

PARENTING FOR FAITH

Scriptures: Exodus 12:21-27; Exodus 13:3-10

There was an episode on the show *Everybody Loves Raymond* where Raymond's young daughter asks him, "Why are there babies?" Thinking that she is asking him about sex, Raymond has a sneezing attack and has to leave the room. But his wife prods him to answer her question, so armed with several books about sex he goes in to have "the talk" with his daughter. He starts out, "I guess you have some questions about babies." "Yeah," she says, "why are there babies?" He says, "Well, when a man and woman love each other they get married, and then sometimes they decide to make a baby." His daughter interrupts and says, "I already know where babies come from. I was wondering why they are here at all. Why did God put us here?" Raymond looks at her and says, "What?" She says, "Why are we here?" He says, "Don't you want to talk about sex?" She says, "No, I'm wondering why God put us here." Raymond looks at her and then starts sneezing.

Now here is my question to all you parents or grandparents or even aunts and uncles. Are you prepared to answer that little girl's question? Last February there was a *Newsweek* article written by Kathleen Deveny entitled, "Talking to Kids About God." She writes,

Sometimes I think it is easier to talk to my daughter about sex than about God. Perhaps because I have a pretty good idea where babies come from, but I'm still a little fuzzy on the details about God. It's also because my daughter is only 7, so we haven't gotten to the really difficult conversations about sex. But I have a few ideas about what I'll say when the time comes. I was caught by surprise, however, when she asked me how your soul gets out of your body.

We were talking about Heath Ledger, and how sad it was that he died so young. Then she asked if someone came to "rip his soul out." After making a mental note to pay more attention to the materials she brought home from her weekly religion classes, I explained that no one "rips" anything out of you. It's something more natural and peaceful, I said. Like a burp (*Newsweek*, February 11, 2008, p. 60).

When it comes to sharing faith with the children, the first step is having some understanding of the Christian faith for yourself. That is one reason we put so much effort into adult education classes at our church. You cannot share faith with children, your own or anyone else's, unless you understand and experience what it means for yourself. Right now during the 9:00 a.m. Sunday School hour Bob Nofsinger, one of our newer members, has a adult Bible class just beginning called, "Reading Matthew As If for the First Time." The beauty of this class is that Bob Nofsinger has actually been reading the Bible for the first time. For him the Bible is a new exciting experience. Stories that may seem boringly familiar take on new luster when seen through his eyes. It does not hurt that he is also a retired professor of communication from WSU and knows how to teach. There are some great opportunities here on Sunday mornings or at various times during the week to learn more about why babies are here or how your soul gets out of your body, or any number of other questions that children may ask, or that you may ask. Parenting for faith begins by understanding and experiencing that faith for yourself.

But parenting for faith is not something you can do only with words. And that brings me to our scripture readings for today. Did you notice that both of our scripture readings this morning involve answering the questions of children? It is like Raymond or Kathleen Deveny answering the questions of their daughters. In Exodus 12 the people of Israel are given instructions on how to celebrate the Passover, not just once on the night that God brings them out of slavery, but in future years. Verses 26-27 say, “And when your children ask you, ‘What do you mean by this observance?’ you shall say, ‘It is the Passover sacrifice to the Lord, for he passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt, when he struck down the Egyptians but spared our houses.’” The chance to share faith with children arises out of their experience of sharing in a ritual of faith—in this case the Passover.

Something similar happens in our second scripture lesson. In Exodus 13 Moses gives instructions to the people of Israel for celebrating the Festival of Unleavened Bread. This is another way of remembering how God liberated them from slavery in Egypt. After the night of the Passover when the Egyptians finally let them go, the people of Israel had to leave in a hurry. They did not have time to let their bread dough rise before they baked it. They had to bake it and eat it while it was still unleavened. Every year after that the people of Israel ate unleavened bread during the Passover to remember how they fled from Egypt in a hurry, taking their bread with them before it had time to rise.

In this case the child’s question is not stated, but I imagine it goes something like this. The child says, “Why are we doing this? Why can’t we have ordinary bread like everyone else? None of my friends have to eat this stuff. They get good bread. Why do we have to eat this flat, hard, tasteless stuff every year?” That’s what the child is probably saying. And here is the response—verse 8: “You shall tell your child on that day, ‘It is because of what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt.’”

Think about that statement for a minute: “It is because of what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt.” That parent was not in Egypt. Remember we are talking about a Jewish family celebrating the Passover hundreds, maybe thousands of years after the time of Moses. That parent was not in Egypt. And yet if God had not rescued the people of Israel in the time of Moses, that Jewish parent might never have been born. Pharaoh the king of Egypt was drowning all the Israelite babies in the Nile River. If God had not rescued them, future generations of Israelite children would have never been born. So the parent is not exaggerating when he says, “God brought *me* out of Egypt. God brought you out of Egypt. We eat this bread so that we never forget that.”

For us Christians the equivalent of Passover is communion. Jesus was actually celebrating the Passover with his disciples when he instituted communion at the last supper. If your children ever ask, “Why do we have those little cubes of bread in church? Why don’t we have something good, like Twinkies?” If your children ever ask that, tell them, “It is because Jesus gave his life for us, not just for those first disciples living 2,000 years ago, but for us—you and me and all of us here in this church. We would not be here if Jesus did not give his life for us. We would not know how much God loves us or the wonderful new life that God can give us after we die—we would know these things if Jesus had not died for us and rose from the dead on

Easter, and that is why we come to church and eat these little cubes of bread and drink these little cups of grape juice.”

In 1993 an organization called the Search Institute did a study of what factors in a child’s life had the greatest effect in helping them grow up with a mature faith. First they identified a set of criteria for measuring mature faith in adults. The criteria including things like believing and trusting in God, integrating faith into daily life, seeking spiritual growth, nurturing faith in a community of believers, and finding intentional ways to serve God in the world. With these criteria they identified a broad sample of adults who had a mature faith. Then they analyzed the factors in their backgrounds that may have led them to have a mature faith.

The results were fascinating. The number one factor in faith development of people who had a mature faith was talking with a mother or father about faith while they were growing up. Talking to your kids about faith, instead of sneezing, is one of the most important things you can do to help your children grow into mature believers. The second most important factor was participating with your family in worship, prayer, or Bible reading (Eugene Roehlkepartain, *The Teaching Church: Moving Christian Education to Center Stage*).

Did you notice how both of those things are combined in our scripture readings? One of the best times to talk with children about faith is when you are experiencing together one of the rituals of our faith. Children love rituals—things they can physically do and know how to do because they have done them before. Use the rituals of our faith—whether it is going to church, lighting Advent candles, acting out the Christmas story, watching a baptism, celebrating communion, putting ashes on your forehead on Ash Wednesday, or wearing red on Pentecost—use the rituals of faith as occasions to tell your children what they mean and why we are here and what a difference God makes in our lives.

In her article on “Talking to Kids About God,” Kathleen Deveny quotes a friend of hers who is the parent of a 9 year-old daughter. The friend says, “I kind of play down the religious aspect of church, which is easy when you are a Presbyterian.” Here is an invitation not to play down the religious aspects of church or of life but to use them to share with your children what life with God really means.

In the last sentence of her article, Kathleen Deveny says, “And come Ash Wednesday, I will be prepared to explain the dirty smudge on my head. Because I Googled it.” Whatever it takes, do not play down the religious aspects of church or life or walk away sneezing. Use these occasions to share with your children what God really means to us.

- Ken Onstot
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