

"Helping Children Know Right from Wrong"

Text: Psalm 78:1-4; Philippians 4:8-9

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Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable,...whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Philippians 4:8

Last Sunday, we started a sermon series that some of you might be thinking is the shortest series in history, since I've preached one and I'm not preaching another one today. We will return to the wonderful, rich Elijah and Elisha stories in I and II Kings next week. Today, in observance of Father's Day, I wanted to focus our attention in another direction.

How do we raise a new generation of honorable human beings?

Several years ago, a piece appeared in that often funny and sometime poignant section of the *New York Times* called "The Metropolitan Diary." Here is the way the letter went:

Dear Diary,

My new Discover credit card arrived in the mail with the instruction that I was to call an 800 number. As I dialed the number, my three and a half year old son wanted to know what we had to eat for a snack. The Discover operator answered, and after requesting a lot of information, she put me on hold. At that point I went on answering my son's question about the snack. I said, "Well, there's cheese, peaches, popcorn, cucumbers, bananas..." Shortly, the operator returned to the line.

"Thank you for holding," she said. "Your card has now been activated and you gave that kid WAY too many choices."

In the 21st century, life offers all of us, children, young people and adults alike, an unprecedented array of choices. Do you remember when your only lettuce choice was iceberg or iceberg? How can we help a new generation choose wisely and well?

Moral development is a matter of active concern to theologians, educators, parents, just about everyone I know who lives and breathes. Our young people are growing up in a society that requires both unprecedented, ethical centeredness, and a society that also challenges cherished and deeply held beliefs. We are in a state of flux. How can we help members of the next generation mature into morally dependable human beings? Or, to put the question in the language of faith: How can we help give them tools with which to discern the will of God for the situations in which they must act? (1)

Did you get the moral imperatives that underlie the baptismal ceremony? "To grow in wisdom and in stature" and in compassion, not only for the inner circle, but for the human family, of which these precious baby girls are a part.

Wayne Meeks is a professor of Biblical Studies at Yale University. He recalls that the admonition that he heard most often in his growing up was a simple two-word admonition, "Behave yourself." It seems on the surface semantically empty, but no kid or parent has ever doubted the content or meaning of the phrase "Behave yourself." Meeks defines ethical discourse as that conversation that begins when a parent says "Behave yourself."

The kid says, "Why?"

The parent answers, "Because I said so!"(2)

Moral maturity comes finally, however, not in doing what one is told, but in becoming able to think ethically oneself, to decide ethically, and to act ethically. You know from the inside out how to behave. Where does that knowledge come from? It comes from internalizing an awareness of what is right for yourself and for others, and developing the will to act upon what you know. One thing we do know is that John Steinbeck was dead wrong when he said, "What's good is what you feel good after, and what's bad is what we feel bad after." We need something more solid to go on than that.

There is a new science called evolutionary psychology. It suggests that morality is biologically based, that the pre-frontal cortex of the brain is a complex system that determines how a person decides right and wrong. (3) I am going to await further word on pre-frontal cortex development. In the meantime, I think it's best not to abandon one of the most basic responsibilities of the faith community. That is to keep calling individuals and human society to move to higher moral ground.

Wayne Meeks defines morality as that dimension of life that consists of "a pervasive and often only partially conscious set of value-laden dispositions and attitudes and

habits." Simply deciding on a set of dos and don'ts and handing them over and saying, "Here, go, live that way" – that is not going to do the trick. Those of you who have tried it know that is not enough. I wish it were but it's not. I also wish that life worked according to the two very appealing maxims the late playwright and director, George Abbott lived by until he died at the age of 107:

1. Have fun.
2. Go home when you're tired.

I wish that were all there was to it, but in an age of ethical confusion, more is needed than maxims, even good ones. I want to name some truths that you already know but might find helpful to hear again.

First, children have a difficult time learning anything except how to survive and how to express anger if they are not safe, if they are unloved, if they are hungry, and if they have no home to live in. The first moral obligation of a human society is to secure the safety and well-being of the young. Too many children in our land are neglected or battered or sexually abused or wounded by gunfire. As our nation prepares to move into an important election year, we must not forget the children. To fail the children is to put the future of American society, indeed, the future of the world at risk.

A child will grow up knowing right from wrong if he or she has been treated right, has been treated fairly, has been respected, has had the word NO said to him or her from time to time. "Why not?" "Because I said so. When you grow up and get smart, then you can decide. But you are not going to have three popsicles just because you want them."

Second, human goodness is not an inborn trait. That any of us ends up living lives that please God is due to the grace of God at work in the human will and in human habits. We are not naturally great people; we have to learn how to be good. Those of you who grew up Presbyterian remember the prayer in our worship book that had the line in it, "We have left undone those things we ought to have done; we have done those things we ought not to have done, and there is no health in us." Someone wrote me once about why that last part was no longer in the book. He said, "I don't like thinking about the fact that I am not as good as I think I am, but I know I need to remember that goodness comes from God."

The writers of the Bible and Aristotle would have disagreed over many things, but they would have agreed that goodness is a developed attribute, not a natural

inclination. To his son, Aristotle wrote, "Moral virtue comes from habits. They are in us neither by nature nor despite nature, but we are furnished by nature with the capacity to receive them . . . we develop them through habit. . . . Harp players become harp players by playing the harp. By doing just acts, we come to be just, by doing self-controlling acts, we come to be self-controlled," whether we are naturally inclined that way or not. (4)

Thirdly, moral habits are formed and reformed in specific places. First, the home; then, the faith community; then, peer group and the school. The most important is the family. Barbara Defoe Whitehead writes, "The family is the seedbed of virtue."

A bit of wisdom from Ghana is: the ruin of a nation begins in the homes of its people. The making of a nation begins in the homes of its people.

What the church does, what the schools do cannot reinforce what is not there already. Kids first learn how to be human from the human beings with whom they first live. Children need to be cared for by adults who attend to their well-being, who listen to them. I am not making a plea for a particular kind of family. A nuclear family, a blended family, a single-parent family: the form is not nearly as important as the content and the values reflected in the family life.

In his book, *he Moral Life of Children*, Robert Coles profiles a little Brazilian boy named Eduardo. What a beautiful human! What character! What moral depth and texture this little boy had. Dr. Coles contrasts Eduardo with a child of privilege in this country who is a victim of our self-centered culture, whose parents think the meaning of life is getting one's own needs met, who live their days lost in a prison of self-absorption. Dr. Coles does not say to be poor is inherently good; he is making the point that material things do not a good character make. (5)

Syndicated columnist Delores Curran interviewed 500 professionals, teachers, scout leaders, psychologists, and came up with a list a characteristics that are most often found in healthy families regardless of their shape and form:

Communicates and listens.

Affirms and supports one another.

Teaches respect for others.

Is based on a sense of trust.

Has a sense of play and humor.

Exhibits a sense of shared responsibility.

Teaches a sense of right and wrong, so that children will have something to go by as they are wrestling with the choices they have to make.

Has a strong sense of the family itself, with rituals and traditions abounding.
Has a balance of interaction among members.
Has a shared religious core.
Respects the privacy of one another.
Values service to others.
Fosters family table time and conversation.
Shares leisure time.
Admits to and seeks help with problems. (6)

Family matters enormously, as does what we do around here in this faith community. You remember Sinclair Lewis's, religiously slick, but morally infantile character, Elmer Gantry. Elmer Gantry had "gotten everything from church and Sunday School except any longing whatsoever for decency and kindness and reason." Through our education and children's ministries and young people's ministries at Morningside, we want to instill the longing for decency, kindness, and reason that Gantry never got.

Church matters. If you have kids, bring them. Even if you've had a hard week and want to sleep in, come anyway.

Pay attention to how you treat other people in your home and how you treat people whom you know outside your home. Anybody sit around the dinner table and talk ugly about a relative or an acquaintance? If you do not want your kids to be disdainful of other people, then you need not to be disdainful yourself.

If you are not a parent you still have an enormous responsibility. You just promised, just a few minutes ago to help take care of two more kids! I have a minister friend who, one baptism Sunday was surprised to see an active member of his congregation remain seated when he asked that the congregation stand in affirmative response to the question of loving, supporting, and nurturing the about-to-be baptized babies. Afterwards, he asked her if she were ill. She answered, "No, I have just made that promise so many times, I'm not sure I can take on another one!"

It is important to fulfill our responsibility to being the community that helps its young grow in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and with their fellow human beings. How did Paul put it? "Whatever is true, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing; whatever is commendable; if there is any excellence; if there is anything worthy of praise, let us think about these things," and the God of peace will be with us and with those who are coming after us, who are Christ's own forever.

(1) C. Ellis Nelson, *Helping Teenagers Grow Morally*, Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992, p.93.

(2) Wayne A. Meeks, *The origins of Christian Morality*, Yale University Press, 1993, p.4.

(3) See *The Moral Animal*, Robert Wright, Panther Books, 1994.

(4) As quoted in William Bennett's *Book of Virtues*, Simon & Schuster, 1994.

(5) Robert Coles, *The Moral Life of Children*, Houghton Mifflin Co., p. 128.

(6) Dolores Curran, *Traits of a Healthy Family*, Ballantine Books, 1983, pp. 26-27.