

August 23, 2009  
Park Road Baptist  
Maria Hanlin

Text: Deuteronomy 6:4-9  
Mark 10:13-16  
Subject: Children, School Beginning

## **THE PILGRIMAGE OF PARENTHOOD: JUST LAUGH WHEN I LAUGH**

It is hard to believe that tomorrow is the last official day of summer with public school beginning on Tuesday. The children of Park Road Baptist Church along with children throughout the city are getting ready for the pilgrimage of a new school year. Just like the pilgrimage the Dean Family has experienced, this one will be full of new experiences, new friends, new insights and challenges. There is much to do to prepare: new clothes and book bag and new books....at least for those children who can afford them. It is a fitting time for us in the church to remind one another, whether we have children or not, how important it is to teach each child who is part of our church family how much God loves them, and how much we love them – no matter what.

A long time member of the church telephoned a new church member and asked how she was feeling. “Terrible,” came the reply over the phone. “My head is splitting, my back is killing me, the house is a mess, and the kids are driving me crazy.” Sympathetically, the long time church member said, “Listen, you go and lie down and I’ll come right over, cook lunch for you, clean up the house and take care of the children while you get a couple hours of rest. By the way, how is Sam?” “Sam?” the mother asked. “My husband’s name isn’t Sam, it’s John.” “Oh, my heavens,” exclaimed the first woman, “I must have dialed the wrong number.” There was a long pause. Then the harried mother asked hopefully, “Are you still coming over?”

There are many days when I have resembled that harried mom. Whether we have children or not, all of us have days like that. And every day I know I need help: help from my friends, help from my family, and help from my church. As school begins and children around the city have gotten new class schedules and teachers and prepared for the new school year ahead, how have we prepared our children for growing in their faith?

On one of his airplane trips, General Omar Bradley dressed in civilian clothes rather than in military attire so that he wouldn’t be recognized. When he boarded the plane, he took out some papers to work on. As he was getting comfortable, a private sat down beside him. The man said to General Bradley, “Sir, we’re going to be traveling together for several hours. I think it would be nice if we got to know one another. I take it that you are a banker.” Well, this was the last thing that General Bradley wanted to deal with so he curtly replied, ***“I’ll have you know, private, that I am General Omar Bradley, a five-star general in the United States Army. I am head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff at the Pentagon in Washington, D.C.”*** Quite impressed, the private replied, “Well, sir, that certainly sounds like a very important job. I hope you don’t blow it!”

That is how I often feel about parenthood and about our responsibility as the church for every child in our church family. Raising children – whether we are parents or not - is a very important job. I pray to God that we don’t blow it. When I see the

availability of drugs for our children, when I see the violence in our schools, when I hear that one-fourth of all preschool children in the US live in poverty, it is frightening. What can we as the church give the children and youth of Park Road Baptist Church to help them survive in our world today? It is only with God's help that we don't blow it.

One thing that we can give our children is education so that they can make intelligent choices for their lives. We spend a lot of time making sure our children get the right school, the right teacher, the best education. But education alone will not do it. Some of the most intelligent, well-educated kids I know are in the most trouble because they have no guiding force to direct them in their lives. They have no beliefs upon which to stand and so blow whichever way the winds of peer pressure take them.

Our children are mental, physical and spiritual beings. We give our children food for their minds – that is why we research and enroll them in the best schools where we know they will get a quality education. We give them food for their bodies and make sure that they get plenty of exercise and regular dentist and medical check-ups. We will spend a lot of money and time on soccer, basketball and band camps, on gymnastics and dancing competitions, and on braces for their teeth. How vital it is that we also give our children plenty of food for their souls; that we consistently bring our children to church and teach our children what it means to love God; that we teach our kids that life has meaning and purpose so that they don't search for the meaning of life in all the wrong places. All children need the church's help so that we don't blow this most important job of raising the children of Park Road Baptist Church in the faith.

Every one of us here today is a child of God – just like every person out there in our city is as well. That includes those of us who have beautiful homes, new school clothes and supplies....and the over 3,000 CMS children who are homeless, who can't afford even new notebooks and paper. Just like every child deserves a quality education, even more so every child deserves to know they are loved unconditionally by a God who has a purpose for his or her life.

As the scriptural lesson from Deuteronomy says, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all of your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates." As our Jewish brothers and sisters know, we must teach our children these words. In fact, this scripture is called the "Shema," and Jews have them attached to their front doors in a mezuzah.

A few weeks ago we had a handyman fix some things around our home. At the end of the day, he came to me and enthusiastically said, "Are you Jewish?!" I said no, why do you ask? And he said, "Well, isn't that a Jewish mezuzah on your front door with the words of the Shema from Deuteronomy? I said that while I was a Christian, I thought this Jewish tradition was a beautiful symbol and reminder to me as a mom to

teach our children to love God. It must be confusing to come to our home or my office where there are Christian and Jewish, Muslim and Hindu, Unitarian and Buddhist religious symbols! One thing that is common among all of our faiths is the command to teach our children to love God and to love one another. Did you notice in our scripture from Deuteronomy that the Bible commanded – not suggested or recommended, but commanded – that we teach the love of God to our children? Why? So that our children will have a foundation upon which to stand when the winds of temptation or the storms of life blow their way.

That doesn't mean that, for those of us who are parents, that we will be perfect any more than the church is perfect. I know many times when I could have been a better mother. There are whole days when I blow it. (Just ask our son, Carey.....or better yet, maybe don't ask him!) But by the grace of God, I am able to forgive myself and learn from my mistakes. It's the same with the church. There are many things that the church can do better. There are some days when the church blows it. To be part of this family we call our church is to discover that we are as human as any family. And it is to discover how we need the unconditional love of God who continues to give life and new birth to us. As for ministers, well, we are not perfect people either, just ask my husband! But by the grace of God – and only through that grace – we in the church are able to forgive each other and ourselves, to learn from our mistakes and carry on.

We know all of this, don't we? This really isn't anything new. But it seems we need to hear it again and again because, somehow, we forget. We forget to teach our children and to show them by example how to love God with all of their heart, with all their soul, and with all their might. As parents, and yes, even as the church, we sometimes forget. How much easier our job is as parents and Sunday School teachers and youth counselors and church members when follow these words from Deuteronomy. As Christine preached last Sunday, the children of Park Road need the wisdom and spiritual guidance of the older members to understand God's call in their lives.....it is the gift of community that comforts and sustains.

In his book, It Was On Fire When I lay down On It, Robert Fulgrum writes, "Don't worry that (your children) never listen to you; worry that they are always watching you." How true. We can't just tell our children to love God, we must be an example. Our children watch us much more than they ever listen to us. We can tell them of the love of God until we are blue in the face, but if we don't show them through our support and commitment to God and to God's church, how can they ever hear it?

A girl went to the movies with her smaller brother and, after they had seated themselves, she asked, "Willie, can you see?" "Nope," her little brother answered. "Well," said the older sister, just laugh when I laugh." That is what our children do. They watch us to know when to laugh....and when to cry; when to celebrate and when to mourn; when to worship God first - rather than all the other things in this world. I remember well one night at the dinner table several years ago when my husband, Tim, and I were laughing at something that was over the heads of our children. But not to be left out (heaven forbid!) our then eight-year old daughter, Anna, started laughing, even

louder than we were, and soon our five-year-old son, Carey, was joining in as well. Our children want to know when to laugh, what makes us laugh and what things are never laughing matters. They want to know what we think, what we want from life, what we believe. They want more than food for their minds and bodies; they are starving for food for their souls. And so are we. Our kids might not listen to us as much as we'd like, but we had better believe that they are always watching us, and that our laughing matters. So does our faith and how we live it.

More than anything else, our children need to know that they are loved unconditionally by us, by their church and by God. Jesus welcomed the little children, and I'll bet they were as noisy and whining as the children I know. Jesus was displeased with the disciples for hindering them in any way. The Bible says Jesus took the children into his arms, laid his hands upon their heads, and blessed them. Jesus touched them and let them know that they were the most important people in the world: more important than any five-star general or any meeting at work or anything else. Jesus always had enough time for children even though the disciples thought he should be about more important matters. God knows, nothing matters more than our children.

As this Tuesday begins a new school year, it gives us much to celebrate and to contemplate. In closing I share this poem by Anne Weems of a time in her childhood:

It was a family treasure,  
The vase,  
That golden vase,  
The vase that had belonged to my great-grandmother,  
To my grandmother, and now to my mother....  
And the vase sat on the mantel  
Out of reach of little fingers.  
However, I managed to reach it;  
I climbed to reach it;  
I broke it,  
The family treasure.  
Golden pieces of once a family treasure  
Valueless  
That moments before was priceless.  
And I began to cry,  
Then louder, in sobs that brought my mother running.  
I could hardly get it out:  
"I broke the vase...the treasure."  
And then my mother gave me a gift:  
A look of relief over her face and  
"Oh, I thought you'd been hurt!"  
And then she hugged to her the one who had  
Just moments before  
Broken the family treasure.  
She gave to me a gift:

She made it clear that  
I was the family treasure.  
I was what was priceless  
And of great value.  
She also made it clear where her heart was.

Dear God, thank you for the treasure of every child. Help us to care about each child in this city as much as we do our own: about what kind of schools they attend, what teachers they have, whether they have new school supplies or a bed to sleep in. With over 3,000 children in CMS being homeless, renew our commitment and compassion to help every child know you love them by how we reach out to care for them and their needs. Praise be to you, O God, who loves us all.

## **HOMEWORK**

Thank you, Park Road Baptist, for the honor of worshipping with you these last 6 weeks. Thank you for your encouragement and love, thank you for your hospitality and your friendship, thank you for your support of Mecklenburg Ministries. The Hanlin family has been privileged to share worship with you.

Now for your homework:

1. Welcome the Deans back with loving arms, ready to hear their stories, share in their pilgrimage and see their pictures (plus join the church pilgrimage over Labor Day weekend)
2. Bring school supplies next Sunday, the first Sunday in September, for children of Family Promise who will be hosting the week of September 6<sup>th</sup>.
3. Is there a child on your street or in your class who does not have a church home? This is a great time of year to invite them to experience the wonderful faith community called Park Road Baptist Church. In fact, that is how the Hanlins got our third daughter, when our oldest, Anna, realized her friend, Brittany, did not have a church, and invited her to go to church over 5 years ago. Now we are blessed with a second daughter – what a gift of God just by simply an invitation to attend church!