

Tell Your Children

Scripture: Deuteronomy 6

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Morning Service**

People of God: I want to connect what we have witnessed this morning to what we witnessed here last Sunday morning. Last week, we heard the public profession of faith of five of our young people. As I mentioned then, 18 years earlier, they were baptized right here at this baptismal font. Now, we have witnessed again another baptism, one of many that, Lord willing, should take place in this year.

There is a strong connection between baptism and profession of faith. At baptism, God extends his promises to us, while in profession of faith we accept those promises as our own. And so, it is our sincere prayer that Kurtis, baptized here this morning, will one day also profess his faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior.

In reflecting upon the connections between baptism and profession of faith, a couple of things struck me.

First of all, we're dealing with a long time frame. Eighteen years between baptism and profession of faith in the cases of last week. That's a long time. When it comes to the faith formation of our children, we're looking at the long-term, rather than something quick and instantaneous. Even though we say, our kids grow up fast, still we're talking years.

And that goes against the grain of our society. We live in a fast-paced society, where we expect results instantaneously. Instant gratification drives consumer spending. We're a fast food nation. And we design our computers to do more in a shorter period of time. Our focus is on the here and now. Who looks ahead 10, 18, 30 years down the road?

Well, in reality many of the important things in life are long-term. Marriage, for example. And having kids. As any new parents can attest, having a child dramatically changes your life. Not just for a day or two, or

even a month or two, or even a year or two, but for the rest of your lives. Given that reality, it is not surprising that faith formation is also a long-term process.

And the church needs to shape its ministry accordingly. Isn't that why our Sunday School program starts at 3 and continues all the way through high school? Isn't why we have decided to hire a Director of Youth and Young Adult ministries? Because faith formation is long-term process, requiring a lot of our time and energy.

Another thought crossed my mind as I reflected upon the connection between last Sunday morning and baptism: It's that many generations are involved in faith formation. Obviously, parents play an important role and I'll get to that in a moment. But grandparents can also play an important role in the faith development of their grandchildren. It struck me that all five who made profession of faith have believing grandparents, at least one of whom is also a member of this congregation. Maybe that was just a coincidence, but I also think it points out the importance of being part of a multi-generational church.

Grandparents you can have an important influence in the faith journey of your grandchildren. Sometimes you can offer a word of correction or encouragement that wouldn't be heard if spoken by a parent. You can share your faith story, with its struggles and its blessings, so that your grandkids can see that church, faith and God are real and important in your life and should be in their lives.

But not everyone can have grandparents in the same church. But that's why a multi-generational church is important. Today, many church plants focus on just the younger generation. I read about a new church meeting in a movie theatre. It attracts the young adult crowd. As a result, it hasn't a death in its short existence. Nor does the pastor have to deal with many cancer cases, as older people tend to get that.

Now, at times I might envy that pastor. My workload would be much different if I didn't have to deal with situations where cancer and death has touched the lives of people. And don't misunderstand me, while we don't wish these things on anyone, it is good for young people and young adults to see the struggles and burdens caused by cancer and death. It forces us to deal with the reality of living in a sin-stained world.

A multi-generational church has its struggles, as different generations have different musical tastes and needs. Talking about Facebook will connect with some, but leave others in the dark. A church with only gray hair is a dying church; but a church of only young adults is missing the wisdom, experience and suffering of an older generation.

A third thought came to me. Not only is faith formation a long-term process; not only is it multi-generational. Parents are far more important than pastors, even when it comes to faith formation.

Now as a pastor, I hope to have some influence on the faith formation of Kurtis. I hope to leave a positive mark on him. But he won't remember that I held him or baptized him. I usually have some influence as children attend worship and then more so in high school—but in Kurtis' case, that will be left to some other pastor, as I hope to be semi-retired by the time he gets to high school. Of course, I'll try to be an indirect influence on Kurtis, through my present ministry, hoping to shape the faith of his parents and the church to which he belongs.

But really, faith formation begins in the home and parents can make a greater impact on their child than anyone else, especially when it comes to matters of faith. That's what our Scripture reading talks about.

In this passage, we encounter the basic OT confession of faith: Hear O Israel (Hear, O people of God): "The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength." This is the God-centered vision that is at the heart of faith formation. It's not just that we believe in God, it's that we are called to love him, to serve him, to give him our all.

Most Canadians will express a belief in God. But they don't really follow up that belief with a commitment to serve him with their whole being. Their heart isn't really in tune with him. Yet that is what God wants from us and our children.

And so, there is a need for us to have a vibrant, living relationship with the Lord. Now Christians will express their relationship with God in different ways. Some are more outgoing than others. Some are more reserved. We need to respect each other in terms of how we might display our faith.

But, I do think, we need to learn how to be more open about our faith. We often say our actions speak about our faith. And indeed, actions do often speak louder than words. But at times, words need to be said. Especially in our society, where the Christian faith and Christian ethics are out of sync with the rest of society. As Christians, as believing parents, and believing grandparents, we need to be more intentional in speaking about the faith to our children and to those outside the church.

Being intentional about passing on the faith to our children (and to others) is what the text goes on to stress:

Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you

get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on the doorframes of your homes and on your gates.

Impress, talk, tie, bind...these are all action words. They are deliberate actions intended to teach the next generation who God is and how we ought to live for him.

What message do our children and others pick up from our attitude towards God, worship and the church? If they hear us only using God's name as a swear word, won't they do the same thing? If our kids only hear us complain about something in a worship service, is it really surprising when they stop coming? On the other hand, when they hear us speak about the Lord in a personal, intimate way, won't they see that we take God seriously? When they see us sing the songs of faith, with meaning and passion, won't they pick up the message that the words truly do mean something to us?

What impression are we leaving for our children, grandchildren and others? That's one concern expressed in this passage. But this passage also is aware of two other dangers we face, two threats from passing on the faith to the next generation. These are mentioned in verse 10-19.

The first danger is forgetting about the Lord in the midst of prosperity. In the case of God's people in the days of Moses, they were about to receive the Promised Land, living in homes and cities they did not build; working land and harvesting crops they did not start. After 40 years in the wilderness, they were going to be rich. In the face of this, God says "be careful that you do not forget the Lord."

Prosperity, more than poverty, is a threat to our spiritual health. That's because when we got it all, we think we can make it on our own. Who needs God, when you have all the material things of life? Given our material blessings, isn't that a danger we face? This generation starts off in their material possessions, where their grandparents finished. And so we need to hear the words of this passage: "be careful that you do not forget the Lord."

Don't get so caught up in financial concerns that you forget to give to the Lord. Don't be so distracted by the technological toys we play with that we neglect to come to God in prayer. Don't be so consumed by your hobbies that you don't have time to serve the church.

The second danger mentioned in our text is the concern about false gods. God's people were about to enter a land, where the people worshiped false gods and the temptation would be to mix the worship of these other gods with the worship of the one true God. And so God lays down the line: Fear the Lord your God, serve him only... Do not follow other gods, the gods of the people around you."

Now we might think that this danger is less serious for us. After all, there are not too many other religions in our community. No mosques or pagan temples. And that's true in terms of formal religions. Few of those baptized here in the past are involved in other religions. Instead, the danger is just not having any formal religion. It actually can become a religion of the self—seeking one's own pleasures and desires; of simply living life apart from God and his will. And that's just as spiritually deadly as joining another religion.

And so, as we seek to pass on the Christian faith from generation to generation, there are dangers that we face. That's why we need to be intentional about faith formation. After all, it's a long haul. Just as being a parent is a long-term commitment, so too is encouraging and sustaining faith in our children and youth.

Dan and Crystal, you're just at the beginning point of that journey in terms of Kurtis. But you're not in alone. You're part of a church community where this task of raising children in the fear of the Lord is taken very seriously. Above all, we depend upon our God for the strength and ability to carry out our tasks. After all, it is God who has acted first. It is God who has sealed his promises in baptism. It is God who works in us through the Spirit. And so, we need to keep our focus on him. Amen.