But you can never, ever be too basic, rehearsing the essentials that we tend to forget.

Briefly, here are five different ways parents can radiate faith. First, we tell and retell the Bible story. The Bible tells all about the age-old love between God and humanity. The Bible tells the story of covenants made, broken and renewed, again and again. The Bible is how we know of God as Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer, loving each one of us. As soon as you begin reading stories to your child, you should have a children’s Bible.

Scripture teaches us our identity isn’t producer or consumer, but beloved child of God. Steeping our young in the Bible renarrates their lives, lifting us from lonely individualism, where we’re the master and controller of our own destiny, the fable the world peddles.

Second, we celebrate our faith through the church’s services, ceremonies, and rites. We start with the Bible, but the church’s rituals—like baptism and confirmation—take a hold of us in even deeper ways. Faith gets embedded in the church’s rites—even little ones

like first time at the Lord's Table in 3rd grade, getting their first Bible, telling the story of the mission trip in worship, or youth leading our children's sermon for our little children.

We are made for rituals and rituals are made for us. They mark both time and meaning. Our rites support the stories we learn from the Bible, touching our emotion and intuition. They prevent us from becoming too cerebral, from being Christians from the neck up. The rites of the church transmit and sustain Christian ways of being and knowing. Experience always precedes reflection; no substitute exists for the experiences of church.

Third, we need to pray together. Pray over meals. Pray before trips. Pray at sad times, like the loss of grandma. Pray at glad times like getting to enjoy a vacation as God's gift. Prayer is conversation with God. If you don't feel adept, if you think it requires a flowery pastoral voice and vocabulary, know that prayer is caught every bit as much as taught. If you bring a good heart to prayers said aloud with your children, you will be their hero.

Prayer is communion with God. It warms and makes real our relations with God. Prayer conveys the constancy of God's presence, beyond these walls. Prayer is a vehicle of giddy joy and a safe retreat as the world busts our chops. Imagine, we get to teach our young to call on the divine power ruling the universe. It doesn't get any better than that.

Fourth, we need to listen and talk with our children around how faith impinges our world. Our children do overhear the dark news cycle that is circulating around us these days. Don't despair if you don't have all the answers; neither do I. If we can help our children ask better questions, the ones Jesus asks, we will give them an overwhelming blessing.

It is less about giving information, advice, tips, or guidance. It is more about a frame of reference, affirming their spiritual quest, a confidence in God's presence. It is about reminding them that through baptism we are living a story bigger than ourselves. It is about bringing them into relationship with God through their struggles, doubts, pains, and insecurities, as revealed in their questions. They see a frog flattened on a road during a summer walk and say, what is that? What is death? Everyone here is equipped enough to share in your own personal way what Good Friday and Easter mean to you.

Fifth, we need to perform faithful acts of outreach, service and witness to the risen Lord. The core message of Jesus' ministry was that the kingdom of God is at hand. But this reign of God is seen only through eyes of faith as we participate in it, or it stays invisible. We offer food for the hungry as we share with each other the food of the Lord's Table. We go on work trips with the poor in Milton, PA or build homes in the developing world. Remember the phrase, "our lives are the only Gospel most will read." Then apply it to your children. It's bigger than "lifestyle", it shows loving God and neighbor as *way of life*.

Frankly, I wish I could banish the world lifestyle from our vocabulary. Lifestyle is an idol of a sacred cow lumbering through our lives, needing nothing so much as to be slain. As soon as we speak of "lifestyle," we start dividing up the parts of our lives into pieces

of a pie. One slice is work, another home, then school, vacation, leisure time, working out. We talk about faith in God and life in the church as one more piece of that pie. But did you ever notice how that piece is so tiny, a mere dietetic sliver of that pie? As soon as we talk about our faith as a piece of that lifestyle pie, God loses out big time. Guess what? Our faith in God is not that slim sliver of a pie piece. It is the pan that holds the whole pie together. That is what I mean by our faith in God as our foundation for living.

None of this is new to you. You've been working on all this in your homes and in the big tent of FCC, Darien. We are simply rehearsing, remembering, and articulating what is too precious to neglect. We don't want to end up sadly regretful, like Roger Manners.

As Jesus told us today, from the mouths of babes and infants, God brings perfect praise. Amen.