**“Preparing the Rising Generation -- for *Life*”**

October 27, 2024 Texts: Proverbs 22:6*;* Luke 1:80, 2:40.

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Introduction to Scripture

Much of the Book of Proverbs, found of course in the Old Testament, is devoted to raising children in the right ways. For instance, in Proverbs 22:6 we read “Point your kids in the right direction —  when they’re old they won’t be lost.”

Of course, as often is the case when the older generations lecture the younger ones on raising children in the right way, discipline is a central concern, and so we get proverbs like the relatively innocuous “My son, obey your father’s commands, and don’t neglect your mother’s instruction”, and the not-so-innocuous “spare the rod and spoil the child.”

The New Testament lacks detail on the topic, but does recognize that children grow and with that growth can come development. For instance, Luke opens the nativity story with the birth of a boy who we will later meet as John the Baptist. After describing John’s birth and a prophecy that he would prepare the way for the Lord, Luke tells us “The child grew and became strong in spirit.” (Luke 1:80)

Likewise, after the birth of Jesus and his dedication in the Temple, Luke tells us “The child grew, and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.” (Luke 2:40)

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Earlier this year Christie and I became grandparents for the first time, and what an ever-unfolding joy it has been to watch Sophie grow and change, and to watch Katie and Chris take like ducks to water as they have grown in the joyous and yet exhausting task of being parents. Our only regret is that they are so far away, down in South Carolina, and so we do not see enough of them.

It has also been an occasion to do something I scarcely had time to do when I was a parent of young children, trying to balance parenting, being a partner in marriage, work, and everything else that was going on in our lives. That “something” being thinking big picture about parenting and its tasks, what we were trying to do, beyond making it through one busy day after another. But now, with distance, with what might pass for wisdom gained in the past decades, and above all time, I have come to see that what we as parents strive to do is to prepare our children for life. And that the family is a learning center when our children learn to grow in so many ways.

A learning center, where they grow in wisdom – they grow intellectually, they get smarter, they learn how to problem-solve, as teens they figure out that they are a lot smarter than their parents, and then, as they mature, maybe even reconsider that last one just a bit.

A learning center, where they grow physically – they get taller, stronger, their bodies change.

A learning center, where they grow in social skills – they learn how to listen, to communicate, to follow, to work together as a member of a team, to lead.

And a learning center where they grow in spirit – they learn that they are loved by their parents, by their siblings, by the extended family, and, if they are particularly blessed, they learn that they are loved by their loving God.

Our culture, at its best, provides a lot of support to parents as they take on this multi-faceted calling of staffing this learning center where children learn to grow in so many ways. Schools help them in so many ways. Schools help children grow intellectually, of course, by stages teaching the basics, reading, writing, and arithmetic, but of course also history, civics, science, and so on. Gym classes can help with growth in physical strength, but there are also all those extracurricular opportunities as well, sports teams of every variety, soccer, football, softball, baseball, field hockey, swimming, and more, plus dance class and judo and on and on. As to social skills, sure these are learned in school, but also through friendships and of course through media, through books and movies and television.

What culture these days does not offer so much is helping children grow *spiritually*. This comes at a time when many parents feel remarkably ill-equipped to help out, often because they themselves grew up without a positive experience of church and perhaps without role models of people of faith. They feel they lack the language to talk about matters of the spirit, and often feel that they have more questions than answers about faith.

And so we here at West Parish are committed to partnering with parents in this most holy of tasks, of helping their children grow spiritually. And we set our shoulders to the grindstone seven days a week to get that done.

We do this five days a week here at the West Parish Family School, where we pride ourselves on offering an early childhood education with a difference, as our motto goes. The difference being that we offer early childhood care with a plus, modeled on Jesus’ acceptance and care for all, especially for the children. The Family School provides an atmosphere of love, acceptance and nurturing while allowing children to grow through their natural stages of development, all under the care of an experienced, loving and caring staff. They have mealtime prayers, age-appropriate Christmas programs, and each Monday our Associate Pastor Christie Burns reads an age-appropriate book of her choosing, which provides a jumping off point for a discussion of values.

At our Saturday 4:30 service, we help our children grow spiritually by including them in our worship together. They join their parents singing the same songs, lighting prayer candles under their supervision, singing the Lord’s Prayer, sharing the bread and cup together, and serving as helpers in various ways. One of my favorite ways to include children has been having them serve with me as “Prayer Candle Safety Officers”, tasked with watching that those who light the candles do so safely.

After 20 minutes or so, the children and youth go over to Jenkins Hall with me and our assistant teacher, Cassie Haven, for Saturday School class. We do this One Room Schoolhouse style, which works well because the middle schoolers learn to model behavior for the younger students, and help them when we do projects together. We begin by lighting our prayer candle, a different child each week throwing the switch on our battery-powered candle, as we say together, “Just as a candle gives light to a room, Jesus gives light to the world.” We read a passage from our storybook Bible, then discuss questions that arise from the text, beginning with “I wonder” questions. For instance, when we discussed the Garden of Eden passage in Genesis, “I wonder what it would be like to live in a garden paradise?”, and “I wonder what you would add to that garden if you were God?”, and “I wonder what other decisions Eve and Adam could have made?” The idea here is not to drub doctrine and dogma into their developing minds, but to get them to see that listening for the word of God is the project of a lifetime, one to which God wants them to bring their minds, their experiences, and their ideas.

What’s the point of all this, how does this help them grow spiritually, how does this help prepare them for life?

For me, the most important thing is to create a positive experience of church for them – that it be a place where they know they are welcomed and valued, where their thoughts, questions and opinions are respected, where it is okay to have questions about faith, where it is even FUN. Sure, there are lots of churches out there which are exclusive, judgmental, didactic, polarizing, so much so that if Jesus himself tried to gain entrance he would be quickly shown the door. But that is not every church, and that is not *this* church. We strive to make church a positive experience for our children, so that if the time comes, as it does for many, that life takes them away from church and its community, they have good memories of it, they have a solid grounding on just who this God and Jesus are, and so when the time is right they can and want to come back.

Second, we seek to reinforce the message that they are not alone, and never will be, that they are loved unconditionally by their Creator and Redeemer, that they are of incalculable worth. God knows that the culture “out there” often sends the message that they are not good enough, not good-looking enough, that they do not have as many friends or contacts on Snapchat as whomever. This is a message we seek to live out each week, as we create a community where there are no put-downs, no cliques, just one gathered group of children of God. And we hope that this is not just a haven for these children from the polarization and divisions of society at large, but also a lived ideal which they can take with them as a goal in the world beyond, something that over their lifetime they might work at to make this world just a bit closer to the kingdom of God that Jesus tells us is breaking in all around us.

And third, we seek to teach them faith is not all about them, about them and their personal walk with Jesus, about tending to their own spirituality. The faith God gifts to us is a communal faith, where we are called to live out Jesus’ Great Commandment – that we are to love God *and neighbor* as we love ourselves. And so we do projects that reach out to church members and to the wider community. Last week, for example, we helped Shirley Stole and Lynn Parker prepare Halloween cards and gift bags for delivery to shut-ins. We have undertaken mitten drives for children in Hyannis, and helped out at the Fair in many ways.

We began the Saturday service, with Saturday School, because parents told us that this is what they wanted. That Sundays were being consumed by sports or simply the desire to sleep in on what was once considered a day of rest, and that Saturday afternoons, a time when their Roman Catholic friends attended Mass, worked for them and their families. Today we are celebrating the Family School and their families, and if it turns out that there is a demand to bring back church school on Sunday, then I am sure the church would be glad to do so.

I speak of partnering, and you might wonder what that means from the parenting end. Three quick thoughts to close with:

First, show up.You know the saying, “*Success is 90% just showing up*”, and this is as true for a child’s spiritual development as it is for their successful development in school, in sports, in activities like music and dance. Yes, there are lots of demands on families’ precious time, but you *can* carve out time for worship most weeks if you decide to be intentional about it – and we hope you will!

Second, share your enthusiasm with your children. Church, spirituality, a community of faith, faith formation, these are all important to you. Share your enthusiasm with your children; tell them why it is important to you as a family that you share this time together. And yes, at some point most kids say “I don’t wanna!” – about church, but also about anything else you think is important – which is always a good time to remember that you just might have a better perspective on what is important than they do!

Finally, help out. We always have openings for parents who might want to help out, maybe just one day a month, in the classroom –under the guidance, of course, of seasoned educators. So ask me or Christie how you can help, and they will be sure to put your talents and good will to good use.

Because what we are about here is partnering with you, with parents of the rising generation, to prepare them for *life*. Amen.