

CHRISTIAN FORMATION: The early years  
Psalm 78: 1-7, Deut. 6: 4-9

June 16, 2013

This is the first of two parts on Christian Formation.  
This morning we will explore how faith is formed in our children.  
Next week we will explore how we as adults  
continue to be formed and transformed.

It was a summer day sometime in the early 1980s.  
I was leaning over the kitchen sink washing the dishes  
in our small home in Worthington, Ohio.  
Weldon had boarded the city bus for his usual hour-long commute to the church.  
The boys were playing outside in the huge sandbox  
with 5-6 neighborhood boys who gathered regularly in our back yard.  
Grandparents were far away.  
Church friends were scattered across the city.  
Few of the neighborhood boys went to Sunday School.  
I was discouraged.  
The setting in which Weldon and I had been raised  
couldn't have been more different  
than the one in which we were trying to raise our sons.

That morning the question burned:  
How were we to pass on our faith to our sons  
in a setting so different from the one we knew?  
And it became very clear to me:  
We would need to be intentional. It would NOT happen automatically.

The psalmist tells us that we are to pass on the mysteries of God  
so that our children will 1) set their hope in God,  
so they 2) won't forget the works of God,  
and so they 3) will keep the commandments.

Three things: developing hope and trust in God,  
remembering the stories of how God had acted in the past,  
and forming ethics and values in order to make life-giving choices.  
As I was thinking of a metaphor which would help us think about  
how faith is formed, I was drawn to the image of building a house.  
It has a foundation—Jesus told a story about the importance of a firm one.  
It has a structure or a frame, and it is finished by forming living spaces or rooms.

I'd like to think about hope or trust as the foundation,  
the story of God and God's people as the structure or frame,  
and the finished spaces or rooms as the commandments for living.

How do we form a firm foundation for the children of our church  
so that it can support them throughout their lives?

I'd like to think that trust is that foundation.

It is the first developmental task of an infant.

Everything else builds on that.

This happens first when a baby learns to trust its parent.

But it takes a village to keep trust going and growing.

The church needs to be a loving, caring, accepting, encouraging  
and absolutely safe place for our children.

They need to be noticed.

They need to be accepted with all their energy and enthusiasm.

They need to be protected and enjoyed.

They need to know they belong.

When parents bring their baby for parent-child dedication

we make promises to help them in the task of forming faith in their child.

They become part of our faith family.

We become their uncles and aunts, grandpas and grandmas.

Some of you may have felt called

to relate intentionally in this way with a young family in our congregation.

Perhaps you invite them over for picnics, go to the zoo or pick apples together.

This is part of building a firm foundation of trust in a child.

The child learns that God's people can be trusted

and he or she belongs to this people.

Children must also learn that they can trust the natural world.

We are sustained by the air we breathe, the water we drink, the food we eat.

Unless we are taught to notice, it's easy to take those things for granted.

We need to help children learn the wonder of the created world.

Much is being written today about Nature Deprivation in children.

Many think that milk comes out of a plastic bottle and bread from a bag.

Others know nothing about playing in a creek

or exploring the multitude of grasses and critters found in a prairie pasture.

During the summer months, the first thing our grandchildren do  
when they come to our house is run out the back door  
and see what produce they can gather from the garden.  
(That is if they can get past the TV without turning it on!)

Learning to trust in God's people and in God's creation  
is a firm foundation for hope.  
Children today are being given a bill of goods—  
told that hope for the future  
depends on technology, military might, instant answers. . .  
We need to help our children trust a God in whom  
we can hope when everything else fails.

So—if the foundation of faith is trust and hope,  
the framework is the story of God and God's people.  
We find that in the Biblical Story.  
We all need to know our place in a story.  
Finding our place in a story is part of how we find our identity.  
As people of faith,  
we hope our children will find themselves in God's story.  
This means that the first task is to help them hear the story.  
We need to be providing families with Bible Story Books to read at home.  
We need to be telling the story in worship and SS, in VBS and summer camps.

I think it was Rosella Wiens Regier who first introduced me to the concept  
of painting pictures on the caves of our children's minds  
so that when they were older they could go in and look around  
and find new meaning in them.  
As a child, I considered Bible stories exciting and often miraculous.  
But as an adult, the stories have offered up priceless treasures.  
I found hope in the Red Sea Story  
at a time in my life when I felt trapped as if between a sea and an army.  
I found hope in the story of the resurrection  
when I experience an inner deadness.  
I found direction in the story of Dirk Willems  
who returned to rescue his pursuing enemy  
who had broken through the ice.

None of this would have been possible if I hadn't known the stories.  
They were important faith images that nourished me later on.

I wonder if the stories could have made the important shift to metaphor  
if I had been told exactly what they meant.  
Too often we skip over the story to teach meaning  
when the stories themselves contain the message.  
That's why I loved the Wondering Questions first introduced  
in the Jubilee curriculum.  
It helped children ask questions of the story.

Weldon and I found that we needed to keep buying new Bible Story books  
as our sons grew.  
When boredom set in, it was time to get a new one.  
There are beautifully illustrated book and DVDs that tell the story.  
We can support families by providing some of the beautiful resources  
for our children.

So if trust and hope in God is the foundation of Christian formation,  
if the framework is the Biblical story and beyond,  
how do we finish the structure—  
divide the house into rooms for different functions?

The Psalmist says that we need to help our children keep the commandments.  
We're talking about forming ethics and values.  
How do we help our children grow into kind and loving adults  
with firm identities that help them live with integrity?

The first three commandments have to do with our relationship with God,  
The fourth one has to do with keeping Sabbath.  
It's a day of celebration and joy when we rest in God's provisions.  
It creates boundaries to work—a recreating space to renew ourselves.  
And the last six commandments have to do with how we relate to others.  
Relationships have boundaries, too. Do not take another person's life,  
their spouse, their possessions, or their reputation.

Just as houses create spaces to protect us  
and provides us with places both to gather in fellowship  
and to retreat in privacy, we need to form boundaries in our relationships.  
We need to honor our need to rest and be renewed,  
to honor time with loved ones and times alone,  
to know when to shut the door and when to open it.

We live in an age when the door seldom gets shut.  
Media fills every spare moment.  
Just as children need nature,  
    they need time to daydream, to develop an inner world.  
It is an important part of developing a sense of self.

Children also need to learn what is yours and what is mine.  
What part of the world around us do we want to let in,  
    and what part do we want to keep out  
        in order to remain healthy and happy and whole?  
Children need help in setting these boundaries as they grow.  
They need to be taught what is right and what is wrong.  
They need it for their safety and their happiness.  
As they mature,  
    they can be allowed to make more and more choices on their own.

The very last part to develop in the growing brain is the section  
    that helps us organize thoughts, weigh consequences,  
        assume responsibility and interpret emotions.  
Scientists are discovering that this part isn't fully developed until well into the 20s.  
A teen may be intellectually and physically mature,  
    but still growing in their ability to make judgments.  
It can be a confusing time for young people and their families.  
Where ARE the boundaries?  
Teens need support as they weigh consequences and interpret emotions  
    on the journey to full maturity.  
The church can be a place that reinforces Christian values  
    as youth explore the boundaries beyond the home.

Christian formation is an important task of families.  
It is a primary task of the church to join with families in this process.  
It is a great privilege. It is one we dare not neglect.  
May the Spirit guide and strengthen us for this task.