

“Teach a Child”
Psalm 78:1-8 and Proverbs 22:6

Some years ago I came across a pamphlet entitled, *Twelve Rules for Raising Delinquent Children*. The pamphlet was originally distributed by the Houston Police Department. This morning I'd like to share a section of this pamphlet entitled, “12 Steps to Raise a Juvenile Delinquent.”

Step 1: Begin with infancy to give the child everything he wants. In this way he will grow up to believe the world owes him a living.

Step 2: When he picks up bad words, laugh at him. This will make him think he's cute.

Step 3: Never give him any spiritual training. Wait until he is twenty-one and then “let him decide for himself.”

Step 4: Avoid the use of “wrong.” He may develop a guilt complex. This will condition him to believe later, when he is arrested, that society is against him and he is being persecuted.

Step 5: Pick up everything he leaves lying around. Do everything for him so that he will be experienced in throwing all responsibility on others.

Step 6: Take his part against neighbors, teachers, and policemen. They are all prejudiced against your child.

Step 7: Quarrel frequently in the presence of your children. In this way they won't be so shocked when the home is broken up later.

Step 8: Give the child all the spending money he wants. Never let him earn his own.

Step 9: Satisfy his every craving for food, drink, and comfort. See that his every sensual desire is gratified.

Step 10: Let him read any printed material, and listen to any music he can get his hands on. Be careful that the silverware and drinking glasses are sterile, but let his mind feast on garbage.

Step 11: When he gets into real trouble, apologize to yourself by saying, “I could never do anything with him.”

Step 12: Prepare for a life of grief. You will likely have it. (1)

Well, there you have it ... a pretty sure fire formula for raising a juvenile delinquent. But, what if that's not what we want? What if we want to raise responsible, godly youngsters? Young people who love the Lord, make wise choices, and walk with Christ throughout their lives. Our second scripture lesson for this morning has wise advice for all of us who want to raise faithful kids. Let's listen now for God's Word from Proverbs 22:6. (Read text)

I recognize that it can be pretty risky to preach on just one verse of Scripture, especially when that verse has often been misunderstood. But, even with that said, this is a really important proverb that has much to say to us about our relationship with the children and young people in our congregation.

It is true that this verse has often been misunderstood. The most common mistake people make is reading this proverb as an “if-then” promise from God. If I take my child to church and try to teach them about the Christian faith, then they will never turn away from that faith.

Over my years of pastoral ministry, I have met with many heart-broken parents of adult children. They faithfully took their kids to church and tried to impart Christian faith, and yet, now their adult children want nothing to do with Christian faith. Invariably, these parents are guilt-ridden, confused and wondering where they went wrong.

I want to share with you what I always try to gently get across to parents in these circumstances. It's important to remember the nature of proverbs. Proverbs, as Ken and I have both stressed this summer, are not intended to be promises. So, this particular proverb is not a promise or an ironclad guarantee from God that if we do certain things our children will never stray from the faith.

It is far more accurate to view this and other proverbs as proverbs of probability. In other words, if you engage in the behavior described by the proverb, it is probable, or much more likely, that the outcome described will occur. So, our proverb for today is meant to encourage parents and the community of faith to get kids off to the right start in the life of faith, knowing that if they faithfully do so, it is much more likely that children will walk in faith as adults.

Notice that a few moments ago I said that this proverb was meant to encourage parents and the community of faith to get kids off to the right start in the life of faith. While this proverb is certainly directed first to parents, as Presbyterians, we also believe that this proverb is directed to the entire community of faith.

In fact, this morning we already articulated our belief that passing on Christian faith is a shared enterprise involving both parents and the faith community. Do you remember the promise that we made during Jace's baptism? Let me read the question again. "Our Lord Jesus Christ ordered us to teach those who are baptized. Do you, the people of the church, promise to tell these new disciples the good news of the gospel, to help them know all that Christ commands, and, by your fellowship, to strengthen their family ties with the household of God?"

Clearly, the call to get kids off to the right start in the life of faith is directed to all of us. So, what specifically does this proverb say to us about getting our kids off to the right start? "Train children in the right way, and when old, they will not stray."

The key to understanding this proverb is the first word of the proverb. It is usually translated into the English word, train. This word in Hebrew, the original language of this proverb, has three basic meanings. In the first instance, it describes an act performed by Hebrew midwives. Apparently, midwives would crush dates, add a drop of honey, and then rub this mixture on a newborn baby's gums to stimulate their ability and desire to suck and feed. This word also is used to describe the beginning of something. And, finally, this word also means to dedicate something.

If we put these three basic meanings together, we come up with a pretty good understanding of what this proverb calls parents and the community of faith to do as they nurture children in faith. Here is my paraphrase. Create thirst or desire for the right things from the very beginning of a child's life, dedicating them and yourselves to the Lord's way. Friends, this is our call.

There are two observations about this call that I want to stress in the time that remains. First of all, the urgency of the call. The time to create thirst and desire for the right things in the lives of our children is now. It's never too early to introduce our children to the life of faith.

I read a story recently about a mother who asked her pastor, "When should I begin to tell my child about God?" The pastor replied, "How old is your child?" "He's seven." "Hurry home, Madam. You have already wasted the best seven years of your son's life. Don't waste any more." (2)

You can't begin too early to share the faith! Social scientists now believe that a child's spiritual moorings are pretty well set by age nine. That's roughly a child in the third grade! We have such a short period of time in which we can get our children off to the right start. We dare not waste a moment of this precious time.

The second observation I want to share is that this call is extended to every one of us: men and women, young and older, parents and grandparents, new or more mature Christians. The task is so urgent and so important that it requires the energetic effort of all of us. It really does take a village to raise a child in the way of faith. A village of people of all ages, genders, gifts and talents, who will pray, teach, listen, encourage and point our kids to Christ.

I read a great story recently about a woman who felt herself “called out of retirement” to begin to nurture kids in faith. She had taught every imaginable age of Sunday school, raised her own kids, and been a speaker at numerous women’s conferences. She understandably felt at age 65 it was time to slow down. Her name is Penny Pappas, and this is how she tells her story.

I had just turned sixty-five. Now I was old. Now it was time to sit back, warm the pews, and let the young people do the job. I would be there, however, to criticize. That was my retirement plan.

But it wasn’t God’s plan, and it wasn’t the plan of the elders and Sunday School superintendent. He approached me one Sunday. “Penny,” he began, “we need a teacher in the senior high class. And we’ve decided that all these younger people aren’t cutting it. We need someone more mature to work with them.”

“Sure,” I responded scornfully, “someone big and old, but not me.” Taken aback the poor man said, “Will you at least pray about it?” “No,” I answered stubbornly, “I will not. Then I’ll come back and blame my decision on the Lord. I have done my time. I really want a rest.”

But that group of young people, challenging as they were, would not leave my mind: Heather, Susan, Sarah, Rob, Laurie, Drew, Tim, Matt, Luke, Brooke, Steve, Todd, Amy, Rhonda, Chris. Some had been in my class when they were small children. I knew their potential, and God was filling my heart with love for them and a real longing to share His Word with them. He was calling me to teach them.

“This old dog will just have to learn new tricks,” I muttered as I contemplated the challenge of those unruly rascals who were so gifted mentally, artistically, and spiritually. I was truly no match for them, but experience told me that God had never, ever failed to equip me for work He had called me to do.

And He did not fail me. Those youngsters still bring joy to my heart as I remember their hearty response to God’s Word, their enthusiastic participation in class service projects, their growth in grace, and the deep love we shared for one another. (3)

What an awesome true story of a faithful woman who let God “call her out of retirement” to get kids off to the right start in the life of faith!

In 1993, the Presbyterian Church (USA) in a document entitled, “A Vision for Children and the Church,” expressed this hope for the future. “We hope for a church where we take seriously our baptismal vow to nurture all children committed to our care.”

Friends, this is my hope for HPPC as we begin a new program year. I hope with all my heart that we will be a church that, in the spirit of Proverbs 22:6, takes seriously our baptismal vow to nurture in faith all the children committed to our care. May it be so that all honor and glory may be given to the One who has been revealed to us as Maker, Redeemer and Friend.

Amen.

Notes:

- (1) Taken from a pamphlet entitled *Twelve Rules for Raising Delinquent Children* distributed by the Houston Police Department.
- (2) Murphey, Cecil. Simply Living. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003, p. 68.
- (3) Hunt, Susan. Heirs of the Covenant: Leaving a Legacy of Faith for the Next Generation. Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1998, p. 203-204.